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Книги

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Гарри Поттер

Четвертый чемпион

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Гарри, который, как полагают, погиб в ту роковую ночь вместе со своими родителями, вызван из забвения для участия в Турнире Трех Волшебников. Тем временем Сириусу, Ремусу и Дамблдору предстоит разгадать загадку: кто мог знать, что Гарри жив.

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1. Chapter 1

Chapter One

He blinked. He blinked again. He tried for a third time, but nothing

changed. It was like some strange dream. He tried to make a fist, and drive his fingernails into his palm. The stinging pain he felt made him confident that it was no vision or dream. Yet, the still smoldering piece of parchment was proof to the contrary.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore lifted his eyes from the smoldering parchment and looked around the Great Hall to all the students who sat silently, waiting to hear the name on the last piece of parchment that had been shot out by the flaming goblet. The silence was so heavy, the Hogwarts headmaster could feel it on his shoulders, pressing them down.

Never in his over one hundred twenty years could he have ever imagined this exact situation, as he stared at the neat scrawl on the singed parchment in his weathered old hand.

Harry Potter.

Staring disbelievingly at the burnt scrap in his hand, the old man felt his chest constrict tightly. It just wasn't possible, and yet, he had the proof in his very hand. Someone else knew that the boy was alive. All of his work, and plans and they were for nothing. Someone knew the boy was alive and they seemed determined to bring him out of hiding.

Harry Potter had been entered into the Triwizard Tournament.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was completely flummoxed as to how young Harry's name got into the Goblet of Fire, which had been tasked with selecting the very best candidates to participate in the tournament. Dumbledore was quite proud when Cedric Diggory's name had emerged from the Goblet.

Diggory was a very popular seventeen year-old Hufflepuff, and would have been captain of his House Quidditch team that year, had not the tournament taken president.

But then young Harry's name had emerged after the other school champions had been selected. This was very bizarre, especially considering that Harry Potter did not attend Hogwarts. In fact, as far as most of the world was concerned, Harry Potter had not survived that fateful night thirteen years ago.

Dumbledore, remembering that everyone was watching him, clutched the scrap of parchment into his hand and led the others responsible for the Tri-Wizard Tournament into a small room just off of the Great Hall where the three champions now waited for their instruction.

Once everyone was locked inside the small room, glittering with shining trophies from past Hogwarts students, Dumbledore turned to face the other judges, and the two ministry officials, Barty Crouch and Ludo Bagman.

"Vat does it say, Dumbledore?" Igor Karkaroff asked, looking quite irritable.

"It appears that someone has tried to pull some kind of prank."

Dumbledore spoke calmly. "A fourth champion has been selected."

"A fourth? 'Ow is zis possible?" Madame Maxime, the head of the French Wizarding school, Beauxbatons asked, looking down on them all, as she was easily several feet taller than them all. Her young charge, and champion for her school, Fleur Delacour looked very confused as she came to her headmistress' side. "Zere are only three schools competing. Unless of course your ministry has failed to inform us of a fourth school."

"No other schools were contacted about participating, I assure you, Madame Maxime." Ludo Bagman flashed what he felt was one of his most charming smiles. The impossibly tall French headmistress merely gave a nod that she'd heard him.

"I am unsure. Though I theorize that the name was put under a fourth

school, how else could it be chosen. What is more upsetting is the fact that this person is under the age set under the new rules. He is only fourteen." Dumbledore said, looking imploringly at Crouch who was in charge of the entire tournament.

Crouch, and tired looking man with a pencil thin moustache and basset hound eyes began shaking his head.

"This is most disturbing." He said as he began to pace. "The Goblet of Fire represents a binding magical contract, even if someone else submitted the name, this person must compete or risk losing their magic. Who is this new champion, Albus?"

Dumbledore clenched his fist a bit tighter.

"Are you sure they must compete? Is there no way to release them from this obligation?"

"You know the rules as well as I do." Crouch said firmly. "The new champion will need to be contacted and brought here to take part in the tournament."

"What if they are dead?" Dumbledore asked hopefully.

"Then their name would not have been selected. Dumbledore, you already know all of this. What is going on?" Ludo Bagman asked. Ludo was a stout man with a barrel chest and a charming smile. He'd once been a champion Quidditch player in his younger days, and still held a bit of popularity to this day, despite his obvious ego and the dirty little secret, which wasn't as secret as he thought. Ludo Bagman had a serious gambling problem.

"The name selected..." Dumbledore took a breath before continuing.

"Was Harry Potter."

There was a collective gasp from nearly all of the inhabitants of the room.

"But he..." Cedric Diggory stammered.

"That's not possible." Crouch took several steps away from Dumbledore.

"Mon Dieu." Madam Maxine and Fleur Delacour said simultaneously.

Both Karkaroff and his school's Champion looked rather indifferent at this news, while Ludo Bagman's nearly permanent smile began to fade from his face.

"Rumors of the child's demise were greatly exaggerated to protect him."

Dumbledore sighed. "I was one of a very few who knew the boy was alive, and as far as I know, I am the only one who knows his current whereabouts, which I had wished to keep a secret."

"But he will need to return here." Crouch said, looking up from the chair he'd stumbled into. "He must compete in the tournament for whichever school he attends."

"But they were not contacted." Karkaroff shouted. "It is the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Not the Quadruple. This is a flagrant disregard of the rules we all worked so hard to agree upon. This fourth school was not present for the negotiations, so why should they be allowed to participate?"

"It is not an entire school." Maxime shouted the Bulgarian Headmaster down. "It is but one child. One, who if you recall, is now being forced to participate against his will. He did not submit his own name. And Dumbledore said he was not of age. 'Ow is 'e expected to manage against three wizards much older and more educated than 'e?"

"Thank you for your understanding, Madame." Dumbledore gave a small bow.

"Dumbledore, you must bring the boy here immediately so that he can compete. The consequences for him should he not will be dire. He could die from the loss of his core." Crouch said urgently.

"I still can't believe the boy's alive." Bagman said. "We all thought that

he'd met his fate along with You-Know-Who, and now you're saying that he's actually alive? Think of what this will do to the morale of our country, Dumbledore!"

Dumbledore gave the softest of smiles as he inspected the mysterious scrap of parchment once again. A tense silence filled the small room for a moment, broken when Bagman cleared his throat.

"Why keep it a secret? Why not let us all know that our savior was alive?"

Bagman pressed. Dumbledore merely shook his head.

"Do you not remember how things were then, Ludo?" Barty Crouch said tensely. "His followers would want vengeance, and not a single one of them was above killing a child. I think it was a smart move. I just wonder when you were going to let everyone know the truth, or if you even planned to."

"I had hoped that I would never need to. It was better for him to grow up away from the fawning and whispers and whatever else he might have had to endure from our people. To be famous for something he would never be able to recall and to have thousands throwing themselves at him with praise and worship. Would you have chosen differently for the child who was barely able to walk on his own?"

Barty Crouch shrugged and then after a moment shook his head. He knew the old Headmaster had chosen correctly for the boy, and if he'd been in the same position, Barty hoped he would have put the child's needs ahead of his own.

"Very well," Dumbledore said, his voice sounding much stronger than it had since that last name had emerged from the Goblet of Fire. "As it seems clear that we have no alternative, I shall contact mister Potter, and have him join us here to participate in the tournament. It is getting late, and I am sure the champions would like to get back to their fellows, who

are no doubt waiting to congratulate them."

Dumbledore ushered everyone out, listening to their conversations.

Karkaroff was clearly agitated over the news that a fourth champion would be joining the tournament. He was speaking in rapid Bulgarian to Viktor Krum, the Durmstrang champion. Madame Maxime had been a bit more understanding of the situation, which Dumbledore was most thankful for. He had always gotten on well with the French Headmistress. Both Crouch and Bagman were discussing what it meant that Harry Potter, the savior of the Wizarding world was not only alive, but returning from oblivion to compete in the tournament.

"Sir?"

Dumbledore turned to face Cedric, who was still in shock. Dumbledore could only guess what this young man might be feeling. He would have been three or four when a baby managed to stop the most powerful Dark Wizard in a hundred years. He would have grown up hearing stories about the death and devastation Lord Voldemort wreaked upon their world. And then one day, for no apparent reason, he had sought out a child. A defenseless babe, and had somehow been destroyed, along with the entire Potter family.

Only Dumbledore and a very select few knew the truth of what had truly happened that night.

"Yes, Mister Diggory?"

"Is it true? Is Harry Potter really alive? Is he really going to be coming here to Hogwarts?" Cedric asked, looking truly awed by just the thought of it. There was no doubt that like many children, Cedric would have heard the story of the brave Potter family and the sacrifice they made to save them all from suffering. Dumbledore himself was still puzzled how the story had gotten out in the first place, but it had, and it was one of

the most famous stories in wizarding history.

"It would seem so. But I urge you to not let your imagination get the better of you. He is only a boy, not too different from yourself a few years ago. He will be leaving everything he knows behind, and will likely be quite alone here. He may need a friend. Someone who might understand what he's going through."

Cedric nodded his understanding. Harry Potter would most likely need a friend, though Cedric doubted the legendary figure would be lacking for friends. Still, Cedric was willing to try and help out a fellow champion if he could. After all, the tournament was supposed to be about creating bonds of friendship, wasn't it? "Am I allowed to tell anyone?"

Dumbledore actually smiled, and patted Cedric on the shoulder. "I think I would be very hard pressed to prevent this news from getting out. Yes, Mister Diggory, you may divulge what you have learned. I will be making a formal announcement at breakfast tomorrow morning. Now, you'd best be getting back to the Hufflepuff Common Room. It is nearly curfew, and I expect the rest of the Hufflepuffs are waiting to congratulate their champion."

Cedric nodded with a smile and headed away, presumably to celebrate his selection and to let all his Housemates know that Harry Potter would be coming to Hogwarts.

Dumbledore began the trek to his office, where he would need to begin making arrangements. If he were honest with himself, he should have seen this coming. It was only three years ago that the first signs that the Dark Lord was trying to rise to power again. Had it not been for himself and his trusted potions master, then Lord Voldemort would have indeed managed to come back to power. Thankfully, the wards they had set had alerted them to Quirrell's presence near the Stone, and they had managed

to rob Lord Voldemort of his vessel.

The following year had seen the release of Slytherin's great beast. The school had very nearly been closed as student after student was petrified by the Basilisk's stare. Thankfully no one had died, thanks mostly to the bravery of Young Ginevra Weasley coming forward and admitting that it had been she who had opened the Chamber of Secrets. As it turned out, the girl was not at all responsible for her actions, as she had been possessed by the spirit of Tom Riddle, whose spirit resided in diary, now locked in Dumbledore's office, while he tried to solve it's mystery. Young Miss Weasley was doing much better these days thanks to regular visits with the Headmaster, and had even led the Gryffindor House to a great Quidditch Victory the previous year.

But this was truly troubling. How did anyone know that young Harry Potter was alive? Were they simply taking a chance, hoping that it paid off, or did whoever behind this scheme actually know Harry was alive? And what was the purpose of entering him in the tournament?

Dumbledore remembered the sudden reemergence of Lord Voldemort's faithful followers at the Quidditch World cup this past summer. Was it coincidence, or was something far more fiendish in the works. As optimistic as Dumbledore could be, he felt that he was most likely correct in assuming the worst.

Unfortunately, there was only one way to learn of the plot, and that was to bring Harry Potter out of seclusion and back to his home country.

In truth, he was rather excited to meet the young man himself. He had of course received reports on the boy's upbringing. It had been a part of the agreement he had with Sirius Black, the boy's Godfather.

Dumbledore remembered the last time he had actually seen the child, that night in the ruins of the house.

He had arrived shortly after the alarms in his office told him that the wards had been breached on the Potter home. The house was barely standing, and there were small fires about. Dumbledore quickly extinguished them as he progressed deeper into the ruin. His eyes stung when he came across the body of James Potter near the door. It was clear he tried to protect his wife and child, but had not succeeded. Dumbledore hoped that the Dark Lord had been quick with his sentence.

His old heart leapt into his throat when he heard the wailing of the child coming from upstairs. Taking care as he climbed the staircase, the next thing he saw gave him pause, as it had been he last thing he expected to see.

Lying as if thrown very violently from a great distance, lay the ruined, mangled and bloody body of Lord Voldemort. His deep red eyes opened wide in a look of purest surprise. Dumbledore stepped over his body and followed the sounds of crying into what had been the nursery. There, upon the floor in front of the child's crib, was Lily Potter. She had placed herself between the Dark Lord and her only child.

And then, standing in his crib, blood caked on his little face which was contorted with his grief, or anger, was baby Harry Potter. His chubby little arms reaching for his mother desperately.

"James? Lily?"

Dumbledore lifted the crying babe, recognizing the voice of Sirius Black. The man who had been the secret keeper to the Potters, the only one who could have given away their hiding place. Dumbledore pulled his wand and prepared to deal with the traitor.

Dumbledore found Sirius sobbing over the body of James Potter.

"Are you pleased with your handiwork?" Dumbledore said accusingly. Sirius looked up and suddenly Dumbledore was conflicted. This was not the face of a man who had just betrayed his lifelong friend, though he had no proof that it

was not Sirius who had divulged the secret to the Dark Lord.

"I wonder what it was that the Dark Lord bestowed upon you as a reward for your betrayal." Dumbledore said scathingly.

"It was Peter." Sirius said through his grief. Tears spilled down the man's cheeks as he looked up at the leader of the light, not really surprised that it had been Dumbledore to arrive first. "I'm going to find that rat and kill him myself."

"Peter?" Dumbledore's wand fell to his side. "Peter Pettigrew? But you were the Secret Keeper." The old man eyed the younger one, who was getting to his feet, his grief being replaced by outrage.

"We switched. I felt it would have been obvious that I would be the Secret Keeper. Lily didn't want to put me in that kind of danger. Both James and I knew I'd be targeted anyway. This way, they'd get nothing from me. I convinced James to use Peter. I figured no one would even bother thinking of Peter. The man can barely transfigure a teacup." Sirius broke down once again.

Dumbledore couldn't believe what he'd just learned. It hadn't been Sirius who had betrayed them all, but Peter Pettigrew. The young man everyone seemed to believe incapable of deceit. He looked at Sirius, who was still staring at the body of his best friend, his brother in all but blood. Sirius looked as if he was steeling himself to go seeking his own vengeance. It was then that the idea popped into Dumbledore's mind. He had a chance to save more than just one person on this night.

"Sirius, There is something far more important you must do. Lord Voldemort is dead."

Sirius looked up at Dumbledore. "What? He asked incredulously. "Are you joking?"

"I assure you that I am not. I have seen his body myself. Go up the stairs if

you wish. But I tell you, he is dead. But more important, your godson is alive."

Dumbledore held out his arm a bit where Harry lay, now still, contented to be held by someone. Sirius came at once to the old man's side, and took Harry into his arms. The baby smiled as he recognized Sirius. Sirius held the child closely, tears of happiness falling from his eyes now.

"He must be protected Sirius. Lord Voldemort's followers will be looking for revenge. You must take him far away from here, and raise him as James and Lily would have. He must be kept safe, for I fear that this war is not truly over."

"What are you talking about?" Sirius looked, at the Headmaster's words. "If the bastard's dead, than why shouldn't the war be over?"

"Lord Voldemort delved deeper into the Dark Arts than anyone witch or wizard before him. While trying to find a way to defeat him, I learned many of the things he researched and now I believe that he may have somehow secured himself to this world, and one day might return and attempt to bring our world under his control once again. If that is true, Harry Potter may be the only person capable of saving us all."

"This isn't funny, Albus." Sirius said sternly.

"As you can clearly see, I am not laughing. I know that James told you the real reason he and Lily were forced to go into hiding. Did they ever tell you why?"

Sirius shook his head, trying to wipe his tears, while holding onto the sleeping babe. "I think they wanted to tell me, but I think they felt the less I knew, the better for me. They did tell me Snape had warned you to protect them."

"He did indeed." Dumbledore nodded. "He thought only of saving Lily and her son. Despite everything, all the torment your four put him through, he still tried to save his greatest rival's child. He tried to do what was right."

"Then I owe him more than I can ever repay." Sirius sighed, tightening the thin

blanket around Harry a bit more securely."

"Sirius, I want you to take Harry and flee the country. Tell no one where you are except me, so that I may contact you should any emergency arise. Protect his identity at all costs."

"One day he'll want answers. What do I tell him?" Sirius nodded towards the boy in his arms, who was now beginning to yawn.

"I leave that to you." Dumbledore said sagely. "But remember this, this boy deserves to have as normal a life as can be afforded. I have a dreadful belief that he has just taken his first step on the path that fate has been lain before him."

Sirius nodded, and gathered his coat around the child. "I'll be in touch." He said before mounting a large motorcycle. Several loud pops sounded, and both men turned towards the sound.

"Go!" Dumbledore urged, and Sirius kicked the motorbike into gear, and tore off into the night. Dumbledore watched in amazement as the motorcycle rose into the air and disappeared behind the clouds.

Dumbledore saw the approaching shadows. He saw that they were aurors led by Barty Crouch. Dumbledore strode to meet them. In a few hours, word would spread about the defeat of the Dark Lord, and the child saviour, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. He cringed ever so slightly hoping that moniker didn't come back to haunt him in the future.

Sirius had done as he had been ordered, and wrote the old Headmaster, keeping him up to date on the goings on in Harry's life. When the boy turned eleven, a serious decision had to be made. Whether it was time for the boy to return to England and attend Hogwarts, or stay away and attend another institute of magical learning.

It was ultimately decided that it might be best for the boy to be educated abroad, as he would not be well known, and could in fact be an average

young wizard in training. Sirius had cultivated a new identity for the boy and registered him at the Salem Academy in America, and according to the yearly reports, was doing quite well in all subjects, especially Charms, Defensive Magics, and Transfiguration. It appeared that he would be in the top of his class by his seventh year.

But it seemed that fate had other plans for the young man, and an echo of a prophecy made at a private meeting so many years ago repeated itself in Dumbledore's mind.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...

With a great sigh, Dumbledore knelt before his fireplace and cast a handful of floo powder into the merrily crackling flames. He was not looking forward to this, but it had to be done. He did not t Harry to lose his magic, especially if his suspicions were correct. Harry still had a part to play in the war, though what it was was still unclear.

"Salem Academy of Magic, Headmistress Blaylock's office."

There was a long pause as the floo connection was made. Dumbledore hadn't expected it to be instant, as connections across the ocean sometimes took a good deal of time. Finally, a rather tired looking woman, much younger than Dumbledore, her auburn hair quite wild as it was clear that she had just been awoken.

"Albus Dumbledore?" The woman asked, her voice scratchy and hoarse. She was a thin woman with silver gray hair and a very pointed chin and sharp brown eyes.

"I am deeply sorry for disturbing you at this hour, but I have something rather important to discuss with you, and it can not wait, I'm afraid."

"Of course. It has been a rather long time since we spoke last. How may I help you?"

Dumbledore went on to explain about the Tri-wizard Tournament, which had not been held in a very long time. Headmistress Blaylock's eyes widened a bit at this news but her shock over that news was nothing compared to the news that one of her students names had emerged from the Goblet of Fire. The American Headmistress wished to know how it was possible, to which Dumbledore could only shrug, making him look quite like the fool that so many of his political enemies often likened him to.

"Needless to say, This student will need to come to Scotland to compete, or suffer great consequences." Dumbledore sighed.

"Why do I get the feeling that we're talking about James Black?"

Headmistress Blaylock asked, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"How ever did you guess?" Dumbledore asked, a smirk twitching his mouth.

"Maybe it's the fact that you've checked up on him twice a year for three years, not to mention it was you who personally met with me about admitting him before his first year. Despite what some might think, I'm no idiot."

Dumbledore began to laugh along with his American counterpart.

"Well, I'm afraid he's not in school at the moment." Headmistress Blaylock said when she got herself under control. "We've only just started our autumn break. The students aren't scheduled to return for two more weeks."

"I see." Dumbledore nodded. "Very well, I shall have to contact him directly. I should warn you that young Mr. Black may not return to your fine institution. I had already been considering bringing him back to attend Hogwarts before this little incident. Now it seems I have no choice. Though, while he's competing in our tournament, he will still be

representing your school."

"I can think of very few better choices. If I can help him in anyway, please let me know. He will be sorely missed by many here."

"I am sure of that." Dumbledore smiled. "Thank you Headmistress."

Dumbledore pulled his head out of the green flames, and brushed the soot out of his beard. Rising to his feet Dumbledore heaved a great sigh. Dumbledore had hoped that he would be able to bring Harry here through the floo and have the boy there by Breakfast, but it appeared that fate had other ideas. It was clear that Dumbledore was about to go visit the United States. Well, at least the students would have something to look forward to. There was no doubt that by breakfast, the whole school would know that Harry Potter was alive, and he was returning to Hogwarts.

2. Chapter 2

"Why can't we just fly brooms?" The black haired, green eyed fourteen year old asked as he double checked his helmet. He stood close to the edge of the cliff, admiring the rather breath taking sight of the desert below.

"One, because there are a ton of muggles around." Sirius Black, A tall man with shoulder length black hair and a well trimmed goatee grinned as he checked the rigging. "Two, because this is going to be just as fun as a broom, and it's less dangerous. And three, it's going to be amazing up there. You speed along on that broom of yours, you never slow down and appreciate the beauty of the world."

"I do to!" The boy snapped. "I just want to know why every time we go on vacation, we end up doing these adrenaline adventure things. We almost died on that bridge a few months ago, remember?"

"That's your recollection. The bungee cords were quite secure. Besides, as

I recall, you did it four times, Harry."

Harry Potter grimaced as he remembered that he had in fact really enjoyed bungee jumping. In fact, as much as he complained, he always did enjoy all the cool stuff he and his godfather had done over the years. Sirius often reminded him that these little adventure helped to remind them what it meant to be alive. Harry didn't think he needed to jump out of an airplane or to scale a sheer cliff face to remind him of that simple fact. Just waking up each morning was enough of a reminder.

And so, Harry always complained about whatever stupid thing they were about to do, even though he always enjoyed each and every adventure. Most of them, he usually got really excited about. It had just become a sort of tradition for Harry to object, and Sirius would wonder what was wrong if Harry didn't put up some sort of resistance. Truth was that Harry had truly been looking forward to hang gliding ever since Sirius had mentioned it a few months ago. Once school had let out for autumn break, Sirius had whisked him away to New Mexico for the trip. The fact that it was also a camping trip just added to Harry's enjoyment. Some of Harry's fondest memories were of him and Sirius camping. They'd gone camping in so many different places, that Harry couldn't even name them all.

"Ok, I think we're ready. Get over here." Sirius waved the boy over. When Harry was close enough, Sirius hooked him into the harness before strapping himself in as well. Together they hefted the hang glider up and with a count of three, the two men sprinted and with a primal scream from them both, they leapt off the cliff.

Harry felt very comfortable in the air. He was a seeker on one of the Quidditch teams at his school, as well as a prominent figure in the broom racing scene, which was a relatively new up and coming sport. There was

nothing better than soaring at top speed through the air with the wind whipping your face as the earth speed underneath you.

But, there was something to be said for cruising slowly through the air and taking in the majesty of the New Mexican desert. It was so quiet and breath taking that it was hard no to find peace.

Harry caught sight of a hawk soaring in the distance and Harry couldn't help but smile.

"See, I told you you'd like it." Sirius grinned.

"I never doubted you." Harry smiled in return, and Sirius returned the smile before allowing the quiet to envelope them again. Sirius kept them in the air as best as he could, being fairly new at the sport himself. He kept them fairly close to the lake where they were camped near as he doubt Harry would enjoy a ten mile hike while carrying the hang glider. As they descended lower and lower, Harry felt his heart sink, as he had really enjoyed being in the sky. As they soared over the small lake, Harry reached down hoping to touch the glassy surface. He suddenly realized however that they were very close to the water, and it didn't appear the Sirius was going to pull up.

"uh, Sirius? We're still kind of far from the shore. You can pull up now."

"I've been trying. I think we're going to get wet."

"Ah, damn it." Harry sighed.

A few seconds later, the two crashed into the lake. Sirius was able to disconnect them both from the harness. Harry swam out from under the glider with Sirius right behind him. They broke the surface of the lake, spluttering and coughing.

"Not bad for our first time." Sirius commented.

"Yeah." Harry responded cheerily. "At least we didn't just dive bomb into the canyon."

"Cheeky blighter." Sirius smirked, splashing his godson. Sirius tried to evade his godson, who splashed him in retaliation.

"Alright, alright." Sirius held up his hands in surrender. "Let's get to shore and make sure no one's around, then I'll get this thing back to camp."

"Then we can eat?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Yes, then we can eat. Come on, cub."

They swam a short distance before the lake began to shallow, and they could walk the rest of the way. Sirius grabbed Harry into a one armed hug and they trudged clumsily through the water.

"A very interesting looking device. I daresay with a bit of practice, you might keep it in the air indefinitely."

Both Harry and Sirius looked up at the source of the voice, and Harry felt his Godfather stiffen. The man was very obviously a wizard. There was no way he could be with those soft blue robes covered in moons and stars. The pointed hat, or the impossibly long snowy white hair and beard. He wore half moon spectacles, and had a long thin crooked nose.

"Sirius Black, it has been a very long time. I'm very happy to see you again. And you," The man said, now turning his attention to Harry.

"You have grown into quite the young man, Harry."

"Uh... thanks?"

Sirius relaxed slightly, but he still stepped in front of Harry, shielding him a bit before pulling out his wand and aiming it at the newcomer.

"The last night we saw each other, what was it you said to me?"

"I said many things that night, but I stressed how very important it was that Harry must be kept safe as he was the only one who was capable of saving us all." the man smiled, his light blue eyes twinkling in the setting sun.

Sirius slowly lowered his wand and stared at the man.

"How did you find us?"

"It wasn't easy. You cover your tracks well. Using Muggle transport instead of portkey. Very smart. My compliments."

"The less magic I do, the harder I am to track, I figured."

"Very wise. Perhaps we should allow you both to get out of the lake, and maybe have some dinner. We have a great deal to discuss."

Harry followed his godfather, a very puzzled expression on his face. Once he was on the shore he got a good look at the rather old looking wizard, who was smiling brilliantly at him, obviously pleased to see the boy, though Harry was quite sure he'd never met the man in his life. Still, he seemed familiar, and for some reason, Harry felt he could almost trust this man.

"Harry, I'm so sorry." Sirius said, turning to his godson. "This is Albus Dumbledore."

"You're Dumbledore?" Harry's eyes lit up with recognition. He'd heard many stories about the great Albus Dumbledore from Sirius. He'd been told that it was Dumbledore who helped Sirius get him away from the house where his parents had died, and who had been helping them through the years. Harry had often wondered about the man who had taught not only his godfather, but his mother and father as well.

"It's an honor, sir."

"No, I believe the honor to be mine, Harry... If I may call you Harry?"

"Oh, yes sir."

Sirius urged them to hurry along and soon Harry had changed out of his wet clothes and was sitting in front of a small fire while Sirius threw some steaks onto a grill as well as a couple of cobs of corn while Dumbledore conjured a rather comfortable looking chair to sit in.

"You never answered my question, Albus." Sirius said without looking at

the old man. "How'd you find us?"

"I went to your house in Salem. Headmistress Blaylock informed me that the autumn break had just begun, and I hoped to catch you there. I was clearly too late. However, I did see a few notes regarding camping and hang gliding adventures in New Mexico. I felt it would be wise to at least take a look."

"I knew I forgot to burn those notes." Sirius chided.

"I doubt anyone else would have thought much of it. Try not to beat yourself up too much." Dumbledore smiled lightly. "This is a very beautiful area. I must admit I have never had the opportunity to visit America. I am quite impressed."

"Sir, If I may ask, why have you come? I mean, I'm really excited to meet you, but I kind of thought that... well..." Harry asked, looking nervously from Dumbledore to Sirius, both who looked rather grave.

"How much do you know of what led to you living with Sirius?"

Dumbledore countered Harry's question.

"Everything, I think. My parents went into hiding from Voldemort because he'd threatened to kill me. They trusted the wrong person, and Wormtail betrayed their location. Voldemort killed them and that you found me right before Sirius showed up, and you asked him to hid me."

"You've hidden nothing from him." Dumbledore looked to Sirius who stared defiantly back at the old headmaster.

"I swore that I'd never hide anything from him. I've always been honest with him when ever he asked me anything. When it was time for him to attend school, he wanted to go to Hogwarts like his parents and me, but I explained that we felt it wasn't safe."

"I see." Dumbledore smiled softly. "Well it seems that fate has other ideas for us. This year, Hogwarts is hosting the Tri-Wizard Tournament."

"Really?" Sirius sat up a bit straighter. "I thought it was banned after so many people died?"

"It had been, but certain people felt that the time was right to bring it back. Better safety precautions have been established, and age requirement of seventeen was implemented."

"What does this have to do with Harry?" Sirius cocked an eyebrow.

"Harry's name emerged from the Goblet of Fire. I have come to bring him back to Hogwarts so he may compete."

There was a long pause while Dumbledore's words sank in. It was Harry who found his voice first.

"Um, how is that possible?" Harry asked, looking quite confused. "It was my understanding that everyone believed I was dead."

"That is just one of the major questions we have been unable to answer."

Dumbledore smiled. "Perhaps you should turn those steaks?"

Sirius shook himself and went to tending their supper before it became little more than ash. He and Harry listened attentively as Dumbledore explained how Harry's name had emerged from the Goblet of Fire and the resulting discussion between the Headmasters and someone named Barteimus Crouch and Ludo Bagman. Dumbledore did his best to make both Harry and Sirius understand that this was not how he had hoped to reintroduce Harry to his homeland, but that there was very little choice.

"So, Even though I didn't enter myself, I still have to compete in this thing or risk losing my magic?"

"This is ridiculous, Albus. He's not ready for anything like this?"

"Hey!" Harry said, looking a bit dejected.

"Harry, I've seen you do some really great stuff, and you've worked really hard in school, but you are only fourteen, and have yet to learn much of what you'll need for this tournament. I know that you are capable , but

you're still untrained, for lack of a better word." Sirius said, hoping to placate his godson. Harry simply glared at his godfather.

"Sirius is right." Dumbledore smiled. "What is being planned is going to be quite difficult, and not to insult you, but it is unlikely that you would truly be able to perform adequately enough. Still, we have no alternative. I have tried to find some sort of way to get you out of this predicament without losing your magic. Unfortunately The power of the Goblet of Fire is quite binding. I have already explained our predicament to your Headmistress and arrangements are being made for your return."

"I'm going to Hogwarts?" Harry asked excitedly. "I'm really going to see Hogwarts, and walk through the halls?"

"And attend the classes, yes." Dumbledore smiled at the boy's excitement. Clearly the boy wished to attend the school where his mother and father had met, been educated, and fell in love. Given how the boy's life had turned out, Dumbledore could not blame him.

"So, he'll be attending Hogwarts this year?" Sirius asked, still rather confused on how this had all happened. His sole concern was for Harry's safety.

"Yes, though he will still be registered as a student of Salem Academy of Magic, he will attend classes at Hogwarts. Perhaps, after this year is finished we may enroll him into Hogwarts properly, if that is Harry's wish." Dumbledore said with a grin at the teen's faraway look.

"And what about the tournament? How's he supposed to get through it?" Dumbledore's grin faded almost at once and he turned to Sirius, who was now pulling the steaks and corn cobs off the fire and Harry stood to get plates and utensils. There was silence for a few minutes as Sirius dished up food and Harry passed a plate to Dumbledore before taking his own and returning to his spot in front of the fire.

"The rules are quite clear that the champions can not ask for help from teachers or anyone of the judges. However, there is no rule that says that the champions can not seek help from one another, or other students.

Perhaps Young Harry will be able to make new friends and they might offer assistance. There is more than a few young people with very bright minds who might prove to be helpful. I happen to know that the Hogwarts Champion, Cedric Diggory, is most anxious to make your acquaintance. He will, I think, prove a most valuable companion."

"So Sirius can't help me." Harry began. Dumbledore shook his head.

"Not officially."

Harry missed a look that passed between the two adults, but did see that Sirius relaxed quite a bit.

"But I can get help from other students?"

"The Champions, which include you, shall not know of the nature of each task until the moment they are expected to begin. So, there is nothing stopping a champion from research and perfecting their performance of spell work. The Hogwarts Library brimming with books just full of incredible magic, as I am sure your godfather can tell you, as he and his school chums learned more on their own than they did in classes."

Harry grinned at Sirius, who was also smiling lightly, remembering many hours spent researching spells, charms and potions that he and his friends could use to cause all sorts of chaos in school.

"Will I be sorted?" Harry asked.

"No. Not while you are still enrolled at Salem Academy. Though, if at the end of the year if you decide you would like to keep on at Hogwarts, then you will be sorted." Dumbledore smiled as he shook his head. Harry seem to deflate for a second.

"So where will he be staying then?" Sirius asked.

"Harry will have his own private room, with an attached bathroom."

Dumbledore explained.

"Sounds pretty great, but what about his protection. Once the country knows that he's not only alive, but at Hogwarts, what's to stop any of Voldemort's followers from trying to kill him?" Sirius asked. Dumbledore gave a sad smile.

"Need I remind you that there is hardly any safer place in all of Great Britain safer for someone to be than at Hogwarts. Though I must say there is little reason to worry about as nearly everyone of Lord Voldemort's followers have gone to ground ..."

"Don't try condescending me. Remus told me all about that mess at the World Cup."

"You still correspond with Remus Lupin?" Dumbledore sounded surprised.

"My only living friend? Of course. I've never told him where I was, but we've written often over the years. I've been kept apprised of the situation while he's been hunting down Peter."

"Ah, that explains a lot." Dumbledore nodded, and smiled. "That was why he so readily took the job as Defense teacher last year."

"We thought that Peter might be hiding in the castle as a rat. He'd have plenty of food, and loads of hiding places. So I sent Remus the map, and the last word was that he had very nearly caught the swine."

"So, the traitor was right under our noses the whole time?" Dumbledore asked, looking quite upset that he'd not been informed of this.

"No, as it turns out he was living with the Weasley family. Remus said that Peter's name didn't appear on the map until the students arrived."

"That was why he came so quickly to Hogwarts. He was hoping to catch your former friend before school started."

"That was our plan. Once the students were there, it was harder for

Remus to catch the bastard, but he finally nearly had him before Christmas. Remus lost him in the forest." Sirius explained, and both men looked upset, though for very different reasons.

"And what about Snape?" Sirius asked, changing topics. "Remus told me that you've been letting that murderer teach all these years? You know how he felt about Harry's family. You know that he all but swore that he'd see James dead. You're going to let that coward teach children? Teach Harry? That's just asking for trouble."

"Severus sacrificed more than anyone at the end of the war. He turned spy for our side. If not for Severus, we might not have been able to save the Longbottoms. I am sure that he has out grown such pettiness as a school boy rivalry."

Sirius arched an eyebrow at Dumbledore, but chose not to respond. He decided it would be better just to prepare Harry for anything Snape might throw out him. Remus had made it quite clear that Snape had changed very little over the years. Sirius hated to think of what he might try to pull on Harry given that he was a nearly mirror image of his father.

"I have only one more question, Professor." Harry said, leaning forward. The light from the fire made his young boyish face look almost devilish.

"What are the girls like?"

Sirius roared with laughter and rolled onto his back, holding his sides. Dumbledore also chuckled mildly at the young man's query. Harry Potter may be the only person who could save them from a future that Dumbledore himself prayed would never happen, but he was also a fourteen year old boy. Of course the only thing on his mind would be the fairer sex.

For the next few hours, Dumbledore gave Harry an in depth history of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He pointed out certain rules that had been

placed on the current tournament to hopefully prevent the champions from being permanently hurt. Harry tried several times to get Dumbledore to tell him what tasks were planned for the tournament, but the old Headmaster was very evasive on that subject.

Finally, Sirius told Harry to get to bed as they had a lot to do in the morning to prepare for their move to Hogsmeade. Harry reluctantly rose, and bade the two men good night.

As he lay down in the tent, Harry's mind was super charged with anticipation. As he closed his eyes, he imagined a grand castle filled with secret chambers and hidden passages where he and some nameless girl, who strangely enough looked like a girl he'd been crushing on at his own school, could hide away to make out.

"So what do you think is going on?" Sirius asked after an hour when he was sure Harry was now asleep. Dumbledore looked pensive for a moment.

Sirius had no illusions about Dumbledore showing up all of a sudden. He at least suspected more than he'd been saying so far. Sirius had always hated the way Dumbledore tried to handle everything on his own. Secrets got people killed, and barely anyone knew that better than Sirius Black.

"Don't you dare try keeping this to yourself. You better start telling me what the hell is happening."

"I suspect that Lord Voldemort has sent one of his followers, perhaps Peter himself, to place Harry's name in the Goblet of Fire. I believe there might be a connection between Harry and Lord Voldemort. Tell me, has Harry ever had pain associated with his scar?"

"A few times in the last three years. Although..." Sirius paused.

Dumbledore looked pointedly at the other man, waiting for Sirius to go on.

"He... he woke up at school from a nightmare a few weeks ago." Sirius said worriedly. "He said the dream was incredibly real to him. A voice talking to two men that he didn't know, but from the description Harry gave, I think one of them was Wormtail. He mentioned something about a tournament. That's all I remember."

"Interesting." Dumbledore said, leaning back in his conjured chair. "Did he describe the second man?"

"No, Harry said he couldn't see him very well. He said they were talking to someone in a high backed chair, and he saw someone killed. A muggle. Harry was quite sure that they were planning something, but he was so freaked out, that he wasn't really sure what."

"How often has this happened, These nightmares?"

"First time that I can recall. He wrote me straight away when he awoke, but it didn't seem that important to me. He had a few headaches during his first year. He claimed they were centered around his scar, but neither of us thought it was anything more than stress. They went away after his first year."

"His first year, you say?" Dumbledore leaned forward, his hand stroking his long white beard.

"Yeah, why? What happened?"

"Lord Voldemort possessed our Defense Against The Dark Arts Teacher that year. He was seeking the Philosopher's Stone."

"The Philosopher's? But I thought it was a myth." Sirius looked shocked.

"Oh no. It was quite real. It was given to me by Nicholas Flamel to be destroyed, while he put his affairs in order. He felt it was long past time to make his leave of this world. I had heard rumors of things that made me believe that Lord Voldemort was at last gaining power once again. By themselves, these incidents were trivial, meaningless. But together..."

"How did he manage to hide from you, How long was he in the school?"

"To be honest, no one had any reason to suspect Professor Quirrell. He had returned from a sabbatical a little more skittish than he had been before, but there were rumors of a breakdown. He was still a quite a teacher. However, Severus noticed strange mannerisms that reminded him of his former master. It was decided to set up a trap. Myself and the other teachers prepared a series of obstacles to lure Quirrell to the Stone even though it had already been destroyed. Severus and I ended up killing him. It was then that we learned the horrible truth that Lord Voldemort had been possessing the man."

"Remus mentioned you had some trouble the year before he started, but I had no idea..." Sirius began, but Dumbledore chuckled.

"I believe Remus was referring to the reopening of the Chamber of Secrets. A diary found its way into the hands of a young girl. The diary was something... sinister, and the young girl had become possessed. Fortunately, the girl found the courage to come to me and admit that she was behind the trouble. No one was seriously hurt, only three petrifications, and we were able to heal them all."

"What was in the Chamber?" Sirius asked, but Dumbledore shrugged.

"It was never reopened, and the poor girl could not remember what the creature might be." Dumbledore sighed. "We don't even know where the chamber is."

Silence fell over them again, disturbed only by the choir of cicadas and the crackle of the fire.

"So how are you planning to protect Harry?" Sirius finally asked.

"There is little I can do. The Tournament has a great number of risks that every..."

"Not from the tournament." Sirius corrected. "Wormtail can obviously

sneak in to the castle whenever he wants. What's to stop him from getting inside and making off with Harry, or worse, killing him in his sleep?"

"I do not believe that Harry will be harmed. I suspect there is something greater being planned for him. Why put him in the tournament otherwise? No, I fear there is something else being arranged. I only hope that I can figure out what it is before it's too late."

"I'm coming." Sirius said softly but with determination. "I'll get a house in Hogsmeade so I'm close if I'm needed."

"I have already arranged a suitable house for you both. Everything has been taken care of. Since Harry will be in school, I hope that you might help me by trying to discover where your former friend is hiding.

Between you and Remus Lupin, I have great faith that you might locate him, and we can stop whatever plot he and his associates are staging."

"Sounds like fun." Sirius grinned maniacally.

"I think it is time that we both get some rest. We have much to do tomorrow so that Harry may start school on Monday."

"For once, I don't think he's going to be upset that we're cutting his vacation short." Sirius chuckled, knowing Harry's enthusiasm to actually go to the same school as his parents.

By Sunday evening, the entirety of Hogwarts was a buzz with anticipation of the new arrival. Cedric had of course told his housemates that the legendary Harry Potter was not only alive, but returning to Hogwarts to compete. This news had spread over the weekend.

When Dumbledore arrived back at the castle late that night, he was met by a few of his teachers who had not been privy to the conversation after the champion's selection Friday evening. He had left quite early the day before, and had only left a letter for his deputy Headmistress, informing her that he would return the next evening.

"Albus, Is it true?" Minerva McGonagall asked, leading the other faculty members. "The students are all talking about Harry Potter coming to Hogwarts."

Dumbledore smiled at his friend and then turned to look at the other teachers in turn. "A formal announcement will be made tomorrow morning, and Young Mister Potter will be here in time for dinner tomorrow evening where he will be introduced to the school."

"My gods." Squeaked Filius Flitwick, the diminutive Charms professor.

"We all thought he was dead. I mean, his body was never found. Did you know..."

"Yes, I knew." Dumbledore sighed, leading the teachers into the castle.

"I've corresponded with his godfather over the years, and was kept abreast of their movements."

"But why now?" Pomona Sprout asked curiously. "Why didn't he come here sooner?"

"Safety." Dumbledore sighed again. He was tired after all the travel and the other business he'd done that day. He desperately wished to get something to eat and go to bed. "It was discussed at great length, and it was decided for Harry's own safety, he should attend school elsewhere. Somewhere he was not famous for doing something that he could not only not remember, but would have no way to explain to anyone. It was best to give him as normal a childhood as possible. However those plans were torn asunder when Mister Potter's name emerged from the Goblet of Fire."

"He's to compete?" McGonagall asked in sudden shock. The other teachers all stopped suddenly at this revelation.

"That's what all that commotion was about." Flitwick said, snapping his fingers. "After the Goblet of Fire ceremony, you and the other judges

stated arguing."

"it wasn't an argument, although Karkaroff thinks we deceived him somehow." Dumbledore explained. "Mister Potter's name was entered under a fourth school. As such, he will be representing his own school for the tournament."

"Wait a minute." Sprout waved her hands in front of her, as if waving away smoke. "How can the boy compete? If memory serves me correctly, he isn't seventeen yet."

"That is correct, Yet, he must compete. His name emerging from the Goblet constitutes a binding magical contract. Harry potter must compete, or lose his magic. Now, I'm afraid I must get some rest. We will speak more about this tomorrow. Good night."

They had arrived at the gargoyle which guarded the Headmaster's office, and subsequently, his living quarters as well. Dumbledore bade them all a pleasant evening and went to his office. He was quite surprised to find Severus Snape awaiting him there.

"Severus, I am very tired. Can this wait until morning?"

"Thirteen years, and you never once thought to tell me Lily Evans son was alive?" Snape hissed. He glared at the Headmaster through a curtain of long greasy black hair.

"Would it have changed anything?" Dumbledore asked, slipping off his traveling cloak. "Would you have been able to let go of your hatred of James Potter, or his friends and lived a good life? Would the knowledge that the child survived made you try to be a better man? Tell me, what would that knowledge have changed in you?"

"Does he..." Snape began, looking away from the headmaster. "Does he look like her?"

"Only in the eyes. Other wise, he is the spitting image of James Potter."

Snape hissed. "Wonderful. It'll be like Potter has returned from the great beyond, mocking me at every turn."

"Are you so certain? Perhaps he has more of his mother in him than his father. You simply can not judge the boy before getting to know him. In fact, I would think, given what his teachers at Salem Academy say about him, you might even find him engaging. He has received top marks in his transfiguration, Charms, Defense and Potions work over the last three years."

Snape seemed to bristle at this information, and turned back to Dumbledore. "Where has he been all this time? Who was taking care of him?"

"Are you concerned about his well being because you wish it was you I entrusted to care for him?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then why ask me about his upbringing at all?"

"Just tell me."

Dumbledore sighed, knowing full well what was about happen. Bracing himself for the explosion, he looked his potions teacher in the eye. "Sirius Black was taking care of him. He is the boy's godfather after all."

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR EVER LOVING MIND!" Snape roared. "What could you have possibly been thinking? Black? The most irresponsible, immature, self centered man to ever have walked this earth, and you let him run off with Lily's child?"

"SEVERUS!" Dumbledore shouted the man down. "There is simply nothing you can do to change things, so ranting like a lunatic will not help. I am tired, and have been traveling most of the day. I would like to rest. Tomorrow, you will be introduced to the boy along with the rest of the school. For now, I suggest you continue with your duties."

Dumbledore motioned for the door, and Snape just stared coldly back.

After a moment, Snape's shoulders sagged a bit and he left, muttering under his breath.

Exhaustion settled onto the Headmaster, and he sighed for the millionth time.

"There is no doubt about it," He contemplated. "This is going to be a very interesting year."

The floor flared green and bright and a man with graying sandy blonde hair stepped out into the small cottage. He was immediately gathered up in a bone crushing hug from a man he'd not laid eyes on in thirteen years.

"Remus, it is so good to see you again, my friend!"

Remus Lupin held tightly onto the last living Marauder, at least in his mind. Sure, Peter was still alive, but as far as the two men holding tightly to one another now, he was dead to them.

"The years have been most kind to you." Remus chuckled, messing Sirius' hair a bit.

"And to you." Sirius replied, leading his friend to the kitchen for a drink.

"Found a hot young witch to uncage your inner wolf?"

"Oh, ha ha. I see that parenting has not matured you in the least." Remus replied with a wry smile as he sat down. "Speaking of which, where is he?"

"Unpacking. He's rather confused and a little nervous."

"I expect. What happened anyway? I was sure you weren't going to return until after Harry graduated Salem Academy."

Sirius went into a long explanation about how Dumbledore had found them, and all he knew of Harry's name suddenly emerging from the Goblet of Fire, as well as all the suspicions the old man had shared

regarding it's purpose. Remus listen closely, waiting to ask his questions when Sirius finished. Before he could however, a slender built teen with messy black hair entered the kitchen.

"Harry, I'd very much like you to meet Remus Lupin." Sirius said, introducing the ragged looking man sitting at their table.

"Moony?" Harry asked, his slightly tired looking eyes opening wide in delight. "Oh, this is so cool!" Harry said, reaching for the man's hand. "I have so many questions to ask."

"Calm down, Harry." Sirius laughed. "Remus isn't going anywhere just yet."

"It is truly an honor to see you again after all this time." Remus smiled cheerfully. Harry smiled and took a seat at the table, grabbing a bottle of butterbeer on his way.

"So you're going to compete in the Tri-Wizard Tournament?" Remus asked, a look of worry crossing his face.

"I suppose I have no choice." Harry sighed. "Dumbledore said since my name came out, I had little choice."

"I'm more interested in how you name got in that cup to begin with." Sirius grimaced.

"You think it was Wormtail?" Remus asked, and Sirius nodded.

"He knows the castle, and with his rat form, it would be quite easy for him to slip into the castle and slip out again unnoticed."

"Maybe, maybe not. Dumbledore has Moody teaching Defense this year. You know how paranoid that man is. There's rumor that he has ways to tell if animagi are around. I don't know if it's true or not, but I rather think what ever he might have set up goes crazy whenever McGonagall does her demonstrations."

Sirius laughed at that remembering fondly that it was McGonagall's

demonstration that had led to himself, Wormtail, and Harry's father to try and become animagi themselves. He also knew Alastor Moody, having worked with him shortly before the war came to an end thirteen years ago, and the man had been... well, paranoid was the nicest way of putting it.

"Speaking of Hogwarts, I brought this." Remus smiled, pulling a folded piece of parchment out of his pocket. Sirius' eyes lit up at once as he took it and examined it fondly, before turning and handing it to his godson.

"I think you have the most use for this."

Harry took the parchment, and looked at it strangely. "Uh, what is it?"

"That, my boy, is the key to the castle. Nearly every secret passage, hidden room and the location of every single person at any given time. That is the Marauder's map."

"No Way!" Harry exclaimed, opening the parchment in excitement and then frowning when he saw that it was blank. "Is this another lame joke?"

"Perhaps you should tell him how to activate it." Remus grinned at the boy's indignance.

"I guess so." Sirius smiled. He slipped his wand out of his wrist holster and tapped the map. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

At once, the map appeared and showed Harry the glory of the castle he was about to enter. There before him was every level of the ancient fortress, and hundreds of names upon moving dots. He saw that Dumbledore was in his office, while someone named Filch was chasing after two names, Dean Thomas and Parvati Patil. Professor McGonagall was walking along a corridor on the second floor and Professor Vector was standing very close to Professor Babbington.

"This is so cool." Harry grinned.

"Just remember to deactivate it when you're done." Remus said, taping his

own wand to the parchment. "Mischief Managed."

"Thank you. This is going to come in so handy." Harry grinned.

"Harry's planning on snogging every single girl he possibly can this year."

Sirius remarked, causing Harry to blush slightly. "Course it won't be too terribly different from his own school. Last year I got several letters from the Headmistress about him exploring broom closets."

"That was totally innocent." Harry protested, but Sirius merely grinned, and Harry caved a bit. "Well, most of it was."

"Well, just be careful." Remus warned. "Try not to let girls make you forget what you need to focus on. Along with classes, you need to prepare for the tournament as much as you can."

"But I don't even know where to begin." Harry sighed, folding the map up again. "I don't even know what the tasks are, and as much as I tried, Dumbledore wouldn't tell me a thing. I mean, I shouldn't even be in this stupid thing." Harry sighed, ruffling his own hair.

"I just noticed something, I figured Harry would have had James' vision issues." Remus said suddenly. Sirius grinned, and nodded.

"He did."

"So why's he not wearing glasses?"

"Laser surgery." Harry smiled.

"Laser what now?" Remus looked between the two men in confusion.

"Really, Remus, are you living in the dark ages? The muggles have done things with medicine that are simply amazing. They were able to fix Harry's eyes with a laser. No more glasses sliding off his face when he dueled or flew." Sirius grinned.

"And the girls love it. They can really see my smoldering eyes." Harry said, sitting back in his seat, grinning like the Cheshire cat. Here was a pause before Remus and Sirius roared with laughter.

"He is most definitely James' son!" Remus said gasping for breath, wiping tears out of his eyes.

The three talked some more, with Remus sharing a few embarrassing stories about Sirius and a girl in their fifth year. Sirius tried repeatedly to argue that the story had been embellished, but Remus offered to show his memories of the event in question, which promptly quieted Sirius protests.

Finally, Sirius sent Harry off to bed as he was supposed to report to Hogwarts in the morning. Harry asked Remus when they'd meet again, and Remus informed Harry that he would be around as much as possible. Once Harry left for bed, the two old friends caught up on lost time, talking late into the night about as much that had happened while they'd been apart before Sirius offered his old friend the spare bedroom for the night. Remus took his old friend up on the offer, not wanting to miss seeing Harry off to Hogwarts.

3. Chapter 3

Hey Friends! I want to thank everyone for their awesome reviews, none of my other stories even came close to the amount of response this one has gotten so far, and we're only two chapters in. So Thanks.

Now, I want to thank everyone for suggesting their favorite pairings. You all gave me a lot to think about. So real quick I want to say that neither Fleur nor Daphne made the cut and here's why. I've done the Daphne thing and need a break. Though she will be in this story, she will not be paired with Harry, not even for a date. Fleur was never a choice because I have something else in mind for our favorite Veela. Plus, the differences in maturity levels would never EVER be easy to write. At least not for me.

So, that being said, the girl who I've decided to pair Harry with will actually be introduced in this chapter, and I hope you all like my choice. Let me know either way, and as always, if you have a question or concern, let me know and I'll do my best to ease your mind.

And to the reviewer calling himself Timber, and anyone else who pointed out that Dumbledore should have just put Voldemort's name in the Goblet of Fire and not told him so he would lose his power, I ask this of you... Where' be the fun in writing that story?

Now, on with the chapter...

Chapter Three

It was a very sleepy Albus Dumbledore who stepped into the Great Hall on Monday morning. Traveling half the globe in a single day really took it out of a wizard, and Dumbledore hated to admit it sometimes, but he wasn't quite as young as he once was. He had hoped to get a good night's rest, however, his conversation with his potions master, as well as the underlying concerns with the coming new arrival, and the still mysterious reasons for the boy to come out of hiding, had kept his mind working, making sleep nearly impossible.

He stopped short when he noticed the noise in the Great Hall. It was not yet seven o'clock, and the Great Hall was already full. Even the student delegations from the visiting schools were already up and enjoying breakfast. Well, they were eating breakfast at least. At once, Dumbledore knew the reason. It was quite apparent as the noise level dropped to dead silence when the students spotted him entering the Great Hall.

The old headmaster had to stifle the low chuckle as he made his way to the head table. It was clear that the children would not be able to continue eating, much less anything else until the ultimate question was

answered by the school's headmaster. He had planned on giving the announcement when breakfast was nearly over, but it was clear that they would not wait, and if he wanted a peaceful breakfast, he would have to tell them the truth.

He happened to catch the eye of Ginny Weasley, who was sitting next to Hermione Granger. Dumbledore had introduced the two himself not long after Ginny had brought the cursed Diary to him, terrified that she was going to be expelled for her hand in the debacle that had plagued the first half of her first year. Dumbledore had recognized the girl's need for a friend, and had observed that Miss Granger had become quite ostracized for her intelligence. Dumbledore felt he had been right in introducing the two girls. They had become very good friends if he wasn't mistaken. He knew he wasn't/ Ginny often talked about the muggleborns during their sessions

Both girls looked as if they might leap over the table and tackle him to get the truth out of him. In fact, nearly every student looked ready to attack him to find out if the rumor that had clearly spread throughout his school in his absence was true.

So, he stepped up to the podium in front of the head table, and turned to face the expectant faces.

"Good morning." He said, clearing his throat. "By now, you have all no doubt heard that the Goblet of Fire chose a fourth champion. I have already contacted our fourth champion, and made arrangements for him to join us here at Hogwarts for the duration of the tournament."

He paused here, and watched as students turned to each other, breaths held for the name they all knew was coming. Dumbledore had to admit to feeling a bit wicked in making them wait, but, he had nothing more to say to lengthen the suspense.

"I know that you've all likely heard who it is, and I am very pleased to confirm that the champion from Salem Academy of Magic in America is none other than Harry Potter."

There was a tidal wave of whispers and even a few students shouting if the old headmaster was quite serious. Dumbledore allowed a moment for the students to murmur and mull over this new piece of information.

After a few seconds, he went on.

"I ask you all to refrain from asking him about that fateful night thirteen years ago. I have no doubt that any of you would wish to discuss such a painful memory as losing family to complete strangers. Also, it is highly unlikely that he has any memory of the events that took place. As he will be attending classes with many of you, I ask that you treat him as you would any other student. He is no different from any one of you. You will all have the chance to meet him when he arrives this evening. Now, let us carry on as normal. Thank you."

The Great Hall erupted in chatter, and Ginny Weasley turned to her best friend Hermione Granger, her eyes as big as dinner plates.

"I can't believe it. Not only is he really alive like my Dad always said, but he's actually coming here." Hermione had never seen Ginny so excited. She was usually a bit more reserved than this, and it made her smile softly.

"So now we'll have two famous wizards competing, Won't your brother be so pleased." Hermione said wryly.

"Still stinging from what he said the other night?" Ginny's excitement ebbed away as she watched Hermione's smile fall away as well. It was no secret to any one that Ronald Weasley, Ginny's older brother by a year hated Hermione, though no one knew the reason. They had been enemies since their first year. Hermione could not figure out what it was she had

done wrong, she had only tried to help him and he'd made her seem like some ogre. He'd said some terrible things that had truly hurt the young girl, and it had led to Hermione locking herself in a bathroom where she had cried for hours, missing the Halloween feast.

That was the night a mountain troll had somehow found its way into the school. Hermione still got the shakes when she thought about it. She was incredibly lucky that Professor Flitwick had seen the troll enter the Girls lavatory and heard Hermione's shrieks of terror. The diminutive Charms teacher had made short work of the troll, and since then, Hermione and Ron had been enemies.

Hermione tried to understand it. Fred and George Weasley were very pleasant to her, and Ginny was an angel... well in comparison. Ginny did have a bit of a wicked streak in her, but it was one of her most endearing qualities.

"Look, forget about Ron." Ginny said quickly. "We have more important things to worry about."

"Like my Runes assignment." Hermione smiled again knowing how Ginny was going to react. As if on cue, Ginny gave a very frustrated growl and rolled her eyes.

"Nooooo. We have to find away to be friends with Harry Potter so we can lord it over Malfoy." Ginny replied condescendingly, rolling her eyes again for emphasis. "I heard him bragging that he and Viktor Krum were becoming the very best of friends. This would really piss him off."

"What about Harry's feelings?" Hermione looked affronted. "You're just going to use him to make Malfoy jealous?"

"Of course not." Ginny look scandalized. "I also want to snog him if he's really cute."

Hermione stopped short and stared at Ginny who was laughing

manically.

"You're mad, you know that right? Absolutely mad."

Ginny and Hermione were not the only girls discussing the reemergence of the legendary Dark Lord slayer. At the Ravenclaw table, a group of six girls were leaning in close and discussing the confirmation of the rumor that had been going around, and what Harry Potter might be like.

"I saw a picture of him in Rise and Fall Of the Dark Arts." Su Li, and short petite Asian girl with very long black hair said to her friends. "He was the cutest baby, with the wild tuft of black hair."

Su Li could be considered the leader of her pack of friends, if she subscribed to that sort of thinking. Su felt she was no better or no worse than any of the other girls in her Ravenclaw class. But, she was the ring leader in a sense.

"So he was a cute baby." Padma Patil shrugged. "That doesn't mean he's Merlin's gift. For all we know he could make Crabbe and Goyle look like models or something." Padma Patil was a bit taller than Su and also had very long black hair, due to her Indian ancestry. Though she was nearly identical to her twin sister Parvati, Padma was a lot more practical, and not nearly as giggly, or gossipy.

"Whoa!" Lisa Turpin said, waving her hands wildly. "There is no one on this earth, or even this plane of existence that hideous. Even if Potter was horribly scarred, he'd still be much better looking than those over grown apes."

Lisa was tall for her age. She was the tallest girl in her year. The trouble with that was she hadn't really begun developing in any other way. Her mother kept telling her that she was going to be a late bloomer, as she had been, but Lisa felt that this was late enough. She had shoulder length blonde hair that she usually kept tied in a loose ponytail, or braided. She

was often the voice of reason, and the other girls usually came to her first when they had a problem because she was an incredible listener, and didn't pass judgment, no matter what the situation.

"Ok, true." Padma consented. "But what does his looks matter if he's as dumb as a rock? Who wants a boy that you can't even have a conversation with?"

"How good a kisser is he?" Eloise Midgen smiled. The other five girls laughed at her joke and she smiled back. Eloise was a very sweet girl, though she had a definite weight issue, and a really horrible war going on with acne. She was also incredibly boy crazy, which made for some very interesting conversations late at night in the dorms. Eloise had an older sister who was quite experienced apparently and often passed on stories to her younger sister, who was more than happy to share with her friends.

"Can I be the first to find out?" Morag McDougal laughed, raising her hand. The rather athletically built girl had a very pretty face with a smattering of freckles across her button nose. She had light strawberry blonde hair cut in a very cute pixie like style.

"I thought you were going after Kevin?" Su asked, glancing down the table where the boy in question was discussing something with his friend Anthony Goldstein.

"Well, yeah. But we're not engaged yet." Morag smiled mischievously.

"Or even together." Eloise pointed out.

"Details!" Morag shouted her down. "The point is, A girl is allowed to change her mine, and if Potter strikes my fancy, why should I not allow him the pleasure of kissing me."

The girls all laughed again at this, and Morag simply smiled self righteously.

"All kidding aside," Mandy Brocklehurst said, looking up at the head table and then back at her dorm mates, her chestnut hair falling over her face a bit. "We can speculate all we want, but none of it matters, we'll all see for ourselves tonight. What I think we should be wondering is if we'll have him in any of our classes. I mean, what year is he in. I know he's not a seventh year."

Many was very different from her five outgoing friends. She was reserved and soft spoken. It was nearly the end of their first year before anyone had heard her speak. She was thinner than Morag, but just as tall.

Though it was Padma who had begun developing breasts first, Mandy's chest was larger. However, despite how noticeably attractive she was, her shyness prevented her from doing a lot. Unbeknownst to her, her five friends had been conspiring during the summer to try and bring her out of her shell this year, even if it killed her.

"No, you're right." Lisa said pointing a half eaten piece of toast at her friend. "He was born the same year as me, so he's at least a fourth year."

"Wait a minute." Su said, holding up a hand. "How can he even compete in the tournament? I thought the judges made it so only people of age could enter."

"How did his name even get in the Goblet of fire?" Eloise asked pointedly.

"He wasn't even here to submit his name. And let's not forget that everyone believed he had died, right?"

"It's all really strange." Padma admitted.

"Too right it is." Su said. "Come on, we'd better get to class. I'm just telling you all right now, so you don't try anything funny, I'm going to be snogging Potter first."

"Yeah right." Lisa grinned. "Even if he's a complete troll?"

"He's Harry Potter." Su said as if this closed the matter. "I'll be able to tell

everyone that I snogged him."

Luna Lovegood watched her housemates walk by, still laughing about making time with the famous Harry Potter. It was truly amazing how much one could hear, especially when others thought you beneath their notice.

Luna was a vibrant girl with long dirty blonde hair that fell nearly to her waist and large protuberant blue eyes that gave her a very dreamy expression. Everyone called her "loony" an image she did nothing to dissuade. It was almost Slytherin like in the way she held onto that façade. It made it so much easier to really get a look at who people truly were.

Luna found it fascinating that the girls would be so interested in getting physical with a boy they'd never seen much less talked to. It made Luna wonder idly if maybe kissing Harry Potter might imbibe the recipient with special power, or give them second sight, or any number of abilities. This was of course ridiculous, but one could never be sure about anything, as her father would often say.

Luna was most intrigued by the idea that Harry had not only survived that fateful night thirteen years ago, but had been hidden. This was a very curious bit of information. The Dark Lord had been vanquished, hadn't he? Without a leader his followers had been rounded up or hid themselves away, and Harry would have been protected and cared for, so why was the magical world led to believe that he had died?

What also puzzled her was a question her housemates had posed. Why was Harry even being allowed to compete in the tournament age limit had been set at seventeen? Why were they making an exception, unless Harry was the second coming of Merlin himself, and the Ministry wished to show off Harry like some sort of trophy. But then again, why was he

hidden all this time?

Luna wondered if Harry himself knew the answers to these questions.

Unfortunately, she was going to have to wait just like everybody else at Hogwarts for her answers.

Getting to her feet, Luna hefted her school bag and headed off to the greenhouses. She hoped Ginny Weasley was saving her a spot. She really liked Ginny, she made classes so fun.

"Eet is exciting, out. But is also unfair." Fleur said forcefully as she and her best friend Claudia followed the other Beauxbaton students to the carriage. "Zis tournament has become nothing more than a circus that we now have no choice but to participate in."

"How can you believe zat?" Claudia asked.

"No one was told of a fourth champion. And if I am not mistaken, zis Harry Potter is not even of age. I overheard zat mister Bagman saying that he was thirteen or fourteen. He is barely older than Gabrielle."

The girl in question looked at her sister, who had clearly forgotten that she was right beside her, and glared.

"Excuse me." Gabrielle said, her voice dripping with venom. "I may be thirteen, but we both know that I am quite capable of..."

"I am not insulting you, Gabby. I am simply stating that someone of your age is not ready to participate in such an contest. I am seventeen, and I do not believe myself ready for such trials. It feels like this is some big production for something else."

"Madam Maxine does not seemed to be worried over zis development, i do not see that you should be either. Besides, what can you do?" Claudia asked, looking bored with the conversation.

"Nothing." Fleur said simply, though she clearly looked upset. "I will simply have to do my best and bring home the Tri-Wizard cup for dear

Beauxbaton."

Gabrielle simply smirked at her sister's bravado. She had little doubt the other two champions were not boasting their claims of winning at this very moment as well.

"You've asked that question six times now." Susan Bones smiled at her dreamy eyed friend, Hannah Abbott. Susan had deep red hair and a very ample bosom. She had a very pale complexion and big bright brown eyes. Her friend, Hannah was blonde, though built very similar, though slightly taller.

"Yeah but come on." Hannah said. "We've both seen the pictures of his dad, and he was a pretty good looking guy, and his mother was gorgeous. Not to mention what a cute baby he was."

"Yes, and I already said that I'm more than a bit curious. But let's be cool, and not fall all over him like some air headed fan girl. Do you really think that will impress him? Besides, every single girl in this school is going to be thinking the same way you are. He's just another boy until he proves otherwise, so stop drooling and let's get to class before McGonagall has kittens."

"What do you think Professor Sprout wanted with Cedric?" Hannah posed the question as she rounded the corner that lead to the Transfiguration courtyard and their first class.

"I don't know, I wasn't close enough to hear, but did you see his face? He looked really nervous." Susan remarked.

"It's probably something to do with the tournament." Hannah shrugged. "I can't wait to see Cedric in action. Maybe we'll get lucky and his shirt will get ripped off in the first task."

"Oh my gods, you are so obsessed." Susan look scandalized. "You see him one time... ONE TIME without his shirt and it's all you can talk about for

nearly two years."

"Trust me." Hannah said, grabbing her friend's arm, if you had seen what I saw you'd feel the same way."

"What ever. Come on we've got to..." Susan stopped short when she saw the two men and a boy with black hair heading down the corridor towards them. The first man had shoulder length black hair and a well trimmed goatee. The second man she recognized from the previous year. It was their former Defense teacher, Professor Lupin.

"Hannah." Susan hissed, her eyes glued to the boy between the two men. Susan felt Hannah's grip tighten on her arm and knew that she must be thinking the very same thing. They were looking at Harry Potter.

He was a bit taller than the both of them, thin, but not too skinny. His hair was raven black and short and rather messy looking, though it was rather charming. He was looking into the courtyard, a soft smile on his face. He had a thin red scar on his forehead just over his right eye that looked a lot like a bolt of lightning. As he got closer to the two of them, he turned and caught their eyes, and gave a warm, appreciative smile as he passed, even turning to look at them over his shoulder. Both Hannah and Susan were instantly enthralled by those sparkling emerald green eyes, and neither of them took a breath as he passed them.

Both girls were deathly silent as the trio passed and when the men were out of sight, the girls let out a long slow breath.

"Ok." Susan said softly. "He's hot."

"Oh yeah." Hannah agreed.

It was a few seconds before they remembered they were supposed to be in class, and ended up slipping into McGonagall's class just as the bell rang. It wouldn't be until lunch that they would learn that they were the first Hogwarts students to set eyes on the new arrival.

Dumbledore finished his breakfast quickly, and just before he left the Great Hall, asked Professor Sprout to send Cedric Diggory to see him after the meal, excusing him from classes for the day.

Dumbledore had thought it would be a good idea for Harry to have a guide around the castle for a few days, and felt it best it be the Hogwarts champion, as they would have at least something in common. He was also hopeful that Diggory might introduce Harry to some of the fourth year students, and Cedric was very popular and had associations in every house, one of the few students who did. Dumbledore didn't wish Harry to only befriend children from one house, as seemed to be the case with most of his students.

Dumbledore wondered just what the student populace might be feeling now. Harry Potter, The hero who vanquished the Dark Lord, was long believed dead, though he had been celebrated as a hero. Dumbledore had actually heard a few of the bedtime stories that these children had likely heard growing up after the war. While none of the tales Dumbledore had heard painted Harry as some sort of god like being, they did manage to make the child look quite powerful and brave. Dumbledore had always feared that that sort of thing might be too much for the boy. He could have become over confident and reckless, trying to live up to his legend. Or, he might have gone the other way, and tried to use that fame to get his heart's desire, eventually succumbing to greater temptations, and forever losing himself to darkness.

The boy he had met only two days ago was humble, and charming, in his way. He was exactly what one might expect a boy, only just fourteen to be though Dumbledore could not deny the obvious influence of the boy's godfather. Dumbledore knew that Harry was quite intelligent, and gifted with magic. He had no doubt in his mind that the boy's godfather had

been teaching the boy from an early age, and Harry still had untapped potential.

But, Harry was still a boy, and deserved to have as normal a childhood as could be afforded to him. It was for this reason that Dumbledore was so frustrated at the situation. No one should have known the boy was alive. Not until it needed to be known.

The answer to the puzzle was there, just out of reach. Dumbledore hoped that perhaps after Harry was at the school, something would happen that would give Dumbledore the answer he sought, and with luck, before it was too late to prevent what the old headmaster feared had been building since that Halloween night.

A knock upon his office door broke him from his thoughts and brought him back to the present.

"Enter." He called, and was unsurprised to see Cedric Diggory, along with his Head of House, Pomona Sprout.

"Ah, Mr. Diggory, Thank you for coming. I have a favor to ask of you. I intend to excuse you from all classes today so that you may play tour guide and host for Mister Potter. I would like you to show him the grounds, and the castle. I wish for him to be kept away from the rest of the students as much as possible, at least until dinner this evening."

"Of course, Professor." Cedric said with his customary half smile. "But, why me?" Surely someone closer to his age would be more appropriate."

"Perhaps. But, you and Harry have at least one thing in common. You are both Champions in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. I hope that during the day, you might find more things in common, and perhaps even form a friendship. You will of course remember what I told you this Friday last?"

Cedric nodded, and Dumbledore smiled. Another knock came and upon Dumbledore's word, the door opened, and Cedric got his first look at the

boy of legend.

Cedric was thoroughly gob smacked.

He didn't exactly know what the vanquisher of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would look like, but never in his life would he have expected anything like what came through the Headmaster's door.

He was about average height for any fourth year boy, with a thin build, and a light complexion. He had a mop of thick black hair that stuck out here and there as if he'd only just awoken and neglected to comb it. His eyes were a startling green, that roamed the office in excited curiosity, and a thin lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead, hovering above his right eye.

"Ah, very good, right on time." Dumbledore smiled, rising from his desk to shake hands with both Harry and the two men who'd entered with him, who Dumbledore introduced as Sirius Black. Cedric had already met Remus Lupin, but shook his hand anyway, happy to see the man once again.

"Soory for our lateness, but Remus and I thought it'd be fun to give HARRY a quick tour." Sirius smiled at Harry, who was obviously enjoying the Headmaster's office. He was trying to take in everything, from the portraits of previous Heads, to the small table overflowing with tiny silver instruments.

"Not to worry." Dumbledore smiled. "I imagine the two of you rather enjoyed pointing out to young Harry some of the best places to hide should he be looking to escape some diabolical prank."

Both Remus and Sirius blushed slightly, though they laughed at Dumbledore's joke. At least, Cedric thought it was a joke.

Black was an interesting person, who after being introduced and shaking hands with the Hufflepuff champion, then embraced Professor Sprout,

exclaiming how delightful it was to see her once again. Sprout blushed, while claiming Black had not changed at all since he'd been at Hogwarts. Dumbledore then introduced Harry to both Sprout and Cedric, and after a quick explanation of his wishes for the two of them, allowed them to be on their way, followed by Professor Sprout who had a class to teach.

"I'll ask Alastor to watch over him." Dumbledore said, watching Sirius stare at the door where Harry and the older boy had left through.

"I have real faith in that kid, Albus, I really do. But he's not ready for this." Sirius turned around to look at his old headmaster. "He won't sit out, or half ass it either, it's not in his nature. He's just like Lily in that respect."

"Ah, yes. I do remember how tenacious she could be." Dumbledore smiled fondly. "I will do my very best to protect him as much as I can, but I am quite limited as I am one of the judges. But Alastor will be able to watch him quite closely. You will be able to see him on the weekends, and during the tasks. Also, as you are not a teacher, nor a judge, the both of you will be able to impart any knowledge to him you feel beneficiary."

"Any clues on how this happened yet?" Remus asked.

"None I am afraid." Dumbledore sighed. "My best guess is that our mutual friend Peter Pettigrew somehow found out about the tournament and slipped into the castle and entered Harry's name."

"It fits except for one thing." Remus said flatly.

"He wouldn't have known Harry was alive." Sirius finished the thought.

"Not unless he was working with someone who did know, and until we can find him and question him, I am afraid we are stuck." Dumbledore said, steepling his fingers.

"So, do you have any ideas where our little rat friend might be hiding?"

Sirius asked, leaning forward in his seat, a glint of undisguised malice in

his dark eyes.

Hogwarts was far more spectacular than Harry had ever imagined it to be. And at the same time... rather blander. He'd grown up hearing about the magnificent castle and all its wonders. As he walked alongside Cedric Diggory, Harry was simultaneously awed, and let down. Yet, he was still filled with excitement. He was in the heart of the setting for every single story Sirius had ever told him. There were so many things he wanted to see for himself.

Cedric was a very patient companion, taking Harry everywhere he asked to be shown. The Whomping Willow, which Harry explained hid a secret passage that led to the Shrieking Shack which was in fact not haunted at all. The Great Hall where his father had made a fool of himself over and over again trying to gain his mother's favor. The Astronomy tower, The kitchens, The Restricted section of the Library, the hospital wing. All the places he'd heard so much about while growing up, they were now being shown to him to his great wonder and awe.

While they walked about, Harry and Cedric talked, and to the Hufflepuff's great pleasure, found that Harry was a truly interesting guy. Not only were they both champions in the tournament, but both played seeker on their respective Quidditch teams. They even discussed the possibility of putting together a pick up game in the coming weeks just for fun.

"Where's your race course?" Harry asked as they approached the Quidditch pitch.

"What?" Cedric looked confused.

"You do have a broom race league right?" Harry looked as if Cedric were putting him on.

"You have a race league in America?"

"Wait a minute." Harry halted, holding up his hands. "You're telling me

you don't have a broom racing league here? How can you not have broom racing? It's amazing."

Harry then went on to explain all about broom racing and how exciting it was and how he had landed himself a spot on Salem's team after a very interesting quid ditch match.

"They use hoops similar to the ones in Quidditch, only a bit bigger and there's a ton of them you have to fly through. If you miss on you get docked in your overall time. It can get really physical, especially if a bunch of you are together. I got knocked out of the air by Francis Barker my second race. I spent two nights in the hospital while my shattered leg was regrown. By the way, Skele-gro... poison. There's no other word to describe it."

Cedric laughed at Harry's joke, and they walked around the pitch so Harry could see how different it was to the one at his school. Cedric himself was very intrigued to learn that Harry's school went all year round. As Harry explained it, they stayed in classes for around three months and then got two weeks off and then they returned. At the end of August, they would sit exams and then, if they performed well, they would be advanced into the next year.

"I think it's so we don't end up forgetting stuff when we can't practice for three months at a time." Harry suggested when Cedric asked why Salem Academy didn't have a summer break. They were interrupted in their discussion when they came upon the tallest man Harry had ever beheld in his life. Though he'd never met him in his life, Harry knew exactly who he was looking at.

"You're Hagrid!" Harry said with amazement.

Hagrid turned around and appraised the young man before him.

"Aye, and who're yeh?" Hagrid said rather shortly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Harry smiled, offering his hand. "I'm Harry Potter, sir."

Hagrid's beetle black eyes widened as he reached out one of his trash bin lid sized hands and shook Harry's.

"My word, are yeh really. Well it's a great pleasure to met yeh. Knew your mother and father, I did."

"I know. My godfather Sirius Black always speaks very highly of you."

"Sirius Black you say, No kidding. I thought he died. No one's heard from him since... well a long time." Hagrid beamed. Then a strange noise made the mountain of a man turn suddenly.

"So sorry, but I have to prepare for me class." Hagrid said apologetically.

"What are you teaching this year, Hagrid?" Cedric asked, coming around to see what it was making the strange noise.

"Blast Ended Skrewts." Hagrid beamed proudly.

"I've never heard of them." Harry admitted, looking at the strange lobster like creatures.

"Very rare." Hagrid said, stuttering a bit. Harry thought he could just make out a blush on Hagrid's cheeks, though there was so much hair, he couldn't be sure.

"Well, I got to get ready fo' me next class. Harry, I'd really like it if we could have tea some time. I knew your mother and father pretty well, and I'd be happy the share some stories, and get to know yeh a bit better, if you'd like tha is."

"I think I'd like that. Sirius said you were one of a kind." Harry smiled, and Hagrid beamed again.

Hagrid puffed out his chest a bit and smiled. "Always did like tha Sirius."

Cedric and Harry said goodbye and continued on their way. The conversation turned to the more colorful characters around the school, especially the teachers and students.

The bell tolled, signaling the end of class. The halls suddenly filled with students journeying towards their next lessons. Yet, everyone was talking about Harry Potter.

"Do you think he's already here?" Tracey Davis asked, angrily flipping her uncooperative auburn hair out of her face. She'd been at war with her lock since the summer when her mother had insisted on giving her a haircut. Tracey had wanted something special and her mother insisted that she could do exactly as Tracey wanted. It had ended badly, and what was worse was her mother refused to take her to Diagon alley to get it fixed.

"I have absolutely no idea, do I." Daphne Greengrass said, holing her books tightly to her chest and keeping a wary eye on Theodore Nott who'd been eyeing her all through class as if she was something to be conquered. She flipped her blonde hair over her shoulder and turn to look at her best friend. "But he'll be here at dinner so you'll just have to wait until then."

Do you think he's coming with someone from his school, or by himself? I mean, Dumbledore said he'd be attending classes with us, but the other schools aren't coming to classes with us, so I was..."

Tracey ran into Daphne's arm, and grunted. She turned ready to admonish her friend, but Daphne's usually stony gaze was gone replaced by a rather dreamy expression. Well, dreamy for Daphne. Tracey turned and followed her friend's gaze and found that she was staring at Cedric Diggory who was talking to that horrible Cho Chang girl, and her curly haired friend, who's name Tracey couldn't recall.

But more importantly was the boy standing next to Cedric, shaking hands with the curly haired girl and smiling politely, nodding as he listened to the girls and Cedric. Tracey's breath caught in her chest as she saw the

boy's eyes. Two perfect green orbs shone like emeralds in the sun, and got impossibly bright when he laughed at something Cho said.

"Is that Potter?"

Pansy Parkinson had pulled up next to Tracey and Daphne and was actually wrinkling her nose. Both Tracey and Daphne turned to look at the girl as if she were out of her mind. Pansy was looking Potter up and down appraisingly, and obviously not liking what she saw. However, Millicent Bulstrode, who stood behind her, and being much taller than Pansy looked as if Harry was a very tasty piece of chocolate and she was starving.

"I don't see what's so special about him." Pansy shrugged.

"But I bet if he and Draco become friends, you'll be falling over yourself just to get his approval, won't you." Daphne said loftily.

"Jealousy doesn't look good on you Greengrass. You'll do well to remember he offered you a chance to be his last year, and you scoffed at him." Pansy smirked as if she had just won the non-existent argument.

"As I recall, she kneed his jewels." Tracey said as though remembering something very pleasing.

"Whatever." Pansy snorted. "Let's go Millie." Pansy commanded and began to head for class.

"We'd better get going too." Daphne said, her icy mask falling back into place. "If we hurry, we can walk by him."

Tracey didn't need any more encouragement, and as she passed him, she actually caught his eye. He held her gaze, and gave a sweet smile that actually made Tracey giggle uncharacteristically.

Daphne had far too much fun the rest of the day imitating the moment, and Tracey vowed not to invite her to hers and Harry's wedding.

"I knew you were going to be popular, but I had no idea that girls would

be going out of their way to get a glimpse of you." Cedric grinned broadly as he and Harry began heading into the Great Hall for an early lunch.

"I have to admit, I'm a little frightened by all the attention." Harry admitted. "But at the same time, having so many girls smiling at you is kind of cool. I noticed quite a few of them checking you out as well."

Cedric stopped short and looked at Harry, who shrugged.

"What? I thought you knew and were just ignoring it. Besides, with a girl like Cho, why would you bother noticing anyone else."

"Good point, you mind if I use that if I get in trouble with her?"

"If you think it'll help." Harry smiled as they took their seats.

"Listen, at dinner tonight, Why don't you sit at the Hufflepuff table and I'll introduce you to some of the people in your year. That way you won't feel awkward with people staring at you. I mean, I know you can sit wherever you want and all, but I thought it'd make things a bit easier for you, you know?"

"Thanks. I'll do that. Can you tell me about some of them before I meet them?"

Cedric began telling Harry all he knew of the nine fourth year kids of his house. Harry listened as Cedric told him their names and a little about each one. This conversation led to Cedric telling Harry about all the fourth year students he knew of and it expanded to other students and teachers culminating in a discussion about the penultimate Quidditch team.

"If I could make the perfect team, I'd pull Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet from Gryffindor, and Thomas Bradley from Ravenclaw for the Chasers, The Weasley Twins as Beaters, My own Keeper, Regina Summers, and myself as Seeker. I think that team would be unbeatable."

"Why no Slytherins? I thought you said they'd won the cup for the last

ten years." Harry asked.

"To be honest, I don't know if any of them have any real talent. You see, they're extremely good at cheating. Ever since Draco Malfoy got on the team two years ago, it's gotten really out of hand. I feel like there might be some truly gifted players, but I've yet to see it."

"I'd be interested in seeing them play." Harry said. "Watching a team play can teach you a lot about what kind of people they are. At least that's what my godfather says. I wouldn't ever tell him this, but he's actually right. Some one who has to cheat is obviously over compensating for something else that might be lacking in their lives. I've actually seen it for myself."

"Interesting theory. I might have to pay a bit more attention in the future." Cedric admitted.

"Ok, so I've met your girlfriend Cho, and Marietta, who's pretty scrumptious..."

"Scrumptious?" Cedric asked, trying not to laugh too hard.

"There was this guy at Salem who graduated last year, and he always called pretty girls scrumptious. Some of us just started using it."

"I'm not sure, but I reckon Marietta might actually like being called scrumptious."

"Well, I'd never say it to her face." Harry said, blushing. "She might kill me. Anyway, what are the other girls like? Who do I need to check out?"

Cedric grinned broadly and the two boys began talking girls, a universal subject for all teenaged boys. Harry was now on the edge of his seat as he listened to Cedric talk about his girlfriend, Cho Chang, and her best friend Marietta Edgecombe in more detail before mentioning other girls like Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, Lavender Brown, Daphne Greengrass, Samantha Fawcett, Patricia Stimpson, Leanne King,

The Patil Twins, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Su Li, Sally Anne Perks, and...

"Of course the Ravenclaws are the brainiest kids, but if you really need help with your studying, you should find Hermione Granger. She's in Gryffindor, but she is tops in her year, and she could put a lot of the seventh years to shame."

"Is she pretty?" Harry asked, a roguish smile on his face, and Cedric had to grin as well.

"Have I mentioned anyone I felt was not pretty?" Cedric chuckled, and Harry smiled as well. He was really liking Cedric. He was so easy going. In a lot of ways, he reminded Harry of Sirius.

"She's got a hair problem. I don't mean she's hairy all over or anything. She's just got this untamable mess of curls. But I tell you what, by next year, she's going to start breaking hearts around here and people who made fun of her, like that complete idiot, Ron Weasley, are going wish they'd been nice to her from the beginning."

"That's the fourth Weasley you've mentioned. How many of them are there?" Harry asked. They were currently walking through the fifth floor corridor and Cedric was showing Harry some interesting shortcuts around the castle.

"Currently, there are four. The twins, Fred and George, though how you tell them apart is beyond me. Good for a laugh those two. Always manage to brighten any day. Last year after Gryffindor lost a match against Slytherin, all the members of the Slytherin team showed up for breakfast the next morning, and as they passed through the doors of the Great Hall their clothes disappeared, but they were all wearing very frilly ladies underwear. No one got punished for it, but everyone, including the teachers I think, knew that Fred and George were behind it. They're

legends.

Anyway, Ron's next. He's in your year, I think. I really don't know a lot about him other than he got in serious trouble for fighting two Slytherins last year. And finally the youngest, Ginny, who's a third year, and personally I think is going to be the school's biggest heart breaker if she hasn't started already. She's fiery, and I don't just mean her hair. I saw her do a really complicated hex on someone who insulted her friend on the train. It was pretty damned wicked.

"Any people I should avoid?" Harry asked.

"I can't tell you that. I think you should be friends with whomever you want. There's a lot of house division, which I can't figure out. I don't know why people think they should only associate with people in their own houses. By sixth year, most people figure it out for themselves, so you see people in sixth and seventh year hanging out no matter what house they're in, but fifth year and below, especially Slytherin, more or less isolate themselves. It's really stupid. The only person I might warn you against is Draco Malfoy."

"You've mentioned that name a bunch. And every time it was something negative. Is he really that bad?" Harry looked over, watching Cedric's face. Sirius had taught him that you could learn a lot about people based on their expressions. Right now it looked like Cedric was trying to find a nice way to say some pretty bad things. The more time he spent with him, the more Harry liked Cedric. This guy didn't seem to have a nasty bone in his body. Plus, he was easy to talk to. Harry hoped they might become lifelong friends like Remus and Sirius.

"Well, for one thing, his father, Lucius is pretty powerful. And petty. He's got the Minister's ear, and whatever he wants done, he can make it happen. They're extremely rich, and it's something Draco loves to lord

over people he believes to be beneath him, which is pretty much everyone in the school, teachers included." Cedric explained as they began heading back to the castle.

"Is Draco like really powerful or something? I mean magically?" Harry queried as they took another secret passage hidden behind a portrait of twelve friars making wine. This led to a staircase that emptied out on the second floor right near the hospital wing.

"Not that I've seen. He threatens a lot, but I've never actually seen him cast. As least, not while someone was facing him. He's an opportunist, to be sure. Always makes sure the odds are in his favor."

"So he's a bully, then." Harry posed.

"No question."

"Why hasn't anyone done anything about him? Surely someone could put him in his place."

"It's been talked about, but you remember me telling you about Professor Snape?"

Harry nodded and Cedric smiled. "He's the Head of Slytherin house, and he's quite biased towards the little snakes. I will say this for the man, he's truly gifted at Potions, I just wish he was a better teacher. It's like he leaves steps out of his directions so you're guaranteed to screw it up."

"Got it." Harry nodded.

"Ah, Mister Diggory and Mister Potter."

The boys turned to find A tall thin woman who Harry swore looked as if she'd been sucking on lemons. She was very stern looking, though her voice sounded friendly enough.

"I have been looking for you both for nearly an hour."

"I've just been showing Harry around, Professor. Harry Potter, this is Professor McGonagall, she teaches transfiguration and is the Head of

Gryffindor House." Cedric smiled as he made the introductions.

"Professor, it's an honor." Harry said taking the thin hand of the Transfiguration teacher. "You played pretty prominently in all of my godfather's stories."

"of that I have no doubts, Mister Potter. I hope you do not share his or your father's love for mischief making."

"Time will tell, I'm sure."

Cedric couldn't be sure, but he swore he saw McGonagall's lip twitch towards a smile. But it was gone in an instant, and she simply stared at Harry.

"I have been sent to collect you for the Headmaster. He wishes to speak with you before you are introduced to the school. If you'd follow me. Mister Diggory, you may head back to your common room if you'd like."

"Thank you, Professor. I'll see you at dinner, Harry."

Harry reached out a hand and shook Cedric's. "Thanks for everything, Ced. Save me a seat."

"You got it." Cedric gave a small bow to the professor before turning and heading away. Harry turned and began following McGonagall through the halls. He'd seen so much of the school, but he still felt lost, much like he had in his first few weeks at Salem. He knew that he'd eventually get used to it, and he had no doubt that he'd make some friends who'd be glad to help him out, so he wasn't too worried. Besides, he now possessed that very handy map.

"How are you enjoying Hogwarts so far?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Too be perfectly honest, it isn't exactly how I pictured it. Sirius always said it looked like this gleaming jewel, or however he put it."

"Aye, it was, and will be again. You see, Hogwarts thrives on the magic of its students. Before the last war, this school housed thousands of students

compared to the roughly five hundred we have now. The generation born during war. Many families were lost forever before the You-Know-Who fell."

"Who?" Harry looked up suddenly, and McGonagall looked back in surprise at the boy's expression.

"My word, I thought you knew. Dumbledore said that you had been told all about the wizard who killed your parents."

"Oh!" Harry's eyes lit up with recognition. "You mean Voldemort."

McGonagall gave a strangled squeak, and stumbled a bit, much to Harry's own shock.

"We do not speak his name." McGonagall said firmly, trying to get her composure back.

"Why?" Harry asked looking thoroughly confused now. "It's just a name. A really stupid one at that."

"I don't suppose you would really understand. Those were truly terrible times."

"No, I get that. It's just that by being afraid to say a stupid name like Voldemort," Harry noticed McGonagall stumble again. "Just gives it more power over you, doesn't it? Besides, he's dead, so you're actually letting his memory have power over you, and that's just plain idiotic."

"Hmm, It's no wonder why Dumbledore is so fond of you. You sound a lot like him." McGonagall said with a sniff. "Termite Toffee."

Harry hadn't realized it, but they had made their way to the stone gargoyle that guarded the Headmaster's office in hardly any time at all.

"The Headmaster is expecting you. I shall see you at dinner, and in my class. Good evening."

"Thank you, Professor." Harry said as he climbed the spiral staircase and knocked upon the Headmaster's door.

"Enter."

"Ah, Harry. How are you? Did you have an informative day?"

Dumbledore smiled as he rose from his seat.

"Yes, I did, sir thank you. Cedric was really nice and I met his girlfriend and another girl as well. Cedric said he'd introduce me to some of my classmates at dinner tonight."

"Very good, Very good indeed. Well, I thought I might show you to your quarters and we might have a chance to speak. Then we shall go to dinner. Is that acceptable."

"I'd be honored, sir."

"So polite. It's a very good quality to find in one so young."

"Sirius made sure to show me how using simple politeness and respect can get you further in life. It also makes it easier to deal with unpleasant people a lot of times." Harry said with a smile."

"That it does." Dumbledore nodded as he waved Harry towards the door.

"Sirius has a very good point. It may also give you a chance to understand that unpleasant individual."

"He failed to mention that." Harry shrugged. "But it's gotten me out of a few rather um... sticky situations at school."

"I see." Dumbledore smiled. "Well, I do hope that you do not find yourself in any sticky situations here at Hogwarts." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, and Harry smiled.

"I think it's a bit late for that, don't you sir? I mean, I'm taking part in what I'm told is a very dangerous tournament." Harry pointed out. Dumbledore had to agree.

"Indeed. I wish for you to know how truly sorry I am that I could not fix this for you. I did try to find some loophole, but the magic surrounding the selection process is very old, and quite binding. I have every

intention of discovering who is behind this conspiracy and find out who they knew you to be alive and hidden. In the mean time, I hope that you work very hard to get through each task."

"It'd be more helpful if I knew what the tasks were." Harry pointed out, and Dumbledore nodded his agreement.

"I'm sure it would be most helpful, though I am bound to secrecy. As I am also bound to be unable to assist you, which is most unfortunate.

However, You may ask your fellow champions for assistance as well as any of your new friends. Sirius and Mister Lupin would be most willing to help in anyway they can as well. Ah, here we are."

Harry saw a rather ornate door with a wrought iron knocker upon it.

"These will be your quarters while here at Hogwarts for the year. To set the password, simply tap your wand to the knocker and whisper it. Then, all you need do is say the password anytime you wish to enter. I do recommend changing the password every few months. Now, I think it is very close to dinner. Shall we?"

They turned and began heading back towards the Great Hall.

"Sir, I was wondering something. Well, I've wanted to know for a long time, but Sirius never had the answer, and I was hoping that you might."

Dumbledore cocked his head and waited for Harry to continue.

"Why did Voldemort try and kill me that night?"

"What has Sirius told you on this subject?" Dumbledore asked and Harry's shrugged.

"Only that my parents had to go into hiding and that Voldemort wanted to get me. Then we were betrayed by Wormtail, and he found us. He says it's a miracle that I survived and that no one has ever survived the killing curse. But he never knew why it all happened."

"Interesting." Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

"What is?"

"Your godfather and father were as close as brothers. What is interesting is that your father never told Sirius the reason they needed to go into hiding. I had thought for sure that James would have confided in Sirius. It is clear that he wished to protect his friend as much as he wished to protect his family."

"But why, sir?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily. He stopped just short of the entrance hall and turned to Harry.

"It is a very long story, Harry, and while it is clearly your right to know it all, I'm afraid that now is not the time. But, I will make you a promise right here. At the end of the year, you, Sirius and myself will sit down together, and I will tell you everything I know of the events that led to that night. I will even try and convince a few others who were involved to join us as they will have unique insights that may help us unravel a few mysteries. Is that acceptable to you?"

Harry's shoulders fell a bit, realizing he was not being dismissed and that obviously everyone's concern was for him to make it through the year in one piece. Harry wondered just how bad this story was, and thought that it might be a good thing Dumbledore didn't wish to tell it to him just yet.

"Alright, sir. When the tournament is over, and done with, we'll speak about this again."

Dumbledore offered his hand, and Harry took it. He felt a warmth rush through him and realized that Dumbledore had just sworn to tell him everything without speaking the oath. Harry's opinion of the man just rose in leaps and bounds.

"Well then, I think it is time to formally introduce you to the student body. I ask that you await the announcement, then you may come in and

take a seat. Enjoy your dinner, Harry."

And with that, Dumbledore entered the Great Hall while Harry awaited to be introduced.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Ginny pestered Hermione for nearly an hour to head down to dinner, owing to the desire to get a really good seat, and being able to offer Harry a place to sit when he arrived. Rumor had it that Harry Potter was already in the castle. Both girls had heard a few stories about other people who had seen Harry Potter in the castle. Ginny had overheard some girls on her way to lunch say that they had seen him in the Charms corridor. Hermione related that she heard Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones telling some of their friends in Herbology that they had seen him on their way to Transfiguration right after breakfast.

Hermione had been wondered all day what kind of person Harry Potter might turn out to be. She hated to admit it, but she had very little hope that he would be any different from any other boy she'd met. Ok, Neville was ok, and Fred and George were nice enough, but most every other boy was just plain mean. She had suffered their pranks and insults most of her life and she just couldn't see how this new boy would be any different. Her mother just sighed and shook her head whenever Hermione spoke of these things. She would always tell Hermione that it would all change, and she'd be beating them off with a stick soon enough. Hermione really loved her mother, but she was clearly deluded. Only pretty girls had that type of problem, and Hermione knew she would never win any beauty contests. For Merlin's sake, she was still waiting for her boobs to finally develop.

Ginny's whines were becoming more and more insistent and Hermione

finally grew tired of listening to every single new thought her friend had over Harry Potter and agreed to go to dinner early, if only to quiet her a bit. It turned out that Ginny wasn't the only one with the same idea. The girls took seats across from Katie Bell, Leanne Simpson, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinet who were already talking about the boy with Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown sitting nearby, though they were talking to each other.

"- jet black hair that's kind of messy, but she said it was really cute on him." Katie was saying. The other girls were listening pretty intently. The all looked dreamy eyed and silly, and Hermione sighed as she sat down. She had just left the common room with just Ginny talking about Harry to now having to listen to five girls discuss the boy none of them had seen yet.

"Are you talking about Harry?" Ginny asked as she sat down. Katie nodded and continued.

"Cho said he was nice, and Marietta just looked like she was lost. Like she'd just been hit with a serious cheering charm or something a little more orgasmic in nature. Cho said that Harry kept looking into her eyes when he talked and it just made her go all fuzzy in the head."

"They said he was really sweet." Leanne confirmed her friend's story.

"Well I say it's high time we had a gentleman in this place." Angelina smiled, looking down the Great Hall as Fred and George entered followed by Lee Jordan. "It might be good if some of these blokes could learn some manners form Potter."

"You think we can get him to sit here?" Ginny asked as she kept looking out to see if Harry might be waiting just outside.

"We have as good a chance as anyone else." Alicia smiled. "The Durmstrang kids are usually sitting with the Slytherins, and the

Beauxbatons are sitting with the Ravenclaws, The 'Puffs have Cedric, why can't we have Potter?"

"Actually, if you believe the rumors, he's been with Cedric all day, so it's likely he'll sit with the Hufflepuffs, because he already knows someone there." Hermione said flatly. The other girls just stared at her coldly.

Hermione cringed a bit under their combined menacing looks.

"Well... wouldn't you if you were in his shoes?" Hermione asked shakily.

Ginny rolled her eyes while Katie shook her head. Leanne turned to look as some more people came into the Great Hall.

"We'll just have to try and appear especially friendly then won't we."

Angelina smiled, making a show of adjusting her breasts and fixing her hair.

Katie snorted with laughter and the other girls followed suit, Alicia nearly falling out of her seat with laughter. Hermione simply rolled her eyes and wished she'd thought to bring her Runes book.

"Hello ladies." Fred Weasley said taking a seat next to Alicia while his twin, George and Lee Jordan sat on the opposite side next to Hermione. The twins wore identical grins as they sat, Fred bending to peck Alicia on the cheek, making the girl blush slightly, though she leaned into him a bit.

"Budge up you gits. We're saving a place for Harry to sit down." Ginny hissed. George looked at Fred who shrugged, not knowing how to react, and then to Lee before looking back at his sister who was still looking quite stern and a bit McGonagall like.

"You've met him then?" He asked, not really sure why Ginny was demanding him to move.

"Well, not yet, but if we look friendly, he might sit with us and..."

"Oi, George, I think our wee sister is in lo-uuf" Fred never got to finish as Alicia elbowed his chest pretty hard. She narrowed her eyes dangerously

at her new boyfriend. Fred had asked her out on the train and made quite a spectacle. Yet he'd been so sweet that she'd been unable to say no. that and she happened to think Fred was the cuter of the Weasley Twins. But Gryffindor Quidditch girls stuck together, and Alicia wasn't going to let Firefly get picked on by her brothers.

"You'd better lay off Ginny, or I might forget that I like you at all, and then you'll be stuck snogging yourself."

"Ouch. Cold." Lee said shaking his head.

"Seriously." George agreed. "Speaking of which, Angelina my dearest, most fair of all ladies in Hogwarts, would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you to Hogsmeade this weekend?"

Angelina blushed at George's invitation, but nodded, smiling as she did.

George stood up and leaned over the table to take her hand, nearly knocking Hermione off her seat in the process to kiss Angelina's hand chivalrously.

"I count the seconds until we are together" he said, causing the other girls to break into giggles, and eye rolls.

"So when do we finally get to lay eyes on the legend?" Fred asked, looking towards the Head table where a few teachers were now starting to gather.

"A couple of the Ravenclaw fifth years saw him already." Katie said picking up a fork and twirling it idly.

"Said he's quite dashing." Leanne said playfully, looking at the boys who didn't seem to be bothered that some new boy was supposed to be roguishly handsome according to the rumor mill.

"Does anyone else find it odd that we were led to believe he died and now we find out he's been alive all this time? I mean, why hide him from us?" Lee asked.

"Well isn't it obvious?" Hermione asked, looking at them all. "Dumbledore obviously thought he might be in danger after You-Know-Who died, and as a baby, he'd have no way to defend himself, would he. So he sent Harry away and told everyone that he died so no one would go after him."

"So who knew he was alive and who put his name in the Goblet of Fire, oh wise one?" Fred asked.

"What does she look like? A seer?" Ginny said coming to Hermione's defense. "What does it matter anyway. All that really matters is that he'd here now. He's probably missing his old friends and it would be good if we can try and make things easier by just being nice to him."

"Especially if it means dragging him into a broom cupboard for a little snog here and there." Katie smiled, but blushed immediately when she realized she'd said it out loud.

"Now I'm wishing I were the new guy." Lee grinned, "Especially if that's how you plan on extending the hand of friendship."

"Keeping dreaming dreadlock boy." Katie smirked.

"Gods, I wish they'd hurry up." Ginny whined, her fist tapping the table nervously.

"Calm down Ginny, You'll have just as much of a chance to get to know him as everyone else." Hermione said calmly.

"Maybe." Fred said, grinning as he nodded his head up the table to where another redhead boy sat staring at the doors to the Great Hall. "Looks like Ronniekins is just as excited to meet Harry as you are Gin-Gin."

"Never call me that again." Ginny narrowed her eyes before turning to see her brother craning his head to try and get a glimpse of Harry before anyone else. Ginny sighed and shook her head. It would just figure that Ron would be acting like a star struck imbecile. He'd followed poor

Viktor Krum around for two days begging for an autograph before Krum had finally had enough and threatened to do something very horrid to Ron. Ron had now been telling anyone who'd listen that Krum was a self centered prat who was charging galleons for a signature. Ginny wonder what she'd say about Harry if Harry refused to be his friend.

"There's Dumbledore." Katie said, leaning forward in her seat, to watch the Headmaster approach the Head table. Ginny tried to catch the old man's eye, as had become something of a tradition. Ever since the events of her first year, Dumbledore had gone out of his way to make time for the youngest Weasley. She held great respect for the man and had come to love him like a grandfather. She was looking forward to the next time they would get to speak, and quite interested to know how well he thought she was doing. It had been ages since she'd last had a nightmare, and her school work had improved greatly, thanks in large part to her best friend, Hermione. She'd also come out of her self imposed isolation and made quite a few friends, including Luna Lovegood, a very lonely Ravenclaw girl. She just wished Luna and Hermione got on better. Still, at the moment there were a few more important things to focus on. Everyone watched the old man as he took the podium and cleared his throat.

"Your attention for just a moment." He smiled and the Great Hall fell silent as if someone had used a silencing spell on everyone at once. "As I told you this morning, The fourth champion has arrived. I ask that you make him feel as welcome as you have made our other guests. It is my great pleasure to introduce Mister Harry Potter of Salem Academy of Magic."

Every head turned as Dumbledore motioned to the doors of the Great Hall.

Ginny and Hermione sat up a bit straighter and got their very first look at the boy of legend. He was well built for fourteen, tall, though not as tall as Ron Weasley or Dean Thomas. His hair was short, though it looked almost as if he'd just rolled out of bed and hadn't bothered combing it out. He was dressed casually in dark cargo pants and black shirt, the sleeves rolled up twice so everyone could see the wand holster on his left wrist. As he came down the center aisle, Hermione could see the dark red jagged scar above his right eye. As he passed, he gave a light smile, his bright green eyes sparkling brilliantly in the candlelit Hall

"He's nervous." She thought, rather baffled by this. Given the way people had been talking about Harry, she had somehow figured he'd be swaggering into the Hall, maybe even winking at girls he thought were cute or something, but this Harry, the REAL Harry was actually uncomfortable looking with all the attention.

"Maybe he'll actually be nice." Hermione mentally shrugged.

Hermione felt Ginny stiffen a bit as Harry passed. Hermione turned quickly to see Ginny watching the boy pass as if hypnotized. She was squeezing her arm a bit and it made Hermione want to laugh. Ginny was never tongue tied around any boys, and Hermione wondered how funny it would be to watch Ginny talk to Harry right at that moment.

"Damn it." Ginny sighed as Harry took his seat next to Cedric Diggory.

Hermione felt Ginny let go of her arm and slump a bit next to her. "Why do you always have to be right Hermione?"

"Well, then I guess you'll just have to invite him to sit with us tomorrow."

Hermione said turning to begin loading her plate. She heard Ginny gasp at the idea of talking to Harry Potter, causing her to chuckle softly to herself.

If Harry had thought about it at all, he would have started dreading

dinner much earlier in the day. Harry normally considered himself to be fairly confident in himself. He could usually accomplish anything he set out to do. If he didn't succeed on his first try, he would just keep trying until he got the results he sought. Sirius often told him that his mother was the same way.

As it was, Harry had never had to be introduced in front of an entire school and walk in front of them while they all watched him.

Given all Sirius and Remus had told him the night before, Harry wondered if the Hogwarts students had expected the doors to open and find a tall strong bloke whose robes and hair were billowing out in a non-existent wind with lightning arcing between his fingers. He wanted to smile a bit as he imagined the collective groan of disappointment as he actually entered the Great Hall.

As he walked by student after student, he felt himself grow a bit more nervous. Harry had never felt more anxiety in his young life, not even when he and his best friend Mark Laughlin fell out of a broom cupboard landing on top of each other in a rather compromising position. They had been trying to avoid getting caught out after curfew by their Charms teacher, while at the same time trying to meet up with two girls, who as it turned out, had lied about meeting them just to get them in trouble. It wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't been caught by Cat Matthews, a very gossipy prefect who then went on to tell everyone that Harry and Mark were caught kissing. Thankfully, Gina Edwards and Scott Peerson were caught two nights later in a far more compromising position, and no one could remember Harry's story after that.

Still, Harry felt as if he were being judged by every set of eyes in the Great Hall despite his lack of billowing cloak and obvious power radiating off of him. Thankfully, Cedric stood up, and waved for Harry to

join him at the Hufflepuff table, and the meal commenced.

"You alright Harry, you look a little flushed." Cedric smiled as Harry sat down.

"I guess I didn't realize that I would have to walk in front of the entire school. It was a little unnerving."

Harry found himself sitting next to a pretty redhead girl, who was sitting next to a cute blonde girl, both of whom Harry remembered seeing that morning.

"Harry, This is Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott. They're both fourth years. That's Ernie Macmillan, Zacharias Smith, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Sally Anne Perks. All Fourth Years. There's a few more of them around here, but I don't see them." Cedric said pointing out all the fourth years nearest him. Cedric had gotten to the Great Hall early enough that he was able to see where the fourth years were congregating, and then taking a seat near them. Susan had even asked him why he was sitting near them as he usually sat closer to the Head table with his friends, but Cedric decided to remain quiet and give them a bit of a surprise.

After introducing the fourth years, Cedric then introduced Harry to his own friends who were all very polite, though clearly excited to meet Harry.

"So how do you like Hogwarts so far?" Justin asked, being the first fourth year to speak to Harry.

"It's pretty nice so far, but I'm anxious for classes tomorrow. It's going to be really cool to see how they differ from my school."

"What is it like there?" Hannah asked, her voice squeaking a bit, making Zacharias and Ernie look at her oddly from across the table. She shot them both a glare, silencing them before they could comment.

"Well, first off, it's not a castle. It's like a bunch of really big mansions all

strung together. We only have three floors, but it's really nice, especially in the fall when the leaves start turning colors."

"Sounds nice." Hannah smiled, and Harry returned the look as he placed some roast chicken on his plate, following the others example. Harry noticed how much food was available, so many different dishes, that he could hardly believe it. He wasn't feeling too adventurous though and decided to stick with things he recognized. For tonight at least.

"Cedric said you had a broom racing league?" A boy that Harry remembered was named Curtis asked. Harry nodded, chewing quickly so he could answer.

"Yeah. I was surprised that you don't have one. All the best broom makers are here. America's got a couple that are pretty good, but Firebolt and Nimbus are among the best in the world. It was a real shock." Harry said, and Curtis and Cedric both looked surprised by this bit of news.

"What's broom racing?" Zacharias asked, and Harry launched into an explanation of his favorite sport. His audience was leaning closer as he explained all about how the courses were laid out and the rules of the racing league.

"So the racer with the fastest time wins, but in order to get the fastest time you have to fly through every hoop?" Ernie asked when Harry finished.

"Pretty much. It's not as easy as it sounds, especially when you've got three or four people trying to get through the hoop before everyone else, and you don't want to stop and let someone ahead of you. It gets pretty rough up there sometimes." Harry confirmed.

"Sounds really intense." Hannah remarked, and Harry turned and caught her eyes.

"Not as intense as you might think. I happen to think there are a few

things that can be way more exciting than racing a broom."

Hannah's face tinged pink again as she smiled back at Harry.

Harry had been practicing this move for about a year, ever since Sirius had told him about it. Sirius always told him that by holding a girl's gaze as you spoke to her was the most effective form of flirting. It showed you were confident, even if you felt like there were raging serpents in your guts.

It was a fine line to walk however, because you didn't want to come off as cocky. Girls could see through that, and had no trouble taking advantage of it, usually making you seem an idiot, as his mother had done to his father for many years.

The key was to make the girl feel like she had your undivided attention, no matter for how long. Look her in the eyes as much as possible and just be nice. Never try to be something other than yourself, and let the girl be your guide.

Harry loved that it worked. Last year he'd been pretty sought after by girls just because the all said he was "intense". Harry still had no clue what that meant. It seemed to be working even better here at Hogwarts.

Hannah was the third girl he'd made blush so far, just by talking to her.

"So Harry," Susan asked, clearing her throat a bit. Harry turned and stared into the redhead's bright blue eyes, making her shiver ever so slightly. Harry wasn't attuned to girls well enough yet to know she had just shuddered under his gaze.

Susan prayed that she wouldn't sound stupid in front of him. "What classes are you taking?"

"I'm not sure yet." Harry admitted. "Most likely the same things as I was taking at Salem, or the closest thing to it. Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, Defense, Runes, Herbology and Creatures

"Pretty full schedule there." Ernie said, reaching for a roll and beginning to butter it. "Not a lot of people taking that many classes here."

"Shows what you know." Sally Anne Perks spoke up for the first time, looking intently at Ernie and clearly avoiding looking at Harry. "Most of the Ravenclaws are taking at least that much, and Granger's got Arithmancy on top of that."

Ernie looked nonplussed but Zacharias looked surprised. He looked like he wanted to ask if she was pulling his leg, but Harry spoke up at that moment.

"I've handled it pretty well so far. But I still don't know how different things are yet." Harry admitted. "It might be a lot tougher than at my school."

"Well, If you find yourself getting lost or whatever, you could always ask one of us to help." Susan said, finding her gaze locked with Harry's.

"I appreciate that. I will definitely ask for your help."

Susan flushed and quickly turned to look at Hannah, mouthing silently.

"Oh my gods!"

"Already a hit with the girls, eh?" Justin smiled as he saw Susan's face burn scarlet. Both Hannah and Susan chuckled rolls at Justin who began laughing, until Sally Anne who was sitting next to him stamped on his foot and gave a scathing look of warning. Justin grimaced and turned his attention back to his plate.

"I'm just hoping to make some good friends at this point. Harry smiled having really enjoyed Justin's demonstration of how to insert his foot into his mouth. Even more since Sally Anne was watching him like a hawk to make sure he didn't do it again. Harry was guessing they were dating, especially after Justin tried to make a pouty face to get him out of trouble.

"I don't think that'll be too hard." Ernie said. You're a bit of a celebrity, you know."

Harry shrugged. "I don't really care about that. Who the hell would want to be famous for losing their family? It's mad. If I'm going to be famous for something, I'd rather it be for my racing, or Quidditch, or for finding a cure for something, you know? Right now I just want to be a kid and have fun."

He said the last part looking at Susan who nodded in agreement, her cheeks coloring slightly again.

"I'm sure you'll have loads of fun here." Hannah smiled brightly. "I mean, I know we don't have Racing or anything, but there's loads to do, and we get to go to the village every once in a while. In fact, this upcoming weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend. We could show you around if you wanted."

"Subtle Abbott. Real smooth." Zacharias smiled coyly.

"Justin?" Sally Anne said with a sweet tone. Justin looked up, smiling innocently. "Punch your friend for being an arse."

"Sorry mate." Justin said as he punched Zacharias in the arm, making Harry laugh again.

"You'd better make time for training." Cedric said. "You'll want to be prepared for whatever the tournament might bring."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that." Harry said, looking at the older boy. "I just want to survive this thing, so I was hoping you might help me a bit. Maybe help me learn some stuff I don't know that you think might be useful."

"I don't see the harm in that." Cedric said, remembering Dumbledore telling him that Harry would likely look to Cedric for guidance in some ways.

"Wait a minute." Zacharias Smith said, turning sharply. "Why should you help him? He's from a different school. He's trying to win too isn't he? Don't we want a Hogwarts victory?"

"Duh Zach." Hannah rolled her eyes. "In case you haven't noticed, Harry's a lot younger than Cedric, and was entered against his wishes. Do you really want Harry to get killed just so you can live vicariously through Cedric?"

Harry was trying not to smile as the cute blonde defended him. He caught Susan smiling out of the corner of his eye, and had to laugh when Zacharias bowed his head, unable to argue back.

"Don't worry about it, Harry." Cedric said, smiling as well, obviously enjoying the melodrama unfolding in front of him as well. "I can show you a few things that might prove useful. Though to be honest, without knowing what the first task might be, I don't know how much it will help."

"Everything helps, even if we're not sure how when we're learning it."

Harry smiled. "That's what my Charms teacher always says anyway."

Cedric nodded at the sage wisdom and dinner continued on with Harry getting to know the Hufflepuffs a bit better, and even flirting a little with Hannah and Susan. This proved to be really enjoyable as they were clearly not used to being flirted with. It was very easy to make Hannah blush, though Susan became pretty comfortable with Harry's manner of looking in her eyes when they spoke. Once Harry learned Susan's Aunt was the head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, thanks to Ernie, Harry did back off a little, focusing a bit more on Hannah much to Susan's irritation.

Ernie had trouble moving his arm the next day thanks to the myriad of bruises Susan inflicted upon him back in the Common Room later that

evening.

"They are so lucky!" Su Li sighed for the fifteenth time. "I would give anything to be right where Bones is right now."

"Blushing like an idiot?" Anthony Goldstein asked, clearly not realizing he was potentially walking right into a mine field. He didn't even see some of the girls near him look angrily at him as he kept eating his steak and kidney pie.

"Maybe if you weren't such a completely hopeless git, girls might look at you the way Abbot and Bones are looking at Potter." Eloise Midgen snorted.

"Why would I want that?" Anthony gestured with his fork at where Hannah was laughing at something Harry had just said.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind that." Terry Boot said. Anthony and Kevin Entwhistle both looked at him suddenly as if he'd just sprouted a second head. "What? Look at him. He's got them eating out of the palm of his hand. On top of that, nearly every girl, and I mean EVERY girl is staring at him right now. Look at the girls from Beauxbatons."

They all glanced up the table and saw that Terry was right. Even Fleur Delacour was eyeing him up and down. They then looked all around and could see quite clearly that that many girls were either blatantly staring, or trying to look as inconspicuously as possible.

"Ok." Anthony said finally. "So, he's got people's attention. But that'll fade in a day or so. Then he'll just be another oddity around her."

"So you're honestly telling me that you don't want to even know the only person who's survived the killing curse?" Padma Patil asked looking disbelievingly at Anthony who shook his head.

"What proof do you have of that?" Anthony pointed out. "The only thing we know for sure is that people thought he'd died that night, but he was

only in hiding. We don't know that he survived a killing curse or anything. For all we know, Aurors showed up and defeated You-Know-Who."

"Ok, as much as I hate to admit it, He's got a point." Lisa Turpin said, looking as if it pained her a great deal to say it."

"But how are we supposed to find out the truth?" Mandy Brocklehurst asked, her voice soft and very difficult to hear over the din of the Great Hall. "We can't ask him. I mean that's just rude."

"Not to mention that he won't even remember." Su added. "But don't you think that if Aurors had killed You-Know-Who the story would be significantly different?"

"Ok, now she has a point." Lisa smiled, happy to be on someone else's side. It was pretty well known that Lisa and Anthony did not agree on a great number of things. However, unlike some people, They often debated rather than screamed at each other.

"The story goes that the Potter's were dead, but that You-Know-Who's body was found in front of the baby's crib." Lisa reminded them all.

"Couldn't his mother have fought him until she had nothing left?" Terry asked.

"The way I always heard it was that she died outside of the nursery, blocking the door." Morag McDougal smiled softly as she took yet another look at the boy in question, looking a bit jealous as Susan Bones bumped his shoulder with her own. Harry looked as if he had really enjoyed that as he bumped her back.

"I heard it that way too." Lisa nodded, following Morag's gaze and sighing softly.

"So he clearly killed the mother and then went after Harry. So obviously whatever happened, Harry was the one to turn it around and defeat You-

Know-Who." Su said with finality.

Anthony realized he was being ganged up on and wisely chose not to continue his stance. A smart move as all the girls and even the two other boys seemed to all be nodding in agreement.

"I wonder what they're talking about now?" Morag asked watching as Harry was gesturing with his hand while those closest to him were obviously listening intently. They suddenly broke into gales of laughter and it looked as if Ernie MacMillian had snorted pumpkin juice through his nose, which made them all laugh harder. Cedric was even pounding the table.

"I wonder what house he's staying in." Su Li pondered aloud.

"He's got private quarters." Came a dreamy response. Everyone turned to look at Loony Lovegood who was looking at something across the Great Hall and gathering another spoonful of chocolate pudding. "I saw Dumbledore showing it to him a few minutes before dinner."

"Hold on." Lisa said quickly looking at the odd girl who so often spoke of things that made her wonder if Loony was playing with a full deck. "Are you saying you actually saw Potter up close?"

"Yes." Luna smiled, now turning her protuberant blue eyes on Lisa. "He smells nice."

"You smelled him?" Su asked looking mixed between envious and a little creeped out.

"As I passed him, yes. He was very busy speaking with Professor Dumbledore, so I didn't get a chance to say hello. But I think I will tomorrow. I'm sure he'd appreciate someone being friendly to him. It must be very strenuous coming to a new school in a whole new country and leaving your friends behind. He's likely to get a bit homesick." Luna's insight actually silenced everyone who heard it. They all glanced

at one another each feeling a tad guilty that they hadn't even thought about how Harry might be feeling. And while he looked to be enjoying himself at the moment, later on he might become a bit gloomy when he really started missing his old friends.

"Ok, I feel like an idiot." Eloise said, glancing at Harry. "All I could think of was getting him into a broom closet."

Anthony laughed and was then elbowed by Su. Hard. Anthony looked upset and ready to retaliate until he saw Eloise eyeing him hard. He quailed under gaze and went back to his pudding.

"Ok, So we make an effort to make friends with him, right?" Mandy asked, looking at her friends.

"Right." Morag said nodding her agreement.

"Of course." Su affirmed. "But I still get to snog him first."

The girls all laughed while the boys simply rolled their eyes and tried to ignore the girls.

When dinner finished, Harry got up from the table, looking forward to checking out his room, and getting a good night's sleep. With his classes starting the next day, he was eager to see how they would differ from his old classes, not to mention having the opportunity to meet more of his classmates.

The Hufflepuffs had proven to be a fun lot, though there had been a bit of awkwardness at first. Once they realized he was just like them, it became more comfortable, and Harry had enjoyed talking about Salem Academy and sharing a few stories about his other friends.

They walked with him to the doors of the Great Hall, Hannah and Susan on either side of him. They all bade him goodnight, promising to see him the next day. Cedric even shook his hand and told him they'd set up some time in the library to do a bit of research. Harry thought that sounded

great.

He was just starting to head to his room when he nearly ran into two girls. The blonde was smiling, at least Harry thought she was, her eyes icy and stoic. The other girl, the one with auburn hair which fell into her eyes almost as if it were out to get her was definitely smiling. She offered her hand to him at once.

"Hi, I'm Tracey and this is Daphne." She smiled, though Harry thought she looked a bit self conscious or something. "We wanted to welcome you to Hogwarts."

"Thank you." Harry smiled, shaking the girls hand.

"We uh, that is, I know you've probably already been asked, or maybe you haven't... I was um..."

"What my friend is trying so eloquently to say is that we were hoping you might want to join us at breakfast tomorrow morning." The blonde girl, Daphne said, giving her friend a shameful glance.

"We just thought that you might like to meet a variety of people from the different houses and get kind of a broader look of the students here."

Tracey said, though it sounded like something she rehearsed."

"I think I'd like that a lot, actually." Harry smiled making sure to catch each girl's eye as he spoke. "It be quite fascinating to hear different views on the school and the people as well. Shall we say, what? Seven thirty?"

Harry said looking to the two girls for any objection.

"An early riser. I like that." Daphne smiled a bit more. "Seven thirty it is. We'll meet you right here."

"I look forward to it. Goodnight ladies." Harry smiled as he headed towards his room. He gave a quick glance over his shoulder as they disappeared down into the dungeons where Cedric said the potions labs were.

Harry headed up a set of stairs into the corridor that held his room and found it easily. He remembered that he hadn't set a password yet, so he removed his wand from his holster and tapped the wrought iron knocker and whispered, "Marauders."

The door opened and Harry stepped into his new bedroom.

It was very nice, Harry thought. There was a large four poster bed, much bigger than his old one at Salem, though he had shared a room with three other boys. Harry always considered himself lucky to room with Mark, Kris and Danny. He felt he had the best room mates in his year. But having a room all to himself was amazing.

There were two plush looking chairs next to a small sofa in front of a large fireplace with a low table between them. Perfect for working on homework, Harry decided. There was a small wardrobe on the opposite wall standing next to a door that Harry found out led to a small bathroom with his own shower.

After a thorough inspection of the facilities, Harry found all his belongings were already there, including a brand new trunk with all his books, quills and potion things waiting for him, as well as a new backpack to carry his books to classes in. On top of everything was a note from Sirius.

Harry,

Remus and I went ahead and got everything you needed for your school year. Dumbledore contacted your headmistress and she'll be sending your things along shortly, so you'll have your broom and the rest of your clothes and the like.

I know that you're excited to be at Hogwarts, and I know what it represents to you, but I want you to remember that it is still a school and you are still a student. Make me proud and study hard. Make a lot of friends, and have fun

with the girls. But if one of them strikes your fancy, then allow things to happen naturally and treat her right.

I know that you're probably overwhelmed by everything right now, but remember what led to you being here. Trust in Dumbledore and keep your eyes open. If anything strikes you as odd, do not hesitate to go to Dumbledore or to contact me.

Have fun, and please come see me this weekend. I can't wait to hear about everything.

Love,

Sirius.

Harry smiled as he set the letter back in his trunk. His godfather knew him so well. He had been so lost in being at Hogwarts he'd all but forgotten that he was entered into a very dangerous tournament by someone who knew him to be alive and hidden away.

Harry swore that he would do everything he could to prepare for each task and survive them. He didn't care at all about winning the damned thing, as he hadn't even wanted to enter, much less known about the damned thing.

Going to the wardrobe, Harry saw that it held the clothes he'd taken camping and a new package of sock and underwear. Harry shrugged, realizing they'd have to do until the rest of his things arrived. Taking a pair of jeans and long sleeved t-shirt out as well as socks and underwear, he set them in the bathroom, then he brushed his teeth, shed his clothes and climbed into bed. It was so comfortable, and he was so tired that Harry fell asleep nearly at once.

It was a very strange sensation. Like being on that hang glider again, but so close to the ground. He smelled so many things, earth and moss and fear. He could smell fear. It was extremely unnerving.

He had no control, and after he realized that he was simply along for the ride, he relaxed slightly, but only just.

Up he rose, gliding just above the stairs. He could feel the power of his muscles working to move him along, and finally he crested the top of the staircase and moved into the room with the fire, following its warmth.

There was a man in the room. Short and stocky and shivering. He had watery brown eyes and a stoop to his shoulder. His light brown hair was sticking out and even from his angle upon the floor he could see the man was balding.

"Nagini as returned, My Lord." the man said, sounding very much like he wanted to break down and start sobbing.

"Good." Came a high cold cruel voice that sent cold shivers of unexplainable fear down his body. "Milk her and prepare my supper you imbecile."

The man bent low and grabbed his neck, forcing his mouth open and shoving something into his mouth. He could feel fluid being forced out of him and he didn't like it. He squirmed a bit, trying to get free. The cold voice spoke softly.

"Be still, my pet. I know you do not like his hands upon you, but I need your powerful venom to help heal me. I promise that should he no longer prove useful, you may devour him. Be still my sweet. It is almost over. I can feel him. He is closer. He has returned, just as we knew he must. He has returned. Harry Potter has returned..."

Harry shot bolt upright in his bed, sweat cold on his face. His heart was pounding in his chest and he was shivering. Throwing his blankets off of himself, Harry went to the bathroom and splashed his face with cold water and then stared in the mirror. The dream had been so vivid, but was slipping away from his consciousness so fast. He could remember the

stooped man with watery eyes, and the voice, but everything else was slipping through his fingers like water.

Harry felt that it was familiar somehow. Like he'd dreamt of that man before, and heard that voice before, but he just couldn't remember it.

Harry finally sighed and headed back to bed. Perhaps it was just everything catching up to him. Everything had happened so fast. He was hang gliding with his godfather only two days ago and now he was in the very place he'd heard about for so long. Hogwarts, the place where his father and godfather had become friends. The place where his father had courted his mother. To Harry it was almost like stepping into his favorite book. The place held so much promise, and Harry just couldn't wait to see what fate had in store for him now that he was here at long last.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Harry awoke at half past five, slipped on a pair of shorts and his trainers, t-shirt, his sweatshirt, grabbed the Marauder's map and his watch and headed out onto the grounds. He and his friends from Salem had started working out in their second year when they had noticed two things.

Those who had really good stamina could last a really long time during a duel. Secondly, the boys that had good figures seemed to get the best girls.

The boys had taken up running, and after that first year had started seeing the results. Girls were talking to them more. And they had performed extremely well in their end of year Defense practical exams. Yet, none of them had been able to best their defense teacher as they had all joked they might.

Harry had asked Sirius about the best place for a good run while at Hogwarts and his godfather had suggested a good few laps around the

Quidditch pitch. Harry wasn't the only one up before dawn it seemed.

The Gamekeeper, Hagrid was busy in his garden while his enormous dog sat loyally at his side, watching Harry pass with interest.

As he ran, Harry began to mull things over in his mind. Sirius and Remus had explained that he was likely going to be quite famous and get a lot of attention. Harry hadn't really understood until he'd walked into the Great Hall the previous evening. At his school, he was just another face in the crowd. Heck, he hadn't even been allowed to use his real name. Sirius had insisted that he go by James Black. Sirius explained that while they were very far away from England, wizards talked, and if Harry Potter suddenly showed up in America, things could become very difficult.

Harry had tried to argue, believing he couldn't be the only Harry Potter in the world. As it turned out, he was somewhat mistaken. While not the only Harry Potter in the world, there were next to no other Harry James Potter's in the magical world.

Harry had never spoken the truth to any of his friends, and sometimes the guilt would rear up and he'd speak to Sirius who always reminded him of the reasons for the secret. Sirius would empathize with his godson, but was always adamant that it was for his safety. He was still Harry Potter, the son of James and Lily Potter. So long as he remained true to himself, Sirius was sure Harry's friends would understand in the end.

But all of his old worries had evaporated a few days ago. Harry's biggest worry was how he was going to ask out Stacy Littleton out for a date, and now he was trying to figure out how he was going to survive a tournament known for it's death toll.

Harry realized that he knew just about nothing about the Tri-Wizard tournament. He decided that he would go to the library at some point

that afternoon and see if they had any books on the competition. He'd also ask Cedric what he knew, as they hadn't really discussed the Tournament at great length the previous day. Maybe he'd try and find that girl Cedric had mentioned, Hermione Granger and get her to help him. Thinking of Cedric made him think of the new people he'd met at dinner. The Hufflepuff's had been very friendly and welcoming. He'd actually liked Ernie and Justin, and thought they'd be cool to pal around with. Zacharias on the other hand, while nice enough did rub Harry wrong. Maybe it was his outburst when he'd asked Cedric for help, and that he was just being overly sensitive. Harry decided not to pass final judgment on Zacharias just yet.

Then there were the girls. Sally Anne had all but avoided talking to him at all. Harry thought she might be a tad shy, as she didn't act like she was haughty or anything. Harry figured she might warm up to him if they hung out more.

Hannah was very cute, Harry thought. He liked the way she laughed, but she laughed at nearly everything. Harry figured she was likely nervous, but she had been fun to flirt with. She had even started flirting back by the end of dinner. Susan was really sweet too. Harry loved her hair, and couldn't deny that her chest was quite nice looking. She had impressed him by becoming a bit playful at the end of dinner, bumping his shoulder when she'd made a rather enticing comment.

So far he really liked what he saw of the Hogwarts girls. Of the ones he'd actually talked to, Susan and Hannah had emerged as his favorites, though Marietta was very high on his short list. She was just really good looking. He wondered if she went for younger guys.

Harry smiled as he imagined Marietta grabbing the front of his shirt and slamming him against a wall and kissing him hard. He shook his head

and reminded himself that Sirius was likely making up most of those stories he told about his time here at Hogwarts. He'd have to remember to ask Remus about some of those tales.

When it was nearing six-thirty, Harry began heading back to his room so he could shower and ready himself for breakfast. He remembered the two girls who'd promised to meet him for breakfast. He tried remembering their names, but couldn't think of them and would have to ask them politely to remind him when he saw them again.

The blonde girl had given him pause. She appeared standoffish at best, and Harry felt like she was appraising him. More so than anyone else at least. She clearly wasn't impressed by him, which Harry found intriguing. The auburn haired girl had been very pretty, and Harry thought she might be cool. She reminded him a lot of a girl at his old school, though Harry hoped this girl wasn't as snobbish.

Once he was all cleaned up, Harry dressed in the clothes he'd lain out for himself the night before and went to his new trunk to get his books ready. It was only as he was reaching for his new charms book that he realized he had no idea what classes he was taking that day. He closed his trunk and started for the door, when someone knocked.

Harry smiled when he saw Professor McGonagall waiting for him.

"Good morning, Mister Potter. I have your schedule for you." She said, looking just as rigid as she had the day before.

"I will see you in my Transfiguration class right after breakfast. Do you know where it is?"

"Oh, yes Professor." Harry smiled up at her. "I was shown the Transfiguration courtyard yesterday morning. And I'm sure I can get someone to show me the way if I get lost."

"Be sure that you do. I will not tolerate tardiness." McGonagall said. She

bade him good day and left Harry, who hurried back into his room to load his backpack with everything he needed for the day.

Transfiguration, Potions, and Runes books as well as his potion supplies and the Marauder's map all got tucked away and a few quills and an ink bottle. He then slung the bag over his shoulder and headed out to the Great Hall to meet the two girls.

The closer he drew to the Great Hall, the more people he saw. A few of them nodded in his direction and one or two waved. Just as promised, the two girls were waiting for him just outside the Great Hall.

"Good morning." He said with a smile.

"Good morning to you." The blonde said, though she did not smile. She stood with her arms over her chest and ran her eyes over his attire.

Thankfully she didn't roll her eyes or anything so condescending. Harry tried to catch her eye, but she seemed fascinated by something over his shoulder.

The other girl however was smiling enough for the both of them. Her hair was done up pretty nicely today, and she also looked over Harry's attire, though she was clearly not appraising him. Actually Harry had the impression she might be undressing him with her eyes., Well at least his chest, as that's where her eyes lingered.

"Does your school not have uniforms?" She asked, taking in Harry's casual appearance.

"Yeah, but I wasn't at school when Dumbledore came to get me. I was told that my school things are being sent." Harry said with a wry grin.

"Shall we?"

He allowed the girls to lead him into the Hall, as he didn't know where they wanted to sit. They led him to the table furthest from the enormous fireplace. It was then that Harry noticed that everyone at this table had a

silver and green emblem on the left breast, and their ties were all silver and green. He then saw that the next table over was the same one he'd sat at for dinner with the Hufflepuffs.

"Can I ask you a question?" Harry asked, sitting down next to the auburn haired girl and reaching for the pitcher of orange juice and filling his goblet. "Well, two actually. Not to be rude, but I can't remember your names."

"Tracey." the auburn haired girl smiled and then pointed to the blonde.

"That's Daphne."

"Ok, I think I'll remember now. I'm so sorry." Harry smiled, but Tracey waved off his apology.

"Don't worry about it. I imagine you'll be doing that a lot over the next week."

"What was the other question?" Daphne asked as she buttered her toast and began to eat very delicately.

"Is there a rule that says you can't eat at other tables?" Harry said looking out on the Great Hall and seeing that people were all sitting according to houses. No one mixed.

"No, there's no rule." Tracey said. "We just don't mix. Especially we Slytherins and the Gryffindors."

"Why?" Harry asked obviously confused. Both girls looked at each other for a moment before looking back at Harry who was waiting expectantly.

"To be honest, I'm not really sure." Tracey admitted. "I mean, we don't tend to get along with the Gryffindors. They think they're so much better than everyone else."

"Oh come on, they can't all be bad." Harry said, looking up and down the Gryffindor table. "There's got to be a few cool people there, right?"

Tracey and Daphne were again silent, looking at the Gryffindor table.

"I mean, you can't honestly tell me that you like everyone in your house, right?" Harry added.

"Well no." Tracey said. "And to be perfectly honest, I have to say I never really gave it much thought. I mean our houses have been rivals for so long... it's just like, you just hate them on principle." Tracey shrugged feeling her cheeks burn.

"Kind of stupid to hate people you haven't even tried to get to know. Would you both hate me if I was a Gryffindor, even if you knew nothing else about me?"

"I take it there's no houses at Salem Academy." Daphne said flatly. Harry could see that she was not appreciative of Harry pointing out the stupidity of House division.

"No, we don't. Just boys and girls dorms. There's like two hundred and sixty some odd students in my year alone. I share a room with three other boys in my year. So, we get a good chance to mingle and get to know one another without prejudices being put on us just because of what house we're sorted into."

Again the girls were silent, and Harry was wondering if he'd just made his first enemies here at Hogwarts.

"So you'd just have us mixing with lesser witches and wizards?" a boy said. Harry and the girls looked up to see a boy with silvery blond hair that was very neatly slicked back. He had cold gray eyes and he was sneering at them. On either side sat what Harry was sure were two shaved gorillas.

"Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy." Tracey said and Harry noticed that she sounded very sardonic. Harry remembered Cedric talk about Malfoy and his father. He couldn't remember a single nice thing Cedric might have said. As he took in Draco's condescending tone, and his very haughty

expression, Harry felt that Draco had clearly earned his less than glowing reputation.

"What makes them lesser?" Harry asked curiously.

"Well, their lack of blood, for one thing." Draco drawled.

"I'm pretty sure they all have blood." Harry said smartly, trying to hide his grin. He noticed Tracey smirk, and Daphne even cocked an eyebrow.

"That's not what I meant." Draco said quickly. "This place is full of Mudbloods and squibs. People, for lack of a better word, who should never be allowed to even touch a wand. Every year this place gets worse with more and more mud bloods being allowed to enter. And then they let that complete oaf, Hagrid, teach a class. I was mauled by a Hippogriff last year because he has no clue what he's doing. They had to kill it. The moron tried to get it off, saying it was as gentle as a kitten. Well, My father made sure no one listened to that great prat's rambling."

"Why did the Hippogriff attack you?" Harry asked.

"How should I know?" Draco said looking self-important. "A better question would be why is that oaf bringing such a dangerous thing near students in the first place?"

"See, the thing is, and I'm no expert, but a Hippogriff only attacks if you insult it. So if you got attack, it stands to reason you gave it cause to attack you. Did Hagrid not tell you how to properly approach one?"

"Oh no." Daphne said quickly before Draco could answer. "He explained how you need to keep eye contact and bow in front of the creature and wait for it to bow in return. But Draco just flaunted forward because he's so far above everyone else he just knew that the Hippogriff would be so thrilled to be attended to by such a powerful being. He even complimented the beast by calling it... What was it again, Draco? A great ugly chicken?"

Tracey was losing her battle with restraint, and Harry saw her gripping the table tightly, her head bowed forward. Harry snickered and Draco's sharp gray eyes snapped to Harry's face.

"It sounds to me that you were attacked because you didn't listen to your teacher, Draco." Harry smiled. "Maybe you actually earned the attack? Perhaps if you actually listened to your teachers and followed their directions, you wouldn't get hurt."

"You should watch yourself, Potter. You don't want to go and make enemies of your betters." Draco snapped.

"Draco, no one was talking to you in the first place." Tracey said irritably, though she was still smiling from Daphne and Harry's combined verbal assault. "Why don't you keep your pointed beak out of other people's conversations."

"No one is talking to you, Davis."

"Actually." Harry felt the need to point out. "We were." Harry indicated himself and Daphne, who had cocked an eyebrow again. Draco glowered and turned back to his two friends, now ignoring Harry and the girls.

"I think he just made my earlier point." Harry said to the girls.

"Yeah." Tracey smiled, looking back at Harry. "I guess we just went along with it all because that's all we knew. No one ever really questioned it before."

"It just seems like you'd be limiting yourself, and I don't see why anyone would want to do that. You could miss out on something really great, or a future job opportunity. You just never know what can happen or who might affect your life in some real way."

"You've made your point. And as Slytherins, we really shouldn't isolate ourselves, because, as you said, we might need some of these other people to accomplish our goals one day" Daphne nodded. "Now, it's our

turn to ask you a few questions."

Tracey sat up a bit straighter, and Harry nodded his consent.

"Why were we all led to believe you had died that night? Where have you been?" Daphne asked without preamble.

"Doesn't pull any punches does she?" Harry smirked at Tracey who rolled her eyes.

"She doesn't know how to do subtle." Tracey smiled.

"Good to know." Harry remarked. "Ok, well, I don't know everything.. But I was told that there was a lot of worry that my life might be in danger from dark wizards looking for revenge. My godfather and I lived in lots of places. France, Spain. Switzerland, we even tried Japan for a bit. Really beautiful country. If you get a chance. Go. I'd really like to go back one day. But we ended up in America when I started school."

"Why America?" Tracey asked. "There's schools in Japan, Bulgaria, France, China, I think Brazil and Canada have schools as well."

"My godfather thought it would be easiest. He said I hadn't stayed anywhere long enough to get a good handle on the language and that America would be easiest on me. I wanted to come here because I'd heard him talk about it so often, but... you know, threats on my life and all."

Harry rolled his eyes and shrugged.

"What was your favorite place that you stayed?" Tracey asked interestedly.

"To be honest, I've actually enjoyed America the most. Partly because I've been there the longest, but also because I gotten to experience so much it has to offer. Every break, Sirius takes me to do something really wild. Right before I got told about all this, we were on a hang gliding trip. It's amazing."

"Hang gliding?" Daphne asked, her stoic mask falling away, and Harry

saw real interest on her face.

"Yeah. It's the closest thing to being a bird I can imagine. Short of being and animagus, anyway." Harry grinned. "You're just floating on the wind. I mean, being on a broom is great, and I love feeling the wind in my face as I'm playing Quidditch or racing, but this... I can't even describe it. I'm going to see if we can go again when this is all over."

"How is it done?" Tracey asked, and Harry tried his best to explain the apparatus and how it was all about using the wind to keep you in the air. When Tracey asked what spells they used, Her eyes nearly popped out of her head when Harry told her it was a muggle sport.

"Wait." Tracey said holding up her hands. "Muggles do this. You were flying around on a ... a ... a kite without magic?"

"You'd actually be surprised how many cool things muggles have come up with. They sound completely mad, and to be honest, a few of them are. My godfather and I went Bungee jumping. Jumping off a bridge with only a long cord strapped to your legs."

"Are you barking?" Daphne asked, her bright blue eyes as big as saucers.

"What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't." Harry smiled, laughing a little. "Trust me when I say it's a really exhilarating. It's even more intense than skydiving. Sirius prefers that, but I liked Bungee jumping more. I did it like five times that weekend."

"I think I've decided that you're mental." Tracey smirked. "Completely barmy."

"Here I was thinking I was charming and debonair." Harry joked.

"Hardly." Daphne muttered.

Breakfast was ending and the three rose from their table.

"Where are you off to first?" Tracey asked.

"Transfiguration." Harry said at once.

"Oh, that's too bad. We've got charms." Tracey said. "But we'll see you later right?"

"I'm sure of it."

They said goodbye, and Harry pulled the Marauder's map from his bag and looked to see where the transfiguration class was. Following the map he made it to the classroom with no difficulty, and stowed the map after blanking it out.

There was only a few students in the class so far, and the seats at the front were all empty, save for one boy, who looked a little nervous. He had a round face and deep brown hair. He had his book open and was reading and looked to be mouthing the words.

"Excuse me." Harry smiled. The boy looked up and gave a bit of a start when he saw Harry. "Would it be alright if I sat here?"

Neville looked at the open seat next to him and then back up at Harry, nodding slowly. Harry set his bag down and pulled out his own copy of the text book. He looked over at the boy and offered his hand.

"I'm Harry."

"N-Neville." the boy said. He clutched Harry's hand and turned back to his own book, though Harry could tell he was no longer reading.

"There you are Neville." A girl said, sitting on Neville's other side. "I didn't see you at breakfast. The girl had cinnamon brown eyes and a mass of wild curly hair.

"I went to the library." Neville said. "I wanted to see if there was anything else I should add to my potions essay." Neville said.

"I told you I'd look it over for you." The girl said, sighing softly as she spoke.

"Hermione, I can't rely on you to do all my work. I have to do it myself or

I won't learn anything at all. It's ok if you help me, but I need to stand on my own." Neville said, smiling at the girl. "I don't want to be someone who uses other people to accomplish their goals like some Slytherin."

"Bit harsh, isn't it?" Harry asked. Neville and the girl named Hermione turned to look at them.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew them." Neville replied.

"Well, I kind of do. I ate breakfast with Tracey and Daphne, and they were nice enough. Even got them to admit that not everyone outside of their house was all bad."

"I suppose they would have said whatever you'd like to hear." Hermione said loftily. "They're all pretty cruel to Gryffindors, especially Neville and I."

"I'd be willing to bet good gold that if you were to sit down with a few of them, you might change your opinion."

Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes. Neville on the other hand looked as if he were thinking Harry's words over.

"Harry, mate."

Harry turned to see a very tall redheaded boy with a long nose and a mass of freckles standing next to his chair, offering his hand.

"Ron Weasley. We've got an extra seat back there if you want to join us. That way you don't have to sit next to the Know-It-All and the half squib."

"Why do you have to always be so rude?" Hermione asked angrily.

Neville just sunk in his seat.

"No one's talking to you haystack." Ron looked back to Harry. "Come on, you do want to hang out with the cool people right?"

Harry looked at Ron then back at Neville and Hermione. Neville looked as if he wanted to fade through the cracks in the floor while Hermione

looked mixed between wanting to cry and punch this Ron guy in the face.

"Well, I haven't been here all that long, so I'm not exactly sure who the cool people are yet." Harry said, turning back to Ron. Then he motioned his head towards Hermione and Neville and continued, "But these two seem pretty cool to me. I mean, here we were just now talking about obnoxious braggarts, and here you are. Frankly, I thought it was a really good bit of magic."

Harry heard Neville snort, and Hermione coughed. Ron's ears went scarlet and he stared at Harry who simply smiled politely back at him.

"I have my own mind and I can figure out who's cool and who's not, and you haven't left me with a very good impression. Maybe you should figure out how not to be a jack ass, and try again another day."

Ron said nothing more, but scowled at Harry and walked away.

"Ok, that's two jerks I've met today." Harry sighed.

"T-thank you." Hermione said. Harry looked over and waved her off. "No, really. No one's ever stood up for either Neville or me, and you didn't have to. Thank you."

"I don't like bullies." Harry said flatly. "My godfather always taught me that if you don't get along with someone then you should just leave them be. Bullies just have to make other people feel bad because of their on inadequacies. Instead of tearing other people down, they should be trying to better themselves." Harry scowled as he glanced over his shoulder where Ron was now talking with two other boys who were both looking at Harry strangely.

"He's going to make your life hell now. Hermione and I have been his verbal punching bags for years." Neville warned.

"I don't see that he could do much to me. I'm already entered in this stupid tournament." Harry shrugged. "Hang on, Are you Hermione

Granger?" Harry asked, turning to look at Hermione whose eyes grew wide with surprise.

"Uh, yeah." She said tentatively.

"Cedric told me about you yesterday. Said you were about the most brilliant witch in the school." Harry smiled.

"H-he said that?"

"Yeah. I was actually going to try and find you later and ask for your help. See, I need to research the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and he said that you knew the library better than anyone, so I was hoping you might be able to point me in the right direction."

"I'd be happy to help you." Hermione said clearly in shock by what Harry had just said to her, or that Cedric Diggory even knew her name. Before they could speak anymore though, Professor McGonagall stepped into the class and called them to order.

By the end of the lesson, Harry was really missing his old Transfiguration teacher, Professor Colton. She always started the class with a joke, usually one they'd all heard before, yet didn't care because she was always so funny. During class she would walk around and help you out, sort of like Professor McGonagall, but she could always make you smile, even if you were still unable to perform whatever the assignment was. McGonagall just walked about watching her students attempting their spell work, and occasionally pointing out their mistakes, if they were serious. However, when she approached Neville, she shook her head sadly and remarked that he was seriously behind the rest of the class. Neville sank a bit more in his seat, looking quite dejected. Harry took pity on Neville and as soon as McGonagall stepped away he turned to the boy.

"Forget what she said." Harry said softly as he flicked his wand at his

hedgehog, turning it into a pincushion. "Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Relax and just shut out everything else, and just picture the pincushion in your mind. Don't worry about getting the wand movement right. Just focus on the pincushion.

Harry saw Hermione watching him out of the corner of her eye. Harry gave Neville a reassuring nod, and watched as Neville took a deep breath and closed his eyes for just a minute. When he opened his eyes he pointed his wand at the hedgehog and said the incantation. Instantly the small animal transformed into a bright red pincushion.

Neville's eyes went wide and he looked at Hermione and then Harry as he beheld his work. To check to make sure he'd done it correctly, he took one of the pins he'd been given and tentatively stuck it into the pincushion. Nothing happened. Neville's smile was so big that Harry was worried his face might split.

"I did it. I really did it."

"Little secret I learned," Harry said. "Wand movements aren't really that important. It's all about your intent and focus. Whenever I have trouble learning a new spell I break it down like that. Get rid of the wand movements and just concentrate on what I want the outcome to be."

"Thanks," Neville said, still smiling. "I'll remember that from now on."

The lesson ended and McGonagall asked that Harry stay behind for a moment. When all the students had left, McGonagall spoke, her voice much more relaxed and friendly than it had been since they'd met.

"That was a very nice thing you did for Mister Longbottom," She said.

Harry shrugged and McGonagall went on. "I believe that he has it in him to be a very great wizard, but he lacks focus, which I believe stems from a severe lack of confidence. Save for Miss Granger, I do not believe he has many friends."

"Are you asking me to be his friend?" Harry asked. McGonagall shook her head.

"It is up to you who you make friends with. I am simply asking that you try and continuing being supportive of him. I think you'll find that there are many who will look to you. I doubt you understand just what you represent to our country."

"I'm sure I'll find out." Harry remarked, already getting a picture of what he meant to people around here.

"Indeed. You best be off." McGonagall said dismissing him.

Harry headed down to the dungeons, using his map to guide him. He was really looking forward to potions. He loved the subject, and had always done well in the subject and looked forward to seeing how the Hogwarts class differed from Salem's.

Harry arrived in the dungeon classroom and was greeted by Hannah and Susan, who saw him come through the door. They offered him a spot with them, and he smiled gratefully as he sat down.

"Just fair warning, Snape's pretty tough." Hannah whispered conspiratorially.

Harry shrugged. "Every school's got a tough teacher I imagine."

"I doubt they're as nasty as Professor Snape." Susan said softly. The class door slammed and a thin man with a curtain of greasy black hair and very sallow skin strode to the front of the class, his black cloak billowing out behind him. He turned on his heel when he reached the front of the class.

"As most of you have no doubt realized, we have a new student in our midst." Snape spoke, his voice like oil, his black eyes cold, and staring hard at Harry who simply looked back at his new teacher.

"The fourth champion." Snape stared a bit harder and Harry felt a chill

run down his spine. He raised a questioning eyebrow, and Snape folded his arms over his chest. "I think it prudent to find out if you are least up to speed with my class before we proceed with today's lesson on antidotes. Tell me, Potter..." Snape sneered as he said Harry's name.

"What is the essential ingredient in the Draught of Living Death?"

Harry felt as if he were being put on the spot, though he had no idea why. He wondered if Snape did this to everyone at some point. Still, a teacher had asked him a question.

"I believe that's a trick question, sir. There are two essential ingredients. Asphodel and Wormwood ." Harry said.

Snape's eyes narrowed and he stepped closer. "Tell me then, Potter.

Where would you look if I asked you to find Celarean Ash?"

"Your local Dragon Handler, I imagine, as Celarean Ash is collected from the teeth of dragons, sir." Harry remarked, unsure of why he was being singled out like this. Harry guessed he was trying to establish the hierarchy of the class or something, which Harry thought was stupid, since Snape was in fact the teacher of the class.

Snape's face colored ever so slightly, and he turned away from Harry, his wand waving and instructions appearing on the blackboard. Harry thought that he looked upset that he hadn't made Harry look like an idiot with those two questions, but so far as Harry knew, those had been basic first year knowledge questions. This led Harry to wonder exactly how far Hogwarts students were in their potion careers

"We are continuing our work with basic antidotes today. I expect that you will all have your potions ready at the end of class. I will then choose someone to be a test subject. Get to work."

"He means whomever's potion looks the worst." Susan remarked, igniting her fire. Hannah nodded and looked a little nervous as she pulled out her

potions kit.

Harry looked appalled that a teacher might even think to subject a student to poisoning just to see if their work was suitable. It was barbaric, and irresponsible. What was worse was what it did to the students.

Harry shared this class with the Hufflepuffs and the Ravenclaws. Harry noted that he hadn't met any students from that house yet save Cho and Marietta, but he remembered Cedric saying that they were the brainiest kids. Harry thought it pretty accurate just from observing their work in this class. They were studying the instructions Snape had written and also consulting their textbooks. They were pretty meticulous in the preparation, and Harry had to admire their work ethic.

Harry was just slicing snake tongues when he felt a shadow behind him.

He looked up and saw Snape standing over him, his upper lip curled.

"I believe you have not read the instructions, Potter." He said coldly.

Harry felt every set of eyes come up and rest on him and Snape.

"I'm not sure I understand, sir." Harry said politely, turning to look at his teacher, who folded his arms triumphantly. "Of course I read the instructions."

"Then why were you preparing to add sliced snake tongue when you clearly haven't yet added crushed dragonfly wing. Do you wish to blow up this school, Potter?"

"Of course I haven't added my dragonfly wing yet. If you'll notice sir, my potion hasn't yet started to bubble, nor has it begun turning green."

"Do not get smart with me Potter. Why on earth would you be slicing you snake tongue if you weren't preparing to add it? Snake tongue has a very short shelf life once sliced Potter. You're wasting your ingredients." Snape snapped, his voice raising in anger a bit.

Harry stared at the man, completely gob smacked by how petty he seemed. Sure snake tongue had a shortened amount of freshness after it was sliced, but Harry knew that it was only a few minutes before his potion would be ready for it. Before he realized what was happening, Snape had waved his wand and Harry's potion had vanished.

"You'll received a zero for today, Potter."

"HEY!" Harry shouted in protest, but he was prevented from protesting further as the door to the classroom opened and a small boy with short brown hair and a red and gold tie peered in.

"Professor Snape sir?"

"What is it?" Snape bellowed and the boy jumped.

"Um, excuse me sir, but I was asked to come fetch Harry Potter. He's wanted in the trophy room by Professor Dumbledore."

"Very well then. Potter, get out of my sight." Snape said, turning away from Harry leaving him stunned. Sirius had told a few stories about this man and how horribly they had treated him during their time at school. Harry always thought it was strange that he learned to avoid being a bully from one of the self admitted biggest bullies ever. But now Harry felt he at least understood some of it. This is what could happen. Snape was a very bitter self important man who got his thrills by doing to his students what had been done to him twenty years ago.

Harry hefted his bag and with a quick nod of farewell to Susan and Hannah and followed the short boy to the trophy room.

The boy's name, as Harry found out was Nigel, and he was a second year in Gryffindor. Harry didn't hear too much more as he was still steaming over what had happened in Snape's class. Harry was sure he'd been on par to make one of his best potions yet. It might have helped that he'd made the very same thing a year before, but still. Snape hadn't even

listened to him when he'd tried to explain his method. He'd simply vanished his potion and given him a zero.

"And here he is."

Harry looked up and saw Professor Dumbledore, and then he was suddenly blinded by a dozen flashes. There were about twenty reporters all seated, and Harry saw that Dumbledore, Cedric and a few others whom Harry had yet to meet, stood on the opposite side of the trophy room in front of a very large glass case.

"Please make room." Dumbledore said, and some of the reporters stepped aside as Harry passed though the camera's kept flashing. Harry blinked his eyes trying to gain his sight back.

"Now that all our champions are together, we may commence with the Wand Weighing ceremony. After which we will allow for a few questions of our four champions. Mr. Ollivander, if you please." Dumbledore motioned to a very tired looking old man who stood from his seat and walked up next to the Headmaster.

Harry took this opportunity to glance at the other champions. Next to Cedric, who was standing in front of Dumbledore was a very pretty girl with shimmering blonde hair and sharp blue eyes. She gave him an appraising look and then turned her nose up at him. Harry actually wanted to laugh. Apparently she felt she was quite superior to him. Harry loved people like that. They were fun to watch when they fell, which they always did.

Behind the blonde was a very tall imposing woman with her hair pulled into a very severe bun on top of her head. She wore a fine black silk dress and Harry saw that every finger had a rather gaudy ring on it. Harry was reminded strongly of the Hogwarts Gamekeeper, as he'd never seen anyone as large as this woman or Hagrid before in his life.

On the other side of Cedric was a man with a very curly mustache and crooked yellowed teeth. He kept glancing at Harry and looked as if someone had coated his mustache with stink sap by the way his nose was wrinkled. He was watching as the last champion, a broad shouldered boy with very closely cropped black hair was watch Mr. Ollivander examine his wand.

There was one more man there. He was practically bouncing on his heels as he watched the ceremony. Harry wondered if that man was from the Ministry as they would be the ones responsible for putting this together. Over the course of the ceremony, Harry learned everyone's names as Dumbledore called them out. The Broad shouldered boy was named Viktor Krum and he was from Durmstrang. The man with the curly mustache and the seemingly permanent look of disgust was the Durmstrang Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff. The girl was Fleur Delacour of Beauxbaton with her Headmistress, Madame Maxime. And finally, the very cheerful looking man, as Harry suspected was from the Department of Magical Games, and was Ludo Bagman.

Finally, Harry was asked to step up, so his wand could be examined. He hand his wand to the tired looking man who's eyes lit up with ken interest.

"Ahh, well this is something." Mr. Ollivander said as he slid his long gnarled looking fingers over Harry's wand. He kept turning it and waving it slowly around, getting a feel for the wand.

"Is it a Johansson?" Ollivander asked.

"No sir. I got it from a man named Pierce." Harry said proudly.

"I've not heard of him, but this is a very fine wand. Flexible, yet hard.

Willow, if I am not mistaken, But the core. I can not identify it."

Ollivander said, his brow knitting as he tried to figure out what lay at the

heart of this particular wand.

"It's cherufe talon sliver. One of the last ones, I was told."

There was a sudden burst of murmuring from the reporters, and Harry turned a questioning expression to them, as if he thought they would explain their worry.

"Are you serious?" Mister Ollivander asked, looking at the wand more closely as if he might actually see the core.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Why, cherufes were very powerful magical creatures. I'm sure you know their history." Ollivander asked and Harry nodded.

"Of course. They were reptilian humanoid creatures that feasted on young children, giving rise to the belief that they enjoyed Female virgins, and that's why ancient tribes used to sacrifice young women and throw them into volcanoes, which ironically is where cherufes could usually be found. They were hunted to extinction for their hides which were stronger than Dragon's hide." Harry said, and he saw Dumbledore raise an eyebrow, clearly impressed.

"They were exceptionally powerful creatures. They could lay waste to a village with one breath. I've never heard of a wand using any part of a cherufe as its core. The maker of this wand must have been exceptionally gifted."

"Huh." Harry said, not sure what to make of the fuss. He remembered that he'd been very difficult to match and that the wand maker had been both ecstatic and sad that Harry match so well with this wand. When Harry pressed the man, he explained that he was excited because he felt only a truly powerful witch or wizard would be able to wield it, and sad because he loved it very much, being one of the first wands he'd ever created.

"I've never had any problems with it." Harry shrugged, accepting his wand back, and going back to stand alone. He suddenly wished that he had his headmistress here with him as he felt really stupid standing up there on his own. Dumbledore stepped forward and allowed the reporters to begin asking questions of the champions. As one all the reporters looked at Harry and began shouting questions, while cameras began flashing again.

"One at a time, please." Dumbledore shouted. He then allowed one reporter to stand and ask her question.

"Mister Potter, Samantha Gold, Witch Weekly."

"Hello." Harry said feeling very nervous all of the sudden. The way the reporters were looking at him was like a pack of rabid dogs, and he'd just tied a steak to his head.

"How does it feel being back in your homeland?" Samantha asked, her quill poised to jot down his response.

"It hasn't really sunk in yet." Harry said looking at the reporter who had curly red hair and lots of makeup. "I've only been here two days."

"Are you making many friends?" A man asked from the back.

"I've met a few people, and I'm looking forward to meeting more." Harry smiled.

"One at a time please." Dumbledore said a bit more forcefully. "Please wait your turn to ask your question."

"Xenophilius Lovegood, The Quibbler." Said the next reporter. He was a thin man with shoulder length blonde hair and a faraway look in his eye.

"Were you aided in your hiding all these years by utilizing Nargles?"

"What?" Harry asked very confused by the question.

"Oh sit down Xeno, and let the real reporters do their jobs." Said a woman with very long finger nails and jeweled spectacles. She had very

curly blonde hair and blindingly bright green robes. She stood up and everyone got really quiet.

"Rita Skeeter, Mister Potter. I think the question on all our minds is how you hope to compete in this tournament against wizards for older and more clever than you, much less how your name got into the Goblet of Fire in the first place."

Harry took an immediate disliking to this woman right away. The way she spoke to him, it was like he was five. Harry didn't know how to respond to her, as he wasn't even sure she had asked a question.

"I mean, to announce to the world that you are in fact alive after all these years, and by doing so, completely overshadowing these three fine individuals is really making a statement, don't you think?"

"I think that is enough." Dumbledore said, his gaze on Rita's rather innocent looking façade. Harry realized what Dumbledore must have concluded as well. These people only cared about his sudden return rather than the tournament. Harry agreed with Dumbledore's decision to kick them out. There were three other champions up there, and they had all voluntarily submitted their names. Shouldn't all this hoopla be about them?

"Are you alright, Harry?"

Cedric had come over. Harry nodded and turned to look at the trophies behind him.

"I hope it isn't going to always be this crazy."

"I think it's likely to get worse." Cedric smiled. "Listen, If you want, after dinner we could head up to the library and start looking up spells to prepare for this thing."

"Yeah." Harry nodded as something caught his eye. A plaque with seven names on it. One name stood out to him and a smile broke out on his

face. He had of course known his father was on the house Quidditch team from Sirius, but as he stared at the plaque he couldn't help feeling enthralled to be standing in the same castle where his mother and father had once walked.

"Well Harry, How are you getting on?" Professor Dumbledore asked, stepping up behind Harry.

"Ok." Harry said, then he turned to the Headmaster, his smile falling off his face at once. "Except for your potions master. He accosted me for making my potion, trying to find some fault with it, and then without letting me explain my method, he vanished my potion and gave me a zero. Plus, do you know he subjects students to poison to test their antidotes?"

"I have heard a great number of stories about Professor Snape over the years. I am sure he is not as bad as other students make him out to be." Dumbledore smiled.

"Maybe, but the fact still remains that he just vanish a perfectly good brewing without any cause sir. He's a bully, and your students deserve better than that." Harry said, still steaming from his first encounter with the fabled Snape.

"I will have a word with him tonight at Dinner. In the meantime, I believe lunch is now being served, and there are still afternoon classes to attend."

Harry nodded and he and Cedric headed into the Great Hall for lunch.

6. Chapter 6

Hey friends,

So, I've gone through and corrected a few continuity errors. Harry is only known as the Boy who lived to Dumbledore who coined the phrase and told no one... so far Sirius does NOT know the prophecy,

i fixed that as well. As far as Siruis owing Snape and then being enraged that Snape is teaching, that will be explained much later.

Chapter 6

Harry joined his new Hufflepuff friends for lunch, and listened as they told him a few stories about the Potions master. The more Harry heard, the more he disliked the man. Harry then astonished the group by telling them the potion they were struggling to brew under Snape's tutelage, he had learned last year, which was partly why he'd been slicing his snake tongue. He knew that his concoction was getting close to ready for it, just before Snape had ambushed it.

Harry had heard of the man long before meting him. Sirius had told him several stories about how he had tormented them man during their school days, usually ending the story with a discussion about how wrong it had been of him and how Sirius himself should have been more mature and tolerant. Harry had never truly understood what Sirius meant by it all until now. Perhaps if Harry's father and Sirius hadn't been so cruel to Snape, he may have been a different man. But then again, some people were just plain wicked.

"He's a git." Hannah said "Always has been. Unless you're a Slytherin."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Snape's head of Slytherin House, and he favors his students. They get away with so much because of him." Susan explained. "I've heard that he just loves to pick on Neville Longbottom. Last year he made Neville drink his own shrinking solution. Neville was in the hospital wing for a month."

"It's no wonder the Slytherins are such wankers." Ernie groaned. "With Snape as their head of House, they can get away with bloody murder around here."

"Have any of you ever tried talking to any of the Slytherins?" Harry

asked. None of his new friends responded in the positive, and Harry sighed. "Doesn't it seem weird to any of you that you all hate them and you don't actually know any of them?" Harry asked. They all stared at him for a moment. Even Cedric couldn't answer.

"You wouldn't be saying that if you'd been going here the last few years." Zacharias said. "You don't know what they're like."

"Well, that's true, but the thing is I met a few of them today. I had breakfast with them, and they seemed ok to me." Harry said much to the Hufflepuffs disbelief

"That's where you were." Sally Anne said looking up from her sandwich. Harry noticed that the brunette had very pretty eyes and a thin nose with very faint freckles. Sally Anne flushed when she saw him looking at her. "Sorry. It's just that none of us could find you at breakfast." she said, lowering her gaze.

"And none of you even thought to look at the Slytherin table?" Harry smirked. The shamed looks they had gave him his answer. "Just seems stupid to me." He muttered.

"What did Dumbledore want with you?" Susan asked, changing the slightly tense subject.

"Wand weighing ceremony." Cedric answered. "The reporters only cared about Harry though. Forgot the rest of us were even there. That Fleur girl was glaring daggers at Harry the whole time."

"Was she?" Harry asked, having not noticed." Cedric nodded.

"I thought for a moment that she was going to leap across the room and scratch your face off." Cedric grinned. Harry saw Hannah turn to glare at Fleur who was sitting at the Ravenclaw table. He couldn't help thinking this was pretty damn adorable.

"Harry?" Justin asked. "We were talking last night and we really want to

see a broom race. We thought that if we could get some people together, we could have one on a weekend or something."

"I'm in," Cedric's friend Curtis said at once. "I've got a brand new Comet 5000 that I was ready to use for the Quidditch season, but what with the Tournament and all."

"Count me in too," Cedric nodded.

"Sure," Harry nodded. "Though we'll have to figure out a course, and without the rings..."

"We might be able to get McGonagall and Flitwick to help us out with that," Ernie said.

"Alright then," Harry smiled. "We'll talk about it some more at dinner then."

As lunch was over, Harry gathered his books and started off for his afternoon Runes class. He was just about to head up the staircase when someone stepped in his path. She was a head shorter than he was with very large blue eyes and waist-length wavy dirty blonde hair. She had very strange earrings that reminded Harry of radishes, and a necklace that had what looked to be Butterbeer corks on it.

"Uh, hi," He stammered. She was looking at him strangely.

"Hello Harry Potter," she said with a rather musical dreamy voice.

"Can I help you in any way?" Harry asked, not sure what to do. He felt like she was looking through him. She held his gaze better than he usually could, and he found it a little unnerving. He was just starting to wonder if this was how he made other people feel when he looked at them when she suddenly moved.

Never in a million lifetimes would Harry have ever been able to guess what this girl had intended to do. She lunged at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing her lips to his. Harry grabbed her waist to

prevent her from falling over and dragging him down as well. Her lips were soft, and not at all unpleasant and she smelled lightly of honeysuckle and berries. Harry was only just starting to respond to the kiss when the girl pulled away, staring at him with those wide blue eyes. Harry had kissed a grand total of two girls in his life, one of them just before his old school had let out for autumn break. He liked it very much and had thought of doing little else since the first kiss he'd ever had. Sirius always laughed and coughed "Hormones" whenever the subject came up.

The last girl he'd kissed was Stacy Littleton. Or rather, she had kissed him. But Harry had been steeling himself to make a move when she said goodbye and leaned towards him, giving him a very tender sweet peck on the corner of his mouth. It had been quick, but Harry felt there had been an unspoken promise that there would be more.

But this was something he hadn't been prepared for or even thought about. Harry thought the girl was quite cute, if not a tiny bit strange looking. Harry couldn't help wondering if she had been holding back when she had kissed him, or if she had just realized what she had been doing and got embarrassed before things had gotten good.

"Um, so..." Harry started to say but the girl cocked her head a little to the left and gave a soft dreamy smile.

"Frankly, I don't know what all the fuss is about. I didn't feel anything out of the ordinary." she then turned around and skipped away, leaving Harry standing there with a very odd expression on his face.

It took a couple of seconds before his brain fired up again and he had to run to his Runes class. He had great difficulty in concentrating on his work as he kept wondering why the girl had kissed him. Even more disconcerting was that he didn't even know the girl's name. Still, it had

been pretty damned cool.

Harry ended up with loads more homework for Runes than he'd ever gotten at Salem. This class was very far ahead of his old class and Professor Babbling was very knowledgeable, or at least she appeared to be, Harry hadn't been all that focused on listening, his mind constantly replaying the kiss.

When class did finally end, Harry was stopped again, this time by a group of six girls, all wearing blue and bronze ties.

"We just wanted a chance to say hello and welcome you to Hogwarts.' the pretty Asian girl smiled, offering her hand. "My name is Su, and this is Morag..." she indicated the girl with strawberry blonde hair and freckles. Harry shook her hand as Su motioned towards a heavy set girl with acne. "Eloise.' Su continued her introductions. Harry shook Eloise's hand and idly thought that she could easily crush him if he made her angry.

"That's Padma."

Padma was a very pretty Indian girl with long straight silky looking black hair and dark eyes that Harry thought he could look at for hours on end. She blushed slightly under Harry's gaze, and had to look away.

"This is Lisa." Lisa was the tallest of the girls standing a head and a half over Harry.

"And last but surely not least, Mandy." Su finished.

Mandy smiled at Harry from behind the protection of her books which she held tightly to her chest. She had shoulder length wavy chestnut brown hair and bright brown eyes. Harry offered his hand and noticed how soft and petite her hand felt in his.

"It's nice to meet you all.' Harry said courteously.

"We were wondering if you'd join us at dinner at the Ravenclaw table tonight.' Lisa proposed.

"I would be honored, but as it stands, I've agreed to meet some of my Hufflepuff friends."

"You know you can have friends in any house." Eloise said, her voice a little gruff.

"Funny." Harry smirked. "I said the same thing to a couple of Slytherin girls just this morning. I have every intention of meeting and befriending as many people as will be receptive. I just made plans before you asked me, and it would be rude to just not show up. But, I'd be happy to have breakfast with you tomorrow morning."

"That would be fantastic." Lisa said before Eloise could open her big mouth and make Harry angry.

"Let's meet just outside the Great Hall at seven thirty then. Is that ok?"

"Perfect." Su said, leading her friends in the opposite direction as Harry was heading. "We'll be looking forward for our chance to get to know you better, Mister Potter."

"It's just Harry." Harry smiled and gave a slight wave.

They all headed off, Mandy in the rear, who gave a soft smile and a little wave to Harry who smiled in return, making her turn away quickly.

Harry was instantly drawn to her as she was the first girl not to blush like mad when he smiled at them.

Harry turned and headed to his room where he planned on starting his runes homework before dinner.

"Where have you been?" Ginny asked as Hermione entered the Gryffindor Common room after her last class. "I've been waiting for you for ages!"

Ginny's eyes were narrowed as she ran up to her best friend. She pulled Hermione towards the sofas where Neville and a few younger years were sitting and engaged in various activities.

"Ok, one, your last class is much closer than mine. I was in Arithmancy

and that's way on the other side of the castle. Secondly, why?" Hermione looked baffled.

"How about the fact that you failed to mention at lunch that you not only spoke to Harry Potter, but you agreed to meet him in the library tonight?"

Hermione's eyes shot to Neville who buried his face very deep into his book, hoping to escape the bushy haired girl's wrath. Clearly Neville had told Ginny all about what had happened in Transfiguration that morning.

"It's no big deal, He just wants help researching the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Cedric told him I might be helpful."

"Hold on a second." Ron Weasley said from his seat where he'd started a game of chess with Seamus Finnegan. "Cedric Diggory told Harry Potter about YOU? How does he even know your name. It's not like you're special or even good looking. I mean, he's dating Cho Chang after all.

Why would he ever be interested in you?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Hermione glowered. "But he suggested to Harry that I'm very smart, and I might be helpful."

"And here I was thinking Potter might be cool or something. Obviously we were all mistaken. Apparently he's a huge loser. Why else would he want to hang out with the likes of you?"

"Maybe he likes the smell of musty old books." Seamus Finnegan chuckled, and Dean Thomas grinned as well.

"Maybe Cedric and Harry feel sorry for you." Ron suggested. "I mean, everyone thinks you're pathetic. I sometimes wonder why..."

"Ron." Ginny said, her voice low and menacing. "I'm only going to say this one final time. Leave Hermione and Neville alone. You're acting no better than Draco Malfoy."

Ron's face went pink and he glared back at his sister. "Why do you defend

her? She's only dragging you down! No one likes her."

"I like her!" Ginny shouted. "I've gotten more out of being friends with her and Neville than being related to you. Now I understand why the twins won't admit you're their brother."

"That's slander!" Fred said from across the room, while his twin nodded.

"There's absolutely no proof that we are in fact related to that git!"

George added.

"Shut it!" Ron snapped and the twins began laughing. "I think you owe it to yourself to get a better class of friend than this lot." Ron said and turning away from them as if he'd just won the argument.

Ginny snarled and turned back to Hermione, dragging her to the girls dorms. When they reached Hermione's bed, Ginny leapt up onto it and folded her legs under her. Hermione recognized it was time for some girl talk, and sighed in resignation. She wasn't really the giggly gossipy type, nor was Ginny to be honest, yet, every so often, Ginny would break down and embrace her teenage femininity, no matter how appalling it might be. It wouldn't be all bad except she always made Hermione do it as well. Sometimes it wasn't so bad. In fact, they had gone dress shopping last summer when Ginny had stayed with Hermione. It had been fun to try on dresses and high heels and attempt to get dolled up. Hermione had even enjoyed walking around the mall a bit. She even saw a couple of boys looking at her longingly, though she felt it was more likely they were drooling over Ginny.

But girl talk always annoyed her. She never understood how her roommates Parvati and Lavender could waste hours talking about boys.

"I want to know everything." Ginny smiled.

"There's nothing really to tell." Hermione shrugged. "When he heard my name he told me that Cedric had told him I was very smart and that I

could help him in the library. He said he was thinking of trying to find me to ask me to help him. Honestly I was more stunned to learn that Cedric even knew who I was. We didn't get to talk anymore because class started.

"Oh you are so lucky." Ginny sighed. "you get to be alone with him and..."

"You can come, you know. I'm sure he wouldn't mind." Hermione said, taking off her robe and opening her trunk to get a book.

"And be the third wheel? No thanks. Besides, studying in the library doesn't sound like fun. We spend way too much time in there as it is."

Ginny said.

"I don't know why you're making such a big deal out of this. He's no different from any other boy in this school." Hermione huffed.

"Hermione, did your dad ever tell you bedtime stories?" Ginny asked.

Something in her tone made Hermione pause.

"Sure." She shrugged.

"As a little girl did you ever imagine yourself as the princess waiting for the brave knight to rescue you, or something like that?" Ginny continued.

"I guess." Hermione said, sitting down on her bed, listening to her friend.

"Well ok. Imagine hearing your father tell you about a brave knight who vanquished the most evil wizard ever known. A knight so brave that he simply can't be rivaled. Got it?" Ginny said imploringly. Hermione nodded, encouraging Ginny to go on.

"Now imagine that not only, at five years old you find out that not only is the story you've heard so often true, but that hero is real. And to top it off, if he were alive, as many believed, he's right around your age. That's what I grew up with. That's what so many of us grew up with. If you were half or pure blood, you knew the story of Harry Potter. We were all

told he was dead, but a lot of people didn't believe it. My dad always said he thought Harry was hidden because no body was ever found. Some people argued that he was small enough to have been just..." Ginny shuddered and Hermione understood the unfinished thought.

"Now we find that he's alive, and not only that, but he is just a normal average teenager. Not only is he not some fantastical hero with magic just pouring off of him, but he's normal. An everyday run of the mill, although very good looking, wizard. We all grew up to believe him to be this image of perfection only to find out the reality is so much better."

"Ok." Hermione smiled, finally feeling that she understood all the girls in the castle better. "But how do you expect anything to happen if you don't talk to him?"

"Well see, that's what I have you for." Ginny smiled and Hermione shivered involuntarily. She realized too late that Ginny had a plan, And she, Hermione, had just become a very integral part.

Harry ran into Ernie and Justin who was holding hands with Sally Anne as they were entering the Great Hall for dinner. They joined the other Hufflepuffs and Harry met Megan Jones, Wayne Hopkins and Stephen Cornfoot, three other Fourth years who he had not yet spoken with, though he recognized them from his disastrous Potions class.

They joined Zacharias, Hannah and Susan at the Hufflepuff table. Harry sat between Hannah and Susan. He was growing quite fond of the two girls, and wondered idly if either of them had boyfriends. If not, he might try to ask them out after he got to know them a bit better.

"How was Runes?" Hannah asked as they all began to fill their plates.

"It was good. It's going to be tough though. I'm really behind in that class. I've got loads of homework already. It's crazy. My old school seems to be ahead of you in potions, but like two years behind on Runes."

"Maybe different schools put emphasis on different subjects." Susan said wisely.

"Well, on top of that, I was having difficulty concentrating. This girl kissed me as I was going to class."

Several forks clattered loudly on the golden plates. Harry looked up suddenly feeling frightened by the looks on Hannah, Susan and Megan's faces. Zacharias looked as if Christmas was about to come early, while the other boys clearly looked as if they wanted to make a hasty retreat.

"Who was it?" Megan asked, her dark eyes flashing. Harry shrugged which only made the girls look more intimidating. He had no idea why they were all being so protective of him. He wasn't dating any of them, unless in the last twenty four hours he had pledged himself to them in some manner he was not aware of. He then wondered if asking out Hannah or Susan was actually a good idea anymore.

"I never even got her name." Harry said. "She just kissed me, said she didn't see what all the fuss was about and skipped away."

"Skipped?" Susan asked for clarification. She stared at Harry for a moment as he nodded.

"Did she had blonde hair?" Hannah asked.

"Uh, yes to both questions." Harry said warily. The tension at the table melted at once, and the girls all calmed down.

"Of course it was Loony." Hannah said as if that explained everything.

"Uh, who?"

"Luna Lovegood." Sally Anne said. "She's in Ravenclaw. She's...what's a nice way to put it..."

"Weird." Ernie said quickly. "Nice enough, but she says the oddest things, you know?"

"Yeah," Zacharias said with a nod. "She talks about the strangest things as

if they really exist. Her father is editor of the Quibbler."

"Wait, the Quibbler?" Harry asked. "I think I met him today. He asked if I used nargets, or gnarlies or something to keep hidden. It was weird."

"Like father like daughter." Ernie said, reaching for more pork chops. "So is she a good kisser?"

Megan punch Ernie on the arm, making him shout indignantly.

"What?" He asked rubbing his arm.

"Rude much?" Megan asked her expression cold.

"To be honest, I was too surprised to really analyze her technique, or whatever." Harry smirked. "I've never had anyone just up and kiss me for no reason. But, I think it could have been nice had I been prepared for it."

Harry noticed Hannah looking thoughtfully and a glance at Susan showed that the redhead was also looking contemplative. He wondered if he had just told them how he liked to be kissed, and a coy smile emerged on his face. He was really starting to like Hogwarts.

Harry decided it was time that he learned a little more about his new friends, and began asking basic questions. He enjoyed hearing stories about everyone's first bits of accidental magic, especially Susans's.

Apparently when the redhead was around five, she had gotten really angry at her Aunt who had told her she could not have any biscuits before dinner, and had even locked them away in a cupboard so Susan could not get to them. Harry was nearly falling off his seat when Susan explained that her Aunt heard a great crash where the door had been ripped off it's hinges, and found her niece with the cookie jar in the sitting room, three cookies in each hand, and a satisfied smile on her little face.

"Just out of curiosity, what kind of cookies were they?" Harry asked between gasps for breath.

"Chocolate chip, of course." Susan grinned and Harry made a mental note not to get in between the redhead and her favorite cookies.

"What was your first bit of accidental magic?" Hannah asked.

"Sirius said it was summoning the cat when I was one or so."

"Really?" Ernie asked. "I've never heard of anyone showing signs that early."

Harry only shrugged. "Apparently my parents were surprised as well, and I don't think the cat liked it too much either." Harry stood and pulled up his shirt a little to show three very faint lines on his hip. Hannah and Susan who were closest sucked in their breath as they caught sight of his skin under his shirt. Harry was very thin, and his clothes were rather loose fitting, but now they could clearly see that this boy had some nice definition. This tease only made each girl who could see Harry want more.

"Sirius said I was lucky my mom got there quickly or it could have been a lot worse." Harry smiled as he dropped his shirt and sat back down.

"Excuse me?"

Harry turned and found Hermione Granger standing behind him looking a bit embarrassed. "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but you had asked me to help you in the library, and I didn't know if you knew the way."

"Thank you." Harry smiled, standing up. Hermione saw that Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott were giving her surreptitious looks of bitterness as Harry rose from his seat. "I'll see you a lot later." Harry smiled, giving a wave to his new friends before turning to follow Hermione.

"They don't like me." Hermione said softly as they got out of earshot.

"What did you do to make them not like you?" Harry wondered.

Hermione shrugged.

"The same thing I did to everyone else, I guess. I just exist."

Harry gave her a curious look and then shook his head. "You people presume a lot. Everyone hates everyone else for no reason. It's so damned stupid, you know?"

"Can't change the way people think." Hermione shrugged.

"That's garbage." Harry countered. "You can't change the way people think if you don't try. Tell you what. Let's try an experiment."

Hermione nearly tripped as she turned to look at Harry skeptically.

"Tomorrow, I'm having breakfast with the Ravenclaws. Why don't you join me?"

"They'll get mad and tell me to go away." Hermione said, her voice catching.

"Then I'll go away with you." Harry said flatly. "They can either tolerate you and maybe even get to know you, or they can not be my friends."

"Are we friends?" Hermione asked looking into Harry's green eyes and he smiled.

"Don't know yet." He said honestly. "I don't know you yet, and you don't know me. But, we're going to spend some time together and then we'll decide. At the very least, we'll actually have our opinions of each other based on time we've spent together instead of just presuming we wouldn't get along. Sound alright?"

Hermione could only nod and Harry smiled, motioning for her to continue leading them to the Library.

Hermione had never ever imagined that she could meet someone her own age that made so much sense. She was really starting to understand why the other girls were so fascinated by him. Yes, Harry Potter was good looking. There was simply no denying it. With those amazing green eyes and that messy hair and that smile that just made a girl swoon. But more than that. Harry was rather intelligent, and he wasn't some prejudiced

blowhard. He had a very strong set of values, from what Hermione had discovered. It was hard not to like this boy.

Once they got to the Library, Hermione helped Harry find a few books that were about the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and they sat down together at a table and Harry told Hermione that what he was really looking for was some clue as to what the tasks might be. Hermione found it truly refreshing that Harry, unlike other boys she knew, seemed to take his studies fairly seriously. Yet, as they combed through tome after tome, he would engage her in light conversation.

Hermione had real difficulty in concentrating with Harry there with her. It wasn't that his queries were distracting, more the fact that he seemed truly interested in her as a person. No one other than Ginny or Neville had really shown any motivation to get to know her at all, and usually anyone who spoke to her was just doing so to remind her that they didn't care for her, as if she needed the reminder.

As they continued to voraciously search out facts and clues about the Tournament, they discovered that the tasks were all made to test certain aspects of a witch or wizard. Typically the first test was designed to test a wizard's bravery, and they were not usually given any clues as to what the task might be.

The second task usually targeted the Champion's reasoning and resourcefulness. Hermione read an excerpt from *Eternal Glory* that said champions were given bits of parchment with riddles written in ancient runes that actually told them what they would be facing. Once translated, the champions then had to figure out what they would need in order to get past the challenge which turned out to be passing through the great pharaoh's crypt and retrieving stone tablets, which turned out to have clues for the final task.

"You don't think they'll apparate us to Egypt, do you?" Harry asked.

Hermione shrugged as she turned a page.

"I don't think so. This seems to be such a big deal, I think it more likely that whatever the challenges are, they'll bring them here." She said thoughtfully.

"Well that's good. I'll just keep an eye out for anyone building a pyramid then." Harry said. Hermione laughed in spite of herself and Harry chuckled a bit as well.

"You know, what you did for Neville this morning," Hermione said when she'd stopped laughing. "That was really nice. I've tried helping him, but maybe I just over explain it, I guess. He always seems more confused, and then has a worse time trying to manage."

"McGonagall said he's got a real lack of confidence." Harry said, looking up from Terrors of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

"His grandmother is kind of strict and she holds him to an impossible standard." Hermione sighed.

"What about his parents?"

Hermione shook her head and looked at Harry. "He doesn't talk about them. I don't know for sure, and I haven't been able to find out what happened to them. I don't think they're dead, but I know He doesn't live with them. He always just clams up whenever someone bring them up."

"I can relate." Harry sighed, closing the book.

"I'm sorry." Hermione said quickly fearing she'd just put her foot in it.

"It's alright." Harry waved it off. "I can't remember them, though I wish I could. Sirius is great, but there's sometimes when you just really need your mom and dad, and nothing can substitute for it, you know?"

Hermione nodded, a bit of sadness in her eyes.

"Have you found anything on the third task?"

"Only that it is usually quite brutal." Hermione said looking back to her book. "None of these books have anything specific, save for it's usually made to be very tough. It's usually the task that champions die attempting to complete. The tournament in 1223 went on for five days before a champion emerged, and he died three days later. It doesn't say what killed him though."

"Reassuring." Harry muttered. "How can I even begin readying for this thing if I have no idea what I'm going to face?"

"Maybe you're going about this all wrong." Hermione said and Harry turned to look at the bushy haired girl, thinking that despite her out of control hair, she was quite pretty.

"Maybe what you need to do is concentrate on learning some really good spells. Stuff that would be useful in a lot of different situations." She said, rising from her chair and hurrying into the stacks before Harry had a moment to question her. In a flash she was back, arms loaded with thick tomes which she dropped onto the table with a very loud thud.

"Wow." Was all Harry could think to say as Hermione handed him the first book.

"So, what we should do is make a list of any spells that could be useful to you in a fight, or if you have to get out of some kind of trap or anything like that." She smiled taking out some parchment and a quill and setting to work making a list of jinxes, charms, hexes and anything else she found interesting.

Hermione's list was nearly two feet long by the time Cedric found them. His eyebrows rose into his hairline when he saw her tiny scrawl in neat lines that would be easy to read under a really strong magnifying glass.

"So I see you started without me." He grinned, making Hermione look up and blush a bit under Cedric's gaze.

"Hermione thought that by learning a bunch of useful spells, I might be better off than trying to figure out what the tasks might be." Harry said closing his third book, not even sure what he was looking for.

"I told you she was brilliant." Cedric smiled. "How many spells do you have there?"

Hermione felt her face flush and replied "Seventy five, but I've been copying all the wand movements and incantations he doesn't have to find the books again."

"Well, I hate to break this up, but I thought you would like to start getting in some practice." Cedric said. Harry nodded and rose from his seat.

"I'll put the books away." Hermione smiled, handing the parchment to Harry who thanked her profusely.

"Remember breakfast. Seven thirty right outside the Great Hall, alright?" He smiled. Hermione nodded and bade the two boys headed off.

"I'm impressed." Cedric said as they left the library. "So far you've made friends with people in every house."

"Well, not friends yet, but I've met a lot of people. I hope to make friends."

"Any girls catch your eye?" Cedric smiled, thinking it funny that Harry's cheeks pinkened. "Or your lips?"

"Oi" Harry said, smacking his face with his palm. "Does everyone know about that?"

"Not yet, but they will by morning." Cedric smirked. "Hogwarts' rumor mill is incredibly fast. To be honest, I don't envy Luna Lovegood. She's going to have a lot of girls hounding her for details, or worse, she's going to get hexed more than usual."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, feeling he wasn't going to like what

he was about to hear.

"Well, Like you heard, she's rather different. Cho told me that she's the but of a lot of jokes and pranks. Last year she had all her books stolen from her. The thing is, she never told any of the teachers. She just kept going to class without her books and getting in trouble because she said that her books were taken by some creature she'd made up. Funny thing is, he one friend, Ginny Weasley got fed up with it, and went to the Raven claw prefects and told them they'd better get her books back or start a collection for replacements, or she'd go to Dumbledore. The next day, Luna had all her books back."

"I like the sound of this Ginny." Harry smiled.

"She's like a damned phoenix on a broom. She very nearly stole the Snitch from me last year in our final game." Cedric said admiringly as he opened a classroom door and allowed Harry to enter, closing the door behind him.

"Right, so I'm going to show you a few spells that you'd normally learn in sixth year..."

While Cedric was teaching Harry some rather interesting spells, Luna found herself in front of twelve girls from her house, who had followed her into the third year girls dorm. She had barely sat on her bed where she had intended on writing a letter to her father when they had come marching in.

"Is it true?" Asked Annette Hadleburn, and sixth year girl who was staring at Luna as if she were something disgusting.

"I'm sorry?" Luna looked up curiously, which was saying something.

However, Luna knew exactly what these girls wanted of her. She had heard someone in the common room mention her name along with Harry Potter's. Judging from some of the glares she was getting at the moment,

there was no question in Luna's mind she was about to be hexed into next month. Luna wondered idly if it would be very painful.

"Is it true what they're saying?" Marietta Edgecombe asked, stepping in front of Annette and giving the older girl a hard look. "Did you really kiss Harry Potter, Luna?"

"Yes." Luna said simply, Looking at each girl in turn. "I wished to know what all the excitement was about. I've heard nearly every girl talk about snogging him, and wanted to know why. I still don't know what is so fascinating about it. Perhaps I did it wrong."

"I can't believe it!" Lisa Turpin shouted throwing her hands up in the air in frustration. "Of all the girls in the school, he kisses her first?"

"Did you use a love spell?" Another girl asked.

"When did it happen?" someone else shouted.

"Luna, would you tell us all about it?" Cho Chang asked sweetly. Luna gave a very faint smile and nodded. She had never had so many people interested in talking to her. Usually they said things about her as she walked by thinking they couldn't hear them. It was a very peculiar change and Luna was far too curious as to what might happen to deny them a story.

"I simply kissed him in the corridor after lunch." She smiled dreamily.

"That was it. Then I went to Charms class."

"Wait a minute." Su Li said stepping forward. "You just kissed him? Had you talked to him before that?"

"I said hello." Luna said without emotion. "Then I kissed him."

"Did he start tilting his head towards you like he wanted to kiss you?"

Morag McDougal asked, looking rather confused.

"No. In fact, I think he was a bit confused. I didn't even introduce myself. It was a bit rude of me actually."

"Ok." Eloise Midgen said from the back. "The girl's got real guts. Who else would have thought to just grab him and snog him. Without even introducing themselves first before just locking lips."

"Snog him?" Luna asked, her eyebrows going up. "Perhaps that's what I did wrong. I only kissed him on his very soft lips. I didn't even think to use my tongue."

"Oooohhhhhhh, Soft lips?" Padma Patil whined. She clutched her hands to her chest and her eyes were far away. "Did he hold you tightly? Or run his fingers through your hair as you kissed?"

Luna shook her head slowly. "He only lightly held my waist to keep me from falling. I was rather forceful. Perhaps that's why I didn't feel anything special. I did do it all wrong, didn't I? Maybe I should have let him kiss me. Maybe he prefers initiating something so intimate."

The Ravenclaws girls gave her looks of contempt, wonder and jealousy. Luna knew exactly what they were all thinking. They all wanted to kiss Harry Potter. It actually disgusted Luna that none of them even cared about him. All they seemed to want were the bragging rights that they had snogged the boy of legend.

"So does that mean you're shot of him then?" Lisa Turpin asked, looking a bit hopeful.

"I don't know." Luna said honestly. "I think he would be a very nice friend to have."

"But you don't want to date him?" Padma asked, trying to clarify the inquiry. As Luna was so bizarre, there was no telling if she understood what they were asking.

"Oh, I don't think he would like me in that way. I think he wants to date Susan Bones or Hannah Abbott. He looks at them a lot when he speaks to them. I think they fancy him as well. They whisper behind their hands

and giggle a lot. I've also seen Harry looking at Susan bones' chest when she thinks she isn't watching him, yet she puffs out her chest, and she left the top button undone after lunch. My breasts aren't nearly as large as hers."

"Are you saying he's a boob man?" Su Li asked, awkwardly glancing at her own chest. Mentally comparing herself with Susan Bones.

"Aren't they all?" Eloise asked and a few girls laughed.

Slowly they began to move out of the dorm, leaving Luna alone again.

The wide eyed blonde had to wonder if she had just set to motion something that would be extremely entertaining to watch. She had an image of poor Harry being inundated by girls with the top buttons undone so he could get good looks at their cleavage.

Luna was positive that thanks to all she had just shared, she would be able to capture a wrackspurt now.

"Have you heard?" Pansy Parkinson sniggered as she entered the slytherin fourth year girls dormitory. Millicent Bulstrode lumbered in behind her and going to her trunk and looking a bit sleepy. Both Daphne and Tracey who were already dressed in the bed clothes looked up from their conversation to look at Pansy who was smiling like the cat that got the canary.

"What are you on about?" Tracey looked annoyed. She truly hated how Pansy would try and get them interested in her latest gossip, especially since it always seemed to work.

"Well I thought you two would have been the first to hear, especially as you're so interested in Potter."

"Pansy," Daphne said irritably, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Either spill it, or shut the hell up." Daphne was far less tolerant of Pansy's little games than Tracey was.

"Potter was seen kissing a Ravenclaw girl after lunch!" Pansy shrieked with delight. "Samantha Edwards told me that it was that Loony girl. Said they looked like long lost lovers."

Tracey looked to Daphne who gave her a sympathetic look.

"Here I was thinking Potter had a bit of taste, as he was at least talking with Slytherins, even if it was the two of you. But he was talking to Granger, and headed off with her after dinner. And kissing that Lovegood girl? I mean, really." Pansy shrugged heading into the bathroom to prepare for bed.

"He's only been here a day and he's got a girlfriend already?" Tracey asked Daphne in a hissed whisper. Daphne could only shrug.

"Maybe she's making it up."

"She's not." Millicent said gruffly. "I didn't tell her, but I saw it myself."

"What?" Tracey looked as if she'd been slapped. She'd been talking to Daphne about Harry all day. Daphne knew that her friend had developed a crush on the boy. She could understand why, too. He was very well spoken, and quite a bit smarter than many of the dunderheads who they shared classes with. If Tracey hadn't been so taken with the boy, Daphne thought that maybe she might fall for Harry in time.

"He was heading up the stairs when that girl stopped him and then she just threw herself at him. Then she just left him there, gawking."

Millicent said, eyeing the bathroom door to make sure Pansy didn't come back. Pansy was very possessive of her friend, and always made Millie feel bad for even talking to anyone else. Tracey and Daphne often thought that if Millie had a bit more courage, Pansy might find herself without friends at all.

"Do you think they're together?" Tracey asked trepidatiously. Millicent shrugged and gathered her pajamas and headed into the bathroom as

well.

"I can't believe this." Tracey said bitterly.

"Oh come off it." Daphne scowled. "Do you honestly think you can be the only girl in his life? Especially after only one or two days? Don't be so stupid. You've had exactly one conversation with him. He's probably going to date a few girls while he's here. The thing to do is to be a friend and let him see how amazing you are. Never talk ill of any girl he dates, or he'll just think you're a jealous bint. Like I told you, be yourself around him and he'll wise up. Besides, after you get to know him, you might find that he's not the boy for you after all."

Tracey nodded and sighed. "You're right. Of course you're right. You always are. I'm getting ahead of myself. He's perfectly free to snog anyone he wants. We're not even friends yet, and I'm already planning our wedding. This isn't me. Ok."

Tracey gave a great sigh and slipped under her blankets as Daphne did the same.

"So what should I do next oh very wise one?" Tracey asked, looking over to her friend who was extinguishing her bedside lamp.

"How am I supposed to know?" Daphne chuckled lightly. "Like I have a boyfriend."

Tracey snarled and chucked her pillow at her best friend, making her laugh harder.

7. Chapter 7

Hermione had barely slept during the night. She had agreed to meet Harry Potter for breakfast, much to her best friend Ginny's delight, but they were supposed to join several Ravenclaws as well.

Hermione only ever felt this anxious right before exams. The trouble was, this wasn't something you could study for. She wasn't even quite sure

what it was Harry wanted to do. He had said it was going to be some kind of experiment. He seemed confident that he would be able to change people's minds about her. The problem was, she didn't think Harry knew what he was getting into her.

Deciding that she was clearly not going to get any more sleep, she threw her blankets off and through her pajama clad legs out of her bed, keeping as quiet as possible so as not to wake her roommates, who would likely hex her. Padding softly to her trunk, she collected her clothes and toiletries and headed into the bathroom to get cleaned up and ready for the day.

When she had completed getting ready, she saw that it was still an hour before she was to meet Harry. She slipped into the common room and sat down on one of the sofas, taking out her Arithmancy book and trying to study. Her mind was definitely not interested in the subject at all.

Hermione couldn't stop herself and she kept imagining what might happen when she met Harry that morning. What would he do when the Ravenclaw girls made it clear they didn't want her around at all? Would he just shrug and smile and go off with all those pretty girls forgetting her completely, or would he actually do as he said and go eat the morning meal with her someplace else? She had a very hard time imagining that Harry would keep to his word. He was a normal fourteen year old boy. With that many pretty girls interested in him, he would most likely follow his hormones and she'd be left standing there looking stupid... Again!

So why was she even bothering to worry about any of it? Why was she so nervous? Why the hell was she even planning on meeting Harry Potter in the first damned place?

Because. He'd been nice to her.

"Are we friends?" She had asked him, looking into those deep green pools, fighting down the strange hope she felt when he smiled at her.

"Don't know yet." He had said. "I don't know you yet, and you don't know me.

But, we're going to spend some time together and then we'll decide. At the very least, we'll actually have our opinions of each other based on time we've spent together instead of just presuming we wouldn't get along. Sound alright?"

That was why. He was willing to make an effort. He wanted to get to know her and see if they could be friends. So far as he knew, they might share common interests, of enjoy each other's company. And the truth was, she actually wanted to be his friend. That's why she had agreed to this craziness. She wanted to be friends with this new boy. Not the famous boy most everyone was tripping over themselves to meet or associate with. She wanted to be friends with the Harry that had been so very honest with her, and had defended her against Ron Weasley, before he even really knew her name.

Deciding she was not going to get any reading done, she decided to head down to the Great Hall and wait. Her only reasoning was that if she walked slowly, it would at least kill time.

As she hit the bottom of the grand staircase, she thought she saw Harry going down a hallway, but she wasn't sure. She thought it strange that he would even be awake. Then again, he had wanted to meet her at seven thirty. Most of her Gryffindor house mates were only just waking up then.

Hermione went into the Great Hall and took a seat at the Gryffindor table closest to the entrance where she would be clearly visible when Harry returned. About ten minutes later people began pouring into the Great Hall, most of the sixth years or older, though she did see a few first years. Little by little the Great Hall started to fill with more and more students.

Then she saw the Ravenclaw fourth years take up station just outside of the Great Hall, all of them looking as if they'd taken great care with their appearances this morning. Hermione's fear began to rise again as she watched them.

A moment later it was clear that Harry had shown up, and the girls were greeting him. The Asian girl, Su Li led the charge calling out a big "Good Morning". Hermione couldn't see Harry but it was clear that he was there as the girls circled around him protectively. They didn't seem to be moving into the Great Hall and Hermione realized that she had promised to meet him outside of the Great Hall. Preparing herself for the worst, Hermione stood and went out to meet them all.

"Oh, there you are." Harry said the moment he spotted her. He stepped out of the circle and turned to face them, keeping himself between them.

"Ladies, this is Hermione Granger, and I asked her to join us this morning." Harry smiled to the Ravenclaws.

"What?" Eloise Midgen all but shouted looking very indignant. "Why?"

"Do you have a problem with that?" Harry asked. Hermione could see the other girls all looking at Eloise as if she'd just told them the sky was now orange. Eloise seemed not to have noticed as she stared coldly at Hermione.

"I thought we were going to get to know you, Harry. I didn't know we'd be entertaining a bigheaded social reject like Granger. She thinks she's something amazing. Merlin's gift to magic." Eloise spit.

"Funny, I never got that impression." Harry said, looking at Hermione who looked as if all she wanted to do was scamper away.

"You haven't had the misfortune of being stuck in this school with her the past three years. She shows off in every class like she's the perfect witch. She takes so much pleasure in showing everyone up and being every

teachers favorite pet. It's disgusting. Trust me, the more distance you put between yourself and Granger the better off you are." Eloise finished, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at Hermione.

"Hmm." Harry said thoughtfully. "Let me ask you something."

Harry winked at Hermione and then turned to face Eloise fully. "Have you ever talked to her? I mean not insult her, but actually talk to her? Do you know anything about her beyond that she seems quite good in class and has enough pride in herself to do as well as she can?"

Eloise stepped back as if Harry'd just slapped her. She looked to her friends for support, but it was clear they were not going to get in the middle of this. Even Morag, her best friend had become intensely interested in watching people come down the staircase for breakfast.

"So, you've wasted three years insulting her, and you don't know spit about her. Everyone seems to be so intent on getting to know me, but I find it strange that there are so many interesting people who are already here."

He looked at each girl in turn as he spoke now. "But here's a great opportunity to fix it. Why not forget everything you think you know about Hermione here and spend a little time with her. Ask her questions, and give her the chance to do the same. I'm not saying you'll become the best of friends, but at the very least you'll have facts to base your judgment on."

To everyone's surprise, especially those who knew her so well, Mandy Brocklehurst stepped forward and linked her arm in Hermione's and began leading her into the great Hall. Su Li looked at Padma and then Lisa with awe. Mandy was very shy and never EVER initiated anything. Harry gave a wide smile and followed after the two girls, leaving the other five gawking.

"I just screwed up royally, didn't I?" Eloise asked sullenly.

"Most assuredly."

They all turned to see Luna Lovegood standing behind them, smiling her rather vacant dreamy smile as she looked at them all in turn.

"He's very interesting isn't he? He seems to have this thing about helping people who seem to be having trouble as well as this of us who think we know it all. He knows the real value of friendship and doesn't seem afraid to risk the possibility of losing potential friends in favor of people who will be more appreciative of him in the long run. Hermione for all her faults knows how valuable a true friend can be. It's why they will be friends until they die. I actually envy them both." She smiled softly and headed into the Great Hall leaving five very stunned housemates in her wake.

"Ok, seriously." Su said at long last. "When did the world go all barmy, and Loony Lovegood become the damned voice of reason?"

"She really did have some good points." Padma agreed, looking to where Harry, Hermione and Mandy sat. She then noticed that Harry waved Luna over to sit next to him. "And what's worse, is she's actually gotten closer to him than any of us will ever hope to be if we don't start using our brains and thinking of him instead of ourselves."

"Plus he's got a real point. There are loads of interesting people around here, and we've just isolated ourselves. Who knows what we're missing."

Su Li said, watching as Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan walked past.

"I mean, think of all the possibilities."

"Yeah." Lisa grinned. "Dean's one of the few boys in this school taller than me, not to mention that really cute dimple when he smiles."

"Whoa!" Padma turned sharply. "You've never mentioned Dean before."

"I know." Lisa said flatly still focused on the tall dark skinned boy. "I don't

know why I thought that I would only date another Ravenclaw. Makes you wonder how we all got so brainwashed and convinced not to go outside of our own houses. Look at all we've been missing. And I don't think I want to miss anymore. See ya in class."

Lisa gave a little wave and dashed into the Great Hall after Dean Thomas.

"Oh Harry, what have you started?" Su asked making Padma and Morag laugh while Eloise just stared at Hermione Granger feeling very foolish.

Harry was having a really good day. He had proven Hermione wrong, and he was sure that she and Mandy Brocklehurst were on their way to becoming friends. In fact, the two girls had all but ignored him at

breakfast, losing themselves in a conversation centered on Arithmancy.

Harry hadn't minded as it gave him the chance to talk to Luna Lovegood, who had been real entertaining. Luna had a very unique view of the world, and Harry was sure she had spoken in riddles to him throughout breakfast.

Still, Harry liked her. It was hard not to. With her easy smile and her soft smile, Luna was very pretty. But more than that, she was fun to be around. The way she talked about strange creatures, and patiently explained them to him, She even had Harry believing there might be something to them. Her conviction was admirable, and Harry just had an immense amount of respect for the girl immediately.

Harry's first class for the day turned out to be Charms, where he joined Tracey and Daphne and the other Slytherins, as well as the Ravenclaws.

Harry caught some of the Ravenclaws throwing glances his way, but he kept focus on the tiny teacher's lesson. Harry was sure that if he could get Professor Flitwick and Professor Madigan together, it would be a very entertaining and educational time.

Harry enjoyed the practical part of the lesson as it gave him a chance to

talk with the two Slytherin girls, and was introduced to Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini who were rather monosyllabic. Harry guessed they were still on the fence about whether to like Harry or not. Harry wasn't to concerned.

The Slytherins joined Harry for his next class, where they joined the Gryffindors on the grounds for Care of Magical creatures. Harry had never been more freaked out in his life. Hagrid presented Blast Ended Skrewts and made all the students partner up, to take the strange lobster like creatures for a walk to burn off pent up energy.

"These things are so horrible." Tracey said as she and Harry tried guiding their skrewt around the grounds.

"I'm still trying to figure out what they are." Harry said, holding tight to the leash. Tracey refused to take a turn holding the leash, and Harry now understood why. Twice now the skrewt's tail had ignited and drug Harry across the ground, much to Tracey's delight it seemed. Even now she was having trouble not smiling. In spite of it all, Harry didn't really mind as Tracey's smirk was quite fetching.

"What has he said about these things?"

"Only what he finds 'interesting'. Stingers, suckers, pincers." Tracey shrugged looking over to where Daphne and Blaise were trying to fight their own skrewts and guide it where they wanted to go. "I swear if he could, He'd bring a damned dragon for us to study."

"Actually, I don't think I'd mind studying a dragon. You know, so long as it was caged and it couldn't breath fire at me." Harry shrugged.

"thinking of becoming a dragon handler after school?" Tracey smiled and Harry shrugged.

"I have absolutely no idea what I want to do when school is finished. I'd like to play professional Quidditch, but I think I could only do that for a

few years. Same with racing. And there's a good chance that I might not get drafted for a professional team."

"Sounds like you've put a fair amount of thought into this." Tracey said, making Harry shrug again.

"I suppose we're all about that age where we start thinking about that sort of thing." He smiled. The skrewt was no inspecting a patch of ground, no longer concerned with the two teens or the leash around it's middle. "I sometimes think it would be cool to be in law enforcement. My dad and my godfather were set to become Auror's before things happened to change it all. Sirius told me they were just finishing their training when Mom and dad had to go into hiding."

"That's a pretty admirable ambition." Tracey nodded, keeping a wary eye on the skrewt who seemed to have settled into a patch of mud. "I want to be a curse breaker. I think it would be really exciting to go into ancient tombs and discover treasure and artifacts hidden away by wizards ages ago. Plus, Curse breakers make loads of gold."

"Nothing wrong with making a bit of gold." Harry nodded approvingly.

"So long as you remember that there's more to life."

"Another bit of advice from your godfather?" Tracey asked with a smirk. Harry nodded.

"I sometimes think he's trying to make sure I don't make the same mistakes as he or my father did. Like he's trying to keep a promise to my parents or something. I've asked him about it a few times, but he just shakes his head and says it's his job to make sure I grow into a good man."

Harry shrugged and the two fell silent, both turning to look at the skrewt that seemed to be sleeping in the patch of mud now. Harry could feel Tracey's eyes turn on him, and saw her fidgeting a bit out of the corner of

his eye.

"So, you know this weekend we're allowed to go to the village." Tracey stuttered out. Harry nodded, turning to look at her. Tracey's face went scarlet as he captured her gaze. Tracey had to look away after a second if she hoped to continue.

"I was wondering if maybe you'd like to go? You know, with me?" She managed to finally get out. Harry kept silent until she turned to look at him again. He was smiling at her, and she felt her face go red again.

"I'd like that. However, I'm meeting my godfather in the morning, so I don't think I'll be free until the afternoon." He said, looking apologetic.

Tracey merely smiled brightly in return and shrugged.

"We could meet at the Three Broomsticks and have a late lunch and then visit the shops." She suggested and Harry nodded in agreement.

"That sounds great." Harry grinned. "Now, if only it were Friday so we didn't have to wait so long." Tracey could only laugh.

Hagrid called the end of class and all around them their classmates were trying very hard to get their skrewts back to Hagrid. Harry and Tracey looked at their sleeping skrewt and then at each other.

"I really don't fancy waking this thing." Tracey said with a rather frightened look on her face.

"Then I really hope this works." Harry said taking out his wand. With a swish and flick, Harry levitated the napping lobster like creature and guided it back to Hagrid, who was beaming at him and Tracey as Harry gently place the creature down.

"You might look into getting them some mud." Harry said placing his wand back in its holster.

"It went right to sleep in a patch up on the hill there." Tracey remarked and Hagrid nodded, his smile growing ever wider.

"Ten points to yeh Miss Davis, for your discovery. Well done." Hagrid said before urging them off to lunch. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought Tracey might have been a bit shocked to have earned points from Hagrid.

The two walked together back up to the castle where Tracey went to join Daphne for lunch. Harry was greeted by Hannah and Susan, and decided to join them for lunch.

"So what do you have this afternoon?" Hannah asked as they sat down.

"Defense." Harry said simply. "What's Moody like?"

Hannah looked at Susan and Harry saw the look of admiration mixed with fear. Susan turned back to Harry and leaned in towards him.

"He really knows his stuff, but his teaching method is a bit... hands on."

Harry gave her a strange look and Hannah picked up the story.

"He's spent a lot of time so far on the Unforgivable Curses. In our first lesson he showed us the effects of them on a spider. It gave me nightmares. The next few lessons, he put us all under the Imperious curse so we'd know what it would feel like. He made me dance in front of everyone while singing. I nearly died of embarrassment." Hannah groaned.

"There's a lot of people worried that he'll put us all under the Cruciatus next." Susan shivered.

"He really put you all under the Imperious?" Harry asked with concern.

Both girls nodded and Harry sat back in his seat looking thoughtful.

"That doesn't make sense. He's a teacher."

"He said Dumbledore wanted us all to know what it felt like so we could learn to fight it." Susan said. Harry looked up to the head table where the teachers sat. Dumbledore wasn't present this afternoon, but Moody was there gnawing on a chicken leg. Harry noticed the electric blue magical eye was focused on him at that instant, and Harry had to suppress a

shudder. He had been really looking forward to his defense class, as it was one of his favorite subjects, but now he wasn't so sure.

Harry was glad to find that the Hufflepuffs had Defense with him along with the Gryffindors. Harry took a seat next to Susan and behind Hermione, who smiled in greeting when he tapped her on the shoulder. Moody stomped into class, the door shutting behind him. "Alright, settle down, settle down."

He turned around and Harry got a real good look at the former Auror. He had shoulder length blonde hair and about five days worth of facial hair, giving him a very grizzled look. His face was a latticework of scars and there was a large chunk missing from his nose. When he walked, Harry heard what sounded like heavy wood hitting the floor with every other step. Harry looked closer and saw that Moody's left leg was in fact a prosthesis.

"Now then, Before we start today's lesson, I need to point out that we have a new student joining us. As I don't play favorites, I'd like to ask Potter to come up here. As the rest of you have undergone the Imperious, I think it only fair that Potter get a chance to show off his dancing skills." Moody gave a mirthless laugh, but Harry heard some people whispering and more than a few smiles.

Harry stood in front of Moody who was obviously appraising him. Harry felt very uncomfortable in front of the man, as if Moody could see his deepest secrets or his worst fears. Harry had never felt so unsure of himself before.

"No Potter, I'm going to place you under the Imperious curse, so you will understand what it feels like, and maybe you'll be able to fight it off if someone tries to control you."

Before Harry could agree or even ready himself, Moody's wand flashed

and he shouted "Imperio!"

It was such a wonderful feeling. Harry was very shocked that he felt so relaxed and carefree. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before. Complete euphoria.

He then heard the gruff voice of his new Defense teacher, sounding rather distant, yet very insistent. "Jump on the desk."

Harry turned to look at the desk and he then asked himself, "Why?"

The euphoria feeling diminished as he stared at the desk.

"Jump on the desk." Moody's voice sounded much closer and clearer.

"Why the hell would I want to jump on a desk?" Harry asked.

"JUMP ON THE DESK!"

"NO!"

Harry tried to stop himself from jumping and slammed onto his knees on the stone floor. He lurched forward and cracked his head on the edge of the desk, tearing open his forehead.

"Well done, boy!" Moody laughed, clapping his hands. "Did you see it?"

He turned to the class as Harry got to his feet, holding his bleeding forehead.

"It was in his eyes. Did you see? Oh they'll have a time trying to control you boy."

Harry was not encouraged by the Defense teacher's good humor. Moody demanded Harry come closer, and he healed Harry's cut and then placed him under the Imperious Curse once again. Harry had an easier time throwing it off this time, which only served to humor Moody further.

The old Auror kept Harry by his side, and pointed out all the signs that Harry was fighting the curse, and had Harry tell them how he felt when he was fighting it off. Harry was now beginning to dislike Defense class. Then again, he'd never been singled out like this before. Back at Salem,

he was just another student. Sure, he usually got the work done before anyone else in Defense, but he'd never been the guinea pig before.

There was something about Moody that just didn't sit right with Harry either. Though he was sure it was because he was subjecting students to a curse that was quite illegal throughout the world.

When class finished, Hermione, Neville, Susan and Hannah all walked with Harry.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I'll be ok." He said. Truthfully he just wanted to go to his room and sleep. He felt drained somehow. Clearly throwing off the Imperious curse took a lot out of a person. Harry idly wondered if Moody had been using all of his strength, and if he hadn't, how would Harry feel if the Auror had been?

Susan placed a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. "You really look awful. Maybe you should go lie down or something."

"You look like you're ready to fall over, Harry." Hannah nodded.

Harry thought it was a good idea, and with the girls and Neville's help, Harry made it back to his room where he collapsed on the sofa, and fell asleep almost at once.

Harry awoke a few hours later, feeling much better. That is until he realized that he had missed dinner, and it was after curfew.

"Well that won't do." Harry said flatly staring at the clock above the fireplace. Quickly he dug in his bag and pulled the Marauder's map out with a grin and opened it up, activating it with his wand and the passwords. At once the map appeared and after a quick scan, Harry found the kitchens.

Harry headed out into the hall and followed the map, carefully avoiding any of the few roaming teachers and the caretaker. Finally he arrived at a

large portrait of a bowl of fruit, and Harry consulted the map to see what he must do next.

He smiled with satisfaction as the tiny image of himself on the map began tickling the portrait. Harry folded the map and placed it in his pocket before reaching up to tickle the painting. He started with the apple, and when nothing happened, moved to the banana, then the orange, the grapes, and then the pear.

The pear shrieked with laughter, and the painting swung open.

Harry slipped inside and was greeted by two House elves wearing Hogwarts tea towels. They both bowed low and asked how they could serve Harry, who thanked them and requested some food, as he had missed dinner. The first elf guided Harry to a small round table and in a few minutes, several more elves came and all but buried the table with platters of food before bowing low and heading off again.

Harry suddenly felt very lonely as he ate. Sitting in the kitchens, eating by himself made him really miss his best friend Mark. The two had been friends since they met in their first year. The two boys were as thick as thieves and often found themselves getting into trouble. But with Sirius Black as your godfather, telling you loads of stories about what he and his friends got up to while they had been in school, how could you not? Harry wondered what Mark would say when he learned that Harry was now a champion in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Harry smiled to himself as he thought of Mark howling with laughter. Mark would think it was funny, and probably tell Harry he was glad it wasn't him. However, Mark would have been cheering the loudest for Harry. Then when it was over, He'd suggest they go talk to some of the pretty girls. Mark was possibly more girl crazy than Harry, and even smoother. Mark had already had a girlfriend in Rebecca Barklin. Harry had still been working up the

courage to ask out Stacy Littleton.

Harry decided to write to his friend just as soon as he returned to his room, and he also decided to ask about the possibility of some of his friends coming to watch the tournament.

Thinking of Mark and Stacy made Harry begin thinking about all the new people he'd met in the last few days. He smiled when he thought of Tracey. She had asked him out. Harry had been outwardly calm, but inside he'd been jumping for joy. Tracey was very pretty, and he liked her easy going nature. He even liked that she was also at war with her auburn hair, though Harry was sure that she would eventually win her war.

Harry almost wished he could spend the whole day with her, but he was looking forward to seeing Sirius, and telling him all about his first week. He couldn't wait to tell Sirius about all the girls, His classes, the girls, discovering the kitchens, the girls, practice with Cedric, and of course, the girls.

Harry finished his meal and thanked the elves closest to him on his way out. They all bowed and waved to him as he left. Harry pulled out the map and consulted it before heading back to his room.

He had no problems getting back to his room as nearly all the teachers were back in their rooms, and Filch and someone named Mrs. Norris were on the other side of the castle.

When Harry got back in his room, he shut the door and was just about to wipe the map clean when something caught his eye. Harry peered closer to the map and watched it for a few minutes, not sure what he was seeing.

In the Defense office, a figure tagged as Bartemius Crouch was pacing.

Harry thought he recognized the name, but wasn't sure where he knew it

from. Harry tried to figure out where he knew that name from, but the more he tried, the further away the answer seemed to get.

Giving it up for now, Harry wiped the map and got ready for bed. He went over to his trunk and pulled parchment, ink and quill out and began crafting a long letter to his best friend. When he finished two hours later, he readied the letter for delivery and set it next to his book bag before getting ready for bed. He knew he was in for a long day, as he had potions again. Harry decided as he slipped into bed that he wasn't going to let Snape walk all over him again.

By dinner time, the story was all over the school, and the absence of Dumbledore, Snape and Harry Potter seemed to only confirm what was being told. Yet, no one could believe the story. Even those who had witnessed it first hand were having real difficulty in contemplating all they had seen.

Harry had gone to his potions class which was the second class of the day for him. He had once again taken a seat at a table with Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones who greeted him with smiles and a few pleasantries. When Snape had entered the class, the students fell silent while their teacher explained the brew they would be attempting today. He hinted that this would be a very difficult potion and that they would need to pay very close attention.

Harry could only smile faintly as he recognized the potion. Again it seemed that Hogwarts was at least a year behind Salem in regards to potions. Once Snape had set them to task, Harry began preparing his ingredients. Susan noticed that he was doing things seemingly out of order, as she was counting out dragonfly wings to be powdered, Harry was weighing dried rat's eyes. Hannah also noticed Harry working out of order from Snape's instructions.

Yet, Harry's potion was coming along much better than anyone else's from what the two Hufflepuff girls could see.

"How are you doing it?" Susan whispered to Harry as he was checking his heat level.

"It's not hard." He said modestly. "You just have to anticipate things a bit, not unlike cooking a fine meal. Some things you can prepare far in advance, some things you have to wait for the right moment. It's mostly about managing your time and your ingredients." He shrugged.

"Potter, what is this?" Snape had come up behind Harry and was peering into the boy's cauldron. Harry looked at Snape and felt anger begin to boil in his stomach.

"My antidote, sir." Harry said trying to sound respectful. It was very hard with Snape peering down on him like he was.

"Tell me Potter, how have you managed to get such a result this early in the class period?"

"By following the instructions and being prepared." Harry said raising his eyebrows. Snape's lip curled and glared at the boy.

"You are cheating." Snape said smoothly. "There is no possible way you could have already managed to brew a potion this good in the time I've given you so far."

"Actually, sir. I can, as you can clearly see." Harry said motioning to his cauldron.

"I do not stand for cheek, Potter. Now tell me how you did it!"

Harry sighed and shook his head. He looked back up at Snape and took a deep breath. "I started off by weighing out my Rat's Eyes. While my fire got hot, I then counted out my dragonfly wings and crushed them to dust in my..."

"You are lying!" Snape roared. "I have no room in my class for liars or

cheats, you little..."

"Hey, I can't help it if you're behind!" Harry shouted, causing Snape to stare at the boy. "Maybe if you weren't such a substandard teacher you students would be ready for something more advanced than antidotes. Why are you attacking me for your failures as a teacher. Instead of going around class sneering down your pointed nose, you could offer help to the people you're SUPPOSED to be instructing."

"Why you rotten little bastard!" Snape snarled dangerously.

"And one more thing, you self centered piece of shit, I made this potion LAST YEAR!"

Snape snapped out his arm and grabbed Harry's robes. Harry tried to pull away from the man's grasp but Snape had gotten a good strong grasp and was now starting to pull the boy towards the door. Harry dug in his heels, and jerked back, making Snape stumble. The two crashed into the table where Mandy Brocklehurst and Su Li were working. Mandy's cauldron got tipped over and landed on Snape's foot, making the man release Harry and grab his foot.

"The headmaster's office. NOW!" Snape shouted when he had finally stopped howling in pain. Harry had obeyed, wishing to speak to Dumbledore about the man's actions against him.

Dumbledore was clearly shocked when Snape and Harry entered together, though once he saw their faces, his wish that the two would come to a mutual understanding fell away.

Severus, Mister Potter, how may I help you?"

"I wish to inform you of Potter's cheating in class, and his blatant disrespect and foul verbal assault on me in front of my students." Snape glowered. Harry kept his eyes locked on a spot on Dumbledore's desk.

"Harry. Is this true?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

"I want him punished!" Snape screamed with rage.

"Calm down Severus." Dumbledore said, now turning back to Harry. "Is this true?"

"The verbal part is." Harry said flatly, though it was clear he was trying to control himself.

"Please sit, both of you. Now, Severus, tell me what happened."

Harry listened with his fists balled up as he listened to Snape's version of what had happened, which were clearly embellished. With each lie, Harry's body tensed a bit more.

"I see." Dumbledore said when Snape finished. "Is this what happened, Harry?"

"What are you asking him for?" Snape bellowed. "I have told you what happened."

"You have told me your version, Severus. I wish to hear Mister Potter's side of the story."

"You want to listen to his lies?"

"LIES?" Harry turned, no longer able to hold himself in check. "Let's talk about Lies, Professor." Harry then explained what had actually taken place in the dungeons which led to the two of them sitting in the Headmaster's office. Snape's sallow skinned got redder and redder with suppressed rage until Harry got to the part where the cauldron had fallen on his foot as opposed to Harry throwing it at Snape.

"That's enough!"

"Yeas, I think it is." Dumbledore said sadly. "Harry, you are excused. You may wish to head down to lunch."

"You're letting him go? He should be thrown out of here this instant!"

Snape stood so quickly that he knocked his chair over. Harry just stood there for a moment until Dumbledore waved him to the door. Harry

nodded and left. When the door was closed, Dumbledore turned to Snape and motioned for the man to sit down again.

"I have hoped for years now that you would come around. That you could be the man I always hoped you could be. That you could embrace the man who was brave enough to oppose Lord Voldemort in order to save the life of a man he despised. I have covered for you for thirteen years, Severus." Dumbledore said sadly as he took his seat again and peered over his half moon spectacles into the dark black eyes of his potions master.

"What are you talking about?"

"I think you know, Severus. I am not blind, nor am I deaf. I have seen and heard all about your treatment of the students not of Slytherin House. Yet, I have stood up for you all in what now appears to have been a vain hope that you could change. You, Severus, have proven me wrong. Not every soul can be saved it seems. And now, you have actually assaulted a student. A student who is a guest to our school, all because of your wounded pride, and a schoolboy grudge."

Snape's anger was melting away as he listened to the old headmaster.

"But he..."

"Is a boy, plain and simple. Yes, he does look remarkably like his father, but he is not. I dare say he's more like his mother than anything else.

Compassionate, caring and sensitive to those who would be bullied by those who think themselves better than everyone else. Traits I'm sure that you remember Lily possessing.

Snape went pale as he listened to Dumbledore. He started to speak again but the old man held up a hand to stop him.

"When I gave you a home here at Hogwarts, it was because I knew that if left alone, you would have most assuredly been locked away in Azkaban,

or worse, killed by those who felt you were at fault for their master's demise, as I am sure you remember. But it was also with the hope that you would become a better man. But, I can no longer afford to have someone on my staff who does not care about his students success. And so, it is with great regret that I must tell you that you have until the end of the year to make serious improvements, or I will have to release you from service to this school."

"You can't be serious." Snape said rising slowly from his seat again. "You know what will happen."

He rolled up his sleeve to reveal the darkening tattoo which Dumbledore examine before shaking his head.

"You have done this to yourself, Severus. I will contact Salem Academy and get a tutor for Harry Potter, but the rest of the students will remain in your care for the remainder of the school year. I will be personally examining their result and conducting year end interviews with every single student to get a clear view of your performance. If I remain unconvinced that your have truly turned a corner, I will be terminating your employment. If you find this unsatisfactory, you may leave tonight."

Snape could only stare at the Headmaster for a long time. Anger coursed through him followed by intense fear. Snape knew what waited him outside the walls of Hogwarts. He would have few options to him. Rejoin the Dark Lord, where he might be, and die in servitude. Leave Hogwarts and pray that the Dark Lord or his followers didn't hunt him down and kill him. Try to find work elsewhere and hope he didn't run into a group of disgruntled ex students who wanted nothing more than to kill him, or, and this seemed the very worst option to him, Swallow his pride, let go of his hatred and actually become an upstanding teacher who put his students need first.

Snape's head fell forward and he turned to leave.

"Severus, I am sorry." Dumbledore said, his voice heavy with sadness.

"But you have done this to yourself. Perhaps if Harry had not been forced to come here..." He let the sentence hang between them, and Snape nodded slowly and then left the Headmaster.

"Oh Severus, dear boy. I only wish I knew why you cling so tightly to your anger. It has brought you nothing but heartache all these many years."

8. Chapter 8

Harry allowed himself to sleep in a hour on Saturday. He usually took a break from his workouts on the weekend anyway, but the previous night he'd had another training session with Cedric. Cedric was trying to build up Harry's stamina, or at least that's what he'd said. Harry was convinced that Cedric was trying to maim him. Harry was sure it was because he was so popular with the girls, or so Cedric kept telling him.

In the last two days, Harry had been approached by nearly every student who wasn't a Slytherin and congratulated for his masterful handling of the greasy haired Potions master. It appeared that Harry had actually done what nearly everyone had dreamed of doing. Even Ron Weasley, who had been ignoring Harry and acting as if Harry were something foul he had found on his shoe, had asked to shake Harry's hand.

However, despite the praise he had been getting, Harry had been feeling a bit guilty about the things he'd said to Snape. Not that he hadn't meant them. Snape was a dreadful teacher, and clearly disturbed, but Harry had been taught better, and he felt ashamed of himself. So much so that he'd even been thinking of apologizing to the man.

It would be much more difficult as Harry no longer had lessons in Snape's class. Dumbledore had sent for him after dinner the night of the incident

and informed him that Dumbledore had spoken to his Headmistress and that Harry would now be sent his lessons from the his old potions teacher, Professor Quilden, and that his work would be turned into Dumbledore himself. Harry had been very pleased to learn that he would not spend the year repeating lessons from his previous year.

But still the guilt lingered. Harry wondered if his mother was watching over him right then with a disappointed look on her face. Sirius had often told him that Lily could never tolerate rudeness, or disrespect. It was just one of many reasons Harry treated people the way he did.

As Harry finished his shower and got dressed, his thoughts turned from Snape to Tracey Davis.

He was preparing for his first ever date, and he wanted very much to make it memorable for both he and Tracey. The auburn haired girl had very nervously asked Harry to lunch and time together in the village of Hogsmeade, and Harry had accepted. He had only spoken with her for a few minutes the day before, but he was really looking forward to seeing her today.

But before that, he would get a chance to visit Sirius. Sirius had moved into a house in the village to be close to Harry, and Harry felt very pleased that he would not be so far away from his beloved godfather. So much had happened this week and Harry couldn't wait to tell Sirius all about it.

And then, he and Tracey would be together without the whole school watching them. Harry could feel his heart speed up when he thought about the possibility of holding her hand or even, and Harry gulped at this, kiss her.

For all his bravado, Harry was starting to feel terribly insecure just now. Harry saw the clock above his fireplace and quickly finished getting

ready. He had promised Hermione that he would join her for breakfast.

She had asked him to go to Hogsmeade with her Ginny and Neville, but he explained he'd already had a date with Tracey. Hermione had looked a little down until Harry said he'd join her for breakfast.

Hermione was waiting for him at the usual spot just outside the Great Hall. She smiled as he approached and together they went inside.

"I'm going to apologize in advance for this." She whispered. Harry gave her a questioning look and before he could ask, they had arrived at the spot Hermione had been guiding them to. "Harry Potter, this is my friend, Ginny Weasley."

"Hello!" The thin redhead girl said, springing up from her seat and smiling brightly. Harry shook her hand and felt a bit uncomfortable as the handshake lingered. When he raised an eyebrow at her, Ginny quickly let go and blushed, sitting back down and watching him sit on Hermione's other side.

"One week at Hogwarts and look at what you've done." Ginny smiled brightly as Harry reached for a platter of sausages. "I wish I could have seen you hit Snape."

"I didn't hit him." Harry said looking at the redhead sharply. Ginny looked confused.

"I heard Colin say that you hit Snape in the face." Ginny said, now sounding less enthusiastic.

"Colin's not in Harry's class." Hermione said flatly.

"I know." Ginny said looking at her friend, still blushing a bit. "But Fred and George both said they heard some Ravenclaws talk about it."

"I didn't hit him." Harry said again. "Wanted to, but it would have just made things loads worse."

"What happened anyway? I heard he dragged you to the headmaster's

office." Hermione asked, looking interestedly at Harry who shrugged.

"Snape tried to make it sound a lot worse than it really was. Like I'd leapt over desks to try and murder him. Dumbledore let me tell my side, and then told me to go to lunch. I don't know what happened then. After dinner though, Dumbledore asked me to come to his office and he told me that I'd be getting my lessons from my old Potions teacher and be turning them into Dumbledore. Actually I'm really happy about that. I didn't want to spend the year repeating stuff I'd already done, you know?"

"Ok, now I'm jealous." Hermione said with a light smile.

"I could loan you my notes sometime." Harry offered and Hermione's face brightened.

"Oh now you've done it." Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "I don't know if you know this, but our Hermione is a sponge for knowledge. It's like a drug to her."

"There's nothing wrong with being intellectual." Hermione said with a bit of indignance.

"Unless it isolates you from the rest of the world. You're fifteen, you're supposed to be making boys drool over you and breaking their hearts, or sneaking off to have a snog with someone special." Ginny grinned, winking at Harry.

"Why can't she do both?"

Both girls looked at Harry and he suddenly wished he hadn't said anything.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked. Harry took a long drink of his orange juice before he spoke again.

"Hermione's right. There's nothing wrong with being an intellectual. In fact it's something to be admired. However, you're right to Ginny. You

shouldn't let it prevent you from missing out on the rest of what life has to offer you. I'm not saying you should go snog every boy you see, Hermione. But, a date every now and again isn't so bad."

Hermione stared at him looking as if she wanted to argue, but at the same time as if she was seriously thinking about what he'd said. Ginny on the other hand looked at Hermione triumphantly. Harry wondered how often the two girls had this argument.

"Good morning Harry."

Harry turned to see two girls sitting across from him. The first girl was a pretty girl with dark skin and silky jet black hair with an ornamental butterfly comb set in it. The other was a buxom blonde with sparkling brown eyes and a wicked looking smirk. It was the blonde who had spoken and she was leering at him flirtatiously.

"Uh, good morning." He said.

"Harry this is Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown. They're in our year, and my roommates." Hermione said, and Harry heard a bit of exasperation in her voice. Harry said hello and the two girls began filling their plates with fruit and toast.

"Big plans for Hogsmeade Harry?" Lavender asked, smiling at him.

"I'm meeting my godfather for a bit and then I'm going to have lunch with Tracey Davis." Harry said easily. Parvati gave a stifled giggle and Lavender's eyes widened. Hermione and Ginny both gave sharp intakes of breath, and Harry turned to look at them pointedly.

"Is this a romantic type lunch?" Lavender asked with a syrupy sweet voice, leaning forward a bit.

"I don't know." Harry shrugged. "Maybe."

"She's going to be the envy of nearly every girl in the school." Parvati said and Lavender agreed.

"You're a very popular topic on conversation with the female populace, you know that though, don't you." Lavender grinned.

"It's every boy's dream to have girls talking about him, so long as it's positive." Harry said. He was noticing that Lavender was almost leaning across the table, and an idea occurred to him. Lavender was trying to flirt with him. "this could be fun." He thought, and turned a little in his seat so he was facing her directly, locking his eyes with hers.

"Oh, it's most definitely in the positive. Especially after the story about you kissing that Ravenclaw girl made the rounds. You've got every girl in this school wondering what it's like to have you press them up against a wall and stare deep in their eyes as you inch ever closer..."

Harry got a wry smile on his face as he stared at Lavender and he leaned forward in his seat a bit.

"Are you one of those girls?"

Parvati's breath hitched and Harry heard Ginny give a small wistful sigh.

Lavender held Harry's stare however, returning his smile.

"Being press up against a wall for a snog doesn't quite set my heart a flutter if you catch my meaning. I need something a bit more stimulating." Lavender flick her wrist as if waving of a fly. Harry's smile grew as he sat back, keeping his eyes locked with hers.

"So what you're saying is you'd need a bloke to shove you hard against a wall, grab your hair and pull it hard before he snogged you until you couldn't stand up without help?"

Harry had heard blokes at his old school talk like this, and even heard some girls whisper about things like this when they thought no one was listening. He'd always thought it a bit wrong somehow, possibly because he couldn't think why anyone would want to be approached so forcefully. But then again, he'd never snogged anyone. But he was not going to back

down here. It was a matter of pride, right? Besides, he must have done this right if Lavender's face was any indication.

The blonde had sat back her eyes wide now and her face burning crimson.

"Ok, stop it!" Hermione said interrupting the sparring match between Harry and Lavender. "Some of us don't need those kind of mental images."

"I could stand a few more." Ginny said quietly, though Harry was able to hear her. He smiled a bit more, never taking his eyes off Lavender as she sat back a bit more, breathing a bit heavy. Parvati grabbed Lavender and whispered in her ear, making Lavender's eyes get a bit bigger then she nodded.

"Come on Hermione, this is good." Harry said quickly. "I'm really learning a lot about the people here at Hogwarts."

"No you're not." Hermione said, pushing on Harry's shoulder. "You're simply trying to get Lavender to blush, which you've done. You should be finishing your breakfast. The carriages to the village will be arriving soon."

Harry finally broke his eye contact with Lavender. Hermione had said the right thing, and despite the fun he was having, he really wanted to see his godfather, and he didn't want to be late for his afternoon with Tracey. Lavender let out a long breath when Harry averted his eyes, which made Harry smile again.

Harry was impressed with himself. He'd never been good at flirting, but this girl had just riled him up a bit, and he had really enjoyed it, though in truth he'd hardly knew what to say or do. Yet he was sure he'd won.

He hoped that he could do it again sometime soon.

When he'd finished, Harry got up from his seat, with Hermione, and

Ginny and they headed out to where the carriages lined up and got in line with other students. During the trip down to Hogsmeade, Ginny kept up a steady stream of conversation. Hermione simply alternated between looking out the window or giving Harry apologetic looks. Harry understood that she had been forced into introducing Harry to Ginny, and from her expression Hermione had expected Ginny to be unable to shut up for a second.

When the carriages came to stop in the middle of Hogsmeade, Harry bade Hermione and Ginny goodbye and headed up the hill towards Sirius' house.

"Harry!" Sirius said rising from the breakfast table as Harry entered the house. Remus was also there, piling sausages on a plate.

Sirius grabbed his godson and hugged him tightly. Harry held tight to his godfather until Sirius pulled away and offered a chair to Harry, who sat down as Remus placed a glass of juice in front of the boy.

"How's your first week been?" Remus asked, and Harry beamed.

"You're going to love this!" Harry said launching into his story. Sirius and Remus gave sympathetic frowns when Harry told them about how nervous he'd felt having to walk in front of everyone that first dinner, but then roared with laughter when he confessed to having been kissed by Luna, whom he didn't even know at that point. Sirius smiled very proudly when Harry mentioned all the girls he'd met so far and how he already had a date later that day.

The mood in the house darkened however when Harry relayed the story about Snape.

"He what?" Sirius looked murderous.

"Grabbed me by my shirt and started to drag me out of the class. But then I pulled away and we both lost balance and crashed into a table. A

cauldron fell on his foot and after he stopped screaming, he got kind of scary, you know?" Harry said looking to the two adults.

"What happened next?" Remus said coolly. Harry went on, telling them about how Snape had tried to make Dumbledore believe Harry had attacked him. Dumbledore had allowed Harry to relay his side of the story and then excused him, and now he was going to get his lessons by mail.

Sirius snarled and pounded his fist on the table. "I still don't understand it." He said. "What does Dumbledore think he's doing allowing that son of a bitch teach students? For the love of Merlin, he was a Death Eater!"

"What?" Harry asked sitting up straighter. "Are you joking?"

"No, he's not." Remus said flatly. "He was right in Voldemort's inner circle, from what I understand. However," He said turning to Sirius. "He made my wolfsbane potion all year last year, and I was fine. And let's not forget he was the one to tell Dumbledore about Voldemort's desire to kill Harry."

"Ok, I'm really lost here." Harry said.

Sirius took a very deep breath before beginning. "I've told you over the years how we made Snape our punching bag. We were absolutely cruel to him. In some ways, I wonder if it was because of us that Snape ended up joining the Death Eaters to begin with."

"I think it unlikely. Slytherin House was filled with up and coming Death Eaters, and the peer pressure would have been immense." Remus sighed.

"Either way. What I've never told you was that when we started school, Snape and your mother had been friends. Over the years though, they grew apart. I think it had a lot to do with the people Snape surrounded himself with. Pureblood bigots who thought Lily just another mudblood."

"They had a very big fight right after our OWL tests. Most of the school

saw it" Remus went on. "So far as I know, it was the last time they spoke while at school, but we always noticed that Snape would stare at Lily every chance he got."

"Did he love her?" Harry asked slightly shaken. Sirius and Remus could only shrug.

"We were young and didn't care about his feelings at all. He was a greasy haired git to us. However, after fifth year, I can't remember anytime we picked on him again." Sirius sat back in his chair.

"Your father tried to keep us from bothering him. I think he was beginning to grow up a bit. By the end of the year, he finally had Lily's eye. The next year, they were dating." Remus continued the story.

"When we left school, James and I entered the Auror training, and Your parents married. By then, the war was reaching it's peak." Sirius said. "A few nights after Dumbledore convinced you parents to go into hiding, I heard a rumor that Snape had come to Dumbledore trying to convince him to make James and Lily hide. Whatever the reason had been, your parents agreed, and they brought all the marauders back together. By then we knew there was a spy in the Order. We all suspected each other, but James still believed in us. I was sure it was Remus. He had been unable to keep a job, and the werewolves all seemed to be joining Voldemort."

"I thought Sirius the traitor." Remus sighed, looking sad. "Given his family history and his long disappearances which turned out to be him following Death Eaters. I was convinced that Sirius was the spy."

James and Lily wanted to make me the secret keeper. They were going to place themselves under the Fidelius charm. I convinced them to use Peter." Sirius said heavily.

"And he was the one who turned out to be the spy." Harry said, knowing

this story.

"I asked Dumbledore the night I got you if it was true. If it had been Snape who'd told Dumbledore that Voldemort was after them. He told me it was, and it was then that I knew that I'd been wrong. I owed Snape. But it didn't change what he'd done. He'd killed innocent people. He would kill James given the chance. Despite what he did to try and protect you and your family, he was still guilty of killing and gods know what else. When he was never even brought before the courts..." Sirius shook his head. "He should have gone to Azkaban. Sure a reduced sentence for turning spy in the end, but he should have been made to pay for what he'd done."

"Dumbledore protected him." Remus said, picking up the thread. "The thing is, Snape was going to be hunted by those who remained faithful to Voldemort. Those who snaked their way out of a prison sentence would know that Snape had turned spy. If he became a teacher, he'd be under Dumbledore's protection, and even Voldemort was afraid of Dumbledore."

"But he apparently turned his bitterness onto students." Sirius said.

"I've been feeling bad about what I said to him the other day." Harry said after a long silence. "He just made me so angry. I mean, he just ..."

"I know Harry." Sirius said reassuringly. "Snape's always had the ability to make those around him very irritated."

"But it was still wrong of me to lash out at him. I feel like I should apologize."

Remus looked at Sirius with awe while Sirius smiled proudly. "I don't know if I should hug you or shake you." He laughed, making Harry look at him. "Even though he likely deserved everything you said at him, you feel bad about it. You Harry are a far better person than we were at your age. But, I want you to be careful around Snape. For all we know it could

have been he that placed your name in the Goblet of Fire."

How would he have known I was alive?" Harry asked. Sirius shrugged.

"Dumbledore is positive that he was the only one in all of Britain to know the truth, but I would never put anything past Snape. He may have tried to save your life once, but one good deed does not make up for a lifetime of evil."

"How are you getting along with preparing for the Tournament?" Remus asked.

"Alright." Harry shrugged. "Cedric's been showing me some interesting spells that he thinks might help. I've learned a shield spell and a blasting hex. I just wish I had a clue as to what the first task could be."

"We're keeping our ears and eyes open." Sirius said reassuringly. "If we see or hear anything, we'll send word right away. You just keep working hard."

They talked for another few hours and Harry found out that Sirius and Remus were trying to find out the location of the traitor Peter Pettigrew. They were both intent on bringing their former friend to justice. They then regaled him with many more tales about adventures at Hogwarts. Harry found it fascinating to hear some stories that Sirius had told him from a different point a view.

"Getting close to noon." Sirius said after a rather embarrassing story about himself and a sixth year prefect girl being discovered in a very compromising position by Harry's father and mother. "Don't you have a date?"

"Right." Harry said getting to his feet, his face becoming very anxious looking. Sirius laughed and gave a pointed look at Remus who smiled in return.

"Relax Harry." Sirius said calmly. "Just remember what I've always told

you. Be respectful, Listen to her and be polite. And above everything else be yourself. She wants to be with you, not some fictional hero, but you, Harry."

Harry nodded and turned to go. Sirius stopped him and gave him a firm hug and Remus shook his hand. Then after he got directions to the Three Broomsticks tavern, left in a rush.

"I wonder, will he be like you," Remus smirked looking at his friend.

"Snogging every girl he sees, or will he be like James and just pine after one girl."

"I'm hoping he'll be a bit of both." Sirius smiled. "Play the field until he finds his perfect match, then treat that girl like a princess for the rest of his life."

Tracey Davis woke a bit later than she had wanted to, but excited all the same. She and Daphne had spent a great deal of time trying to put together the perfect outfit for Tracey's date. Tracey had wanted a skirt to show off her legs, but Daphne pointed out that it was likely to be too chilly now that winter was coming, and Tracey reluctantly agreed that she didn't want to be freezing all day.

In the end, Daphne loaned her friend a very nice pair of jeans and the two girls picked out a faded blue jumper that Daphne was sure would accentuate Tracey's assets nicely.

After Tracey finished her shower, she and Daphne set to work on Tracey's usually uncooperative auburn hair. Daphne said it would be good to for Tracey to keep it out of her face as Harry seemed to like staring into her eyes.

Giving herself one long last look in the mirror before going off to breakfast, Tracey was very confident that she was in for a very pleasant afternoon.

Tracey and Daphne went up to a late breakfast. After all, Tracey was not about to go into Hogsmeade just to wait nervously for Harry and looking like an idiot. Daphne had offered to wait with her, maybe even doing a bit of shopping, but Tracey had said that she and Harry were going to do that after lunch.

Tracey ate a light breakfast and after a bit, decided that it was okay to go into the village. During the carriage ride, Tracey discovered that Daphne was planning on meeting Blaise Zabini.

"Since when did you start talking to Zabini?" Tracey asked.

"I don't know." Daphne shrugged, her cheeks coloring a bit. "He asked me to met him, and what with you and Potter getting together..."

"Well of all the boys in our house, he's clearly the best looking, but, you know you don't have to only meet boys from Slytherin. Some of those Durmstrang blokes aren't bad on the eyes."

"I know." Daphne said flatly looking out the window at the forest passing by. "But, I like Blaise. He's... I don't know."

"Alright. But I want details later." Tracey said pointedly. Daphne gave her a wry smile and the carriage came to a halt and the girls got out.

"Well, I've got an hour before I'm supposed to meet Harry." Tracey said anxiously. "I have no idea why I'm so nervous."

"Just calm down." Daphne laughed. "You'll be fine. Just keep things light. Talk to him like you do any other time. Just relax and have fun."

"you're not leaving me are you?" Tracey asked with panic evident in her voice.

"Yeah, I am." Daphne smiled. "I have a date, and I don't want to be late."

She gave a wave and started off leaving Tracey standing felling very stupid. She shook her head, trying to clear her head and not over think her coming meeting with Harry. She stepped into the main road and

decided to go to Scrivenshafts to get a few things she needed. She didn't think Harry would want to spend too much time looking at quills and parchment.

Tracey saw Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode walking into Honeydukes across the road. Tracey shivered at the thought of Pansy spying her with Harry. Pansy had not stopped harping on how ugly and rude Harry was. Ever since his first meeting with Harry, Draco had harped on and on to anyone who would listen about Harry's inflated ego and clear lack of power. Draco hadn't liked being made to look like an idiot. He'd been insulting Daphne and Tracey at every turn for their terrible taste in friends.

Tracey turned her mind to think about Harry. They had met the day before to finalize when they would meet. Harry had actually appeared as nervous as she felt when they spoke, but he had smiled and told her that he was very eager to go to Hogsmeade with her. He had ran his hand through his hair, messing it up worse than it had been and Tracey had found it very endearing.

Tracey checked her watch as she took her new quills up to the counter. She had about twenty minutes until she was to meet Harry, so she figured she'd take a leisurely stroll towards the pub.

She was looking in the window of Gladrags when she saw Harry's reflection across the street. She turned and saw him going into the Post Office. Deciding to surprise him, Tracey ran across the street and into the Post office.

There were a handful of people in there and Tracey was able to get right behind Harry who was paying for an international letter delivery.

"A letter home?" Tracey asked. Harry turned and smiled widely as he saw her.

"Hi. You look... wow." Harry said looking her over. Tracey made a mental note to thank Daphne for her help.

"Uh, yeah." Harry said remembering that she had asked him a question. "I was sure I had time to get in here and send off a letter to my friend."

Harry turned back to Tracey a horrified look on his face. "I'm not late am I?"

"No." Tracey grinned. I was across the street on my way to the pub when I saw you come in here. I figured we could walk there together. If that's ok?"

"No, I'd like that." Harry smiled.

He got his change from the man behind the counter and watched him tie the letter to a large horned owl, who swept off the instant the letter was attached. Harry turned to Tracey and with a wave of his hand, they headed off to lunch together.

"So, did you see your godfather?" She asked, looking at him. He nodded.

"Yeah, he was really happy to hear all about what I've been getting up to. He was really mad about what happened with Snape."

"Did you get in trouble?" Tracey asked with concern.

"Oh no. He wasn't mad at me. He knew Snape in school, they didn't like each other, and he was mad that Snape had tried to hurt me, even though I don't think he really would have hurt me. At least, I hope not. Anyway, we talked about other stuff after that. He's really worried about the tournament."

"I'd forgotten about it. Which is weird because you're here and so are the other two schools, but, you know, nothing's really happened yet. I think we've all forgotten about it, really."

They arrived at the Three Broomsticks, and Harry opened the door to allow Tracey to enter and followed her inside.

Harry took in the tavern with a smile. There were loads of students from Hogwarts as well as Durmstrang and Beauxbatons enjoy the warmth and the company. Harry was assaulted by the heavenly aromas of food coming from somewhere, and Tracey grinned at his face.

"Shall we find a table?"

Harry followed her in the crowd and they found a small table near a window. In a moment a tall very attractive woman greeted them and gave a start when she saw Harry.

"My goodness, It's very nice to meet you Mister Potter." the woman said, offering her hand. Harry shook it with a puzzled expression on his face.

"What can I get you?"

Tracey and Harry ordered food and butterbeers, which the woman, who Tracey identified as Madam Rosemerta, brought to their table and told them their food would be up in a few moments.

"So, if it isn't too forward, may I ask who you were writing to?" Tracey asked after taking a sip from her drink.

"My best friend, Mark. He's still on break, but I wanted to tell him about everything that's been happening. He's been my friend since I started school, and it would just suck if I came back to school to find he was gone. I didn't want to do that to him."

"That's really nice of you." Tracey said.

"Naw, it's just courteous. Truth is, I've been having such a good time that I've hardly thought about any of my friends. I miss them all. I'm hoping to ask Dumbledore if we can arrange for some of them to come watch the tasks."

"Did you have a girlfriend?" Tracey blushed as she asked it, but nowhere near as bad as Harry did, who choked on his butterbeer.

"Um." Harry stammered, wiping at his face. "No."

Madam Rosemerta brought their food and set it before them before winking at Harry and leaving them again.

"No, I didn't have a girlfriend. I was trying to get close to a girl, who kissed me right before break, but nothing other than that. In fact..." He said looking up into Tracey's very dark brown eyes, and smiling very nervously. "To be perfectly honest, this is the first date I've ever been on." "Really?" Tracey asked looking surprised.

"Uh, yeah." Harry shrugged.

"Wow." tracey said looking at him with wonder. "I just assumed... Well, This is my first date too."

Harry brightened up a bit. Tracey felt her cheeks heat up and bent her head back to her meal.

Before they could speak anymore, someone came to their table.

"Hello!"

Tracey looked up and smiled to see Daphne along with Blaise Zabini.

"We were just on our way out, and wanted to say hello." Daphne said. "I'll see you later tonight, then."

"Okay." Tracey smiled.

"it was nice to see you again Harry." Daphne said and Blaise gave a slight nod of his head as they turned to go.

Tracey watched them go. "I'm still rather shocked." she said.

"About what?" Harry asked looking at her as she continued to watch her friend leave. She turned back to Harry before she continued.

"Daphne has been more or less hounded by boys since we started school. She's very pretty and her family is very well off. Not just money wise, but power as well. Daphne told me that her father gets loads of marriage contracts for her and her sister every year, some of them from some really disgusting old men. Well, a lot of boys have tried to lay claim to

her. During our second year, she started becoming cold and distant whenever we weren't in our room. She told me that her mother helped her come up with this whole attitude that should help keep away unwanted attention, and it worked." Tracey shrugged.

"So you're shocked to see her with a boy?" Harry asked.

"A little. She only told me this morning." Tracey admitted. "That's why she was so standoffish with you at first. She just assumes the worst of everyone. But she looked happy... oh no."

Harry noticed that Tracey was now looking at a group of girls approaching their table. Harry had seen them all in school, but had not yet learned any of their names. The girl in the lead had black hair to her shoulders, and a cold sneer on her face.

"Well, Tracey, hidden in a corner with Harry Potter." The girl said with an air of superiority.

"Hello, and you are?" Harry asked politely. The girl just sneered at Harry and he was reminded of Snape.

"A school full of respectable and good looking men, and you're here with a boy." The girl continued.

"No one invited you to join us, Pansy." Tracey snapped.

"I was just concerned for my fellow Slytherin." Pansy said with a very fake tone of concern. She even put her hand to her heart. "I mean, what kind of friend would I be if I didn't point out that you could have been here with someone respectable like Theo."

"No one asked you, Pansy." Tracey hissed. Harry could tell that this girl, Pansy was just trying to irritate Tracey, and he wasn't about to let anyone ruin this date if he could help it.

"Excuse me, I don't want to be rude here, but you're kind of making that impossible. So I'll say this as nicely as I can. Go away."

Pansy turned to look at Harry with a sinister smile on her face. "I was not talking to you, Potter." She snapped her gaze back on Tracey who was looking murderous.

"I would think that you'd prefer someone of nobler parentage, Tracey. Wasn't it you who said that all the mudbloods should be thrown into the lake and left to drown?"

Harry turned to look at Tracey's whose eyes had grown into the size of saucers, her face draining of color.

"Yes, I do remember quite clearly that you felt that all the mudbloods should be fed to Slytherin's beast. That we'd be much better off if anyone who was born of a muggle was smothered in their cribs."

Tracey shot out of her seat and ran right out of the Three Broomsticks, leaving Pansy laughing along with her friends, and Harry sitting there stunned. He rose slowly and stood a head taller than Pansy, staring at her coldly. Pansy was still laughing as Harry bent a little towards her and spoke very calmly.

"I wonder if you believe in karma." He said. Pansy laughed harder at Harry.

"What?" She asked trying to get under control again.

"See, you've just made my list, and as there's no one else on it at the moment, all my attention is going to be focused on you. But I'm pretty easy going, so I'll offer you the chance to apologize to Tracey for everything you've done here. Otherwise, I'm going to make you life hell."

Something in his tone, or perhaps it was his cold stare that sobered Pansy, but as Harry stepped by her, Pansy shivered. She had never been afraid of anyone or anything, save some of the things Hagrid had brought for them to study. But as she watched Harry pay for his meal, something inside Pansy was screaming at her to do as Potter said. Fortunately, Her

pride was much louder and she simply scoffed, calling to the girls who were with her to follow. After all, What could Potter really do to her? Harry left the Three Broomsticks and looked up and down the street for any sign of Tracey. There were loads of people, but he couldn't see any sign of his date.

"Hi Harry."

Harry turned and saw Su Li and Morag MacDougal approaching. Harry smile, but kept scanning the crowds.

"Uh, Hi. Have either of you seen Tracey Davis?" He asked. The two girls looked at each other and then shook their heads.

"No, Why?"

"Never mind." Harry said. "I'll see you later."

Harry headed up the road and then back down the other side. There was no sign of his date anywhere. After searching for nearly an hour, Harry figured that Tracey must have gone back up to the castle.

"Harry?"

Harry turned and saw Daphne and Blaise approaching.

"Hey." Harry said dejectedly.

"Where's Tracey?" Daphne asked, her visage becoming hard.

"That's what I'd like to know." Harry replied leaning against a wall and hanging his head.

"What did you do to her?" Daphne asked her voice becoming hard, and her eyes narrowing.

"Nothing!" Harry's head snapped up. "She took off after Pansy said a bunch of stuff."

Daphne's face glare softened at once and even Blaise let out a low whistle.

"Oh no." Daphne moaned. "Do I even want to know what she said?"

"She went on about how Tracey felt the 'mudbloods' should all be killed."

"Oh, that." Daphne said rolling her eyes. "I'm going to let you in on Tracey's deepest darkest secret, something she's very ashamed of. When we first came to Hogwarts, Tracey had the biggest crush on Draco Malfoy. She liked him so much that she started to change herself so he would notice her, until she became something that even she couldn't stand. Our friendship was nearly destroyed."

"Let me guess, she was anti muggleborns during this time?" Harry asked, and Daphne nodded.

"Right in one. Then, in second year, after some people got people got petrified, and I stopped talking to her, well she did a bit of soul searching. Long story short, she realized that Draco was a scumbag, and that she wanted something better. Someone she wouldn't have to change herself for."

"She never struck me as being one of those Pure Blood bigots." Harry said.

"She's as far from it as one can get." Blaise said in a very deep voice. Harry couldn't remember hearing his voice before. "There are very few of us in Slytherin house who don't subscribe to that sort of thinking, and we don't go shouting about it. It makes life more difficult."

"Any chance you know where she might have gone?" Harry asked the two.

"Likely back to the castle." Daphne shrugged.

Harry nodded sadly. "Well, so much for our date." then he suddenly lit up and smiled. "Is there any way you can get her to meet me somewhere tonight?"

Daphne looked uncertain but after a moment she nodded. "I think so."

"Good."

Harry then went on to explain what he had in mind. Daphne's smile grew ever wider as she listened.

Tracey had gone straight to her dorm after running all the way back to the castle. She was exhausted and miserable. What Harry must think of her. All Tracey wanted to do was punch Pansy in her squashed face.

Tracey had cried miserably for twenty minutes after she'd gotten to her bed, but after her long run and everything else, Tracey fell into a restless sleep.

She was shaken awake by Daphne, who was smiling in a sympathetic sort of way.

"I ran into Harry." Daphne said, sitting on tracey's bed as the other girl sat up.

"Does he hate me?" Tracey asked miserably.

"No, but he is concerned. You ran off and he spent an hour trying to find you before he ran into me and Blaise. He told me everything, and well, I sort of explained a few things to him."

"You told him about my crush on the blonde ponce?" Tracey felt her cheeks get hot.

"Kind of had to. But he knows it's in the past. Listen, he wants to see you. Tonight in fact."

"What?" Tracey looked up clearly surprised. Daphne just nodded.

"He says he feels cheated that you ran off, and wants you to meet him for dinner."

"I can't. I can't go to the Great Hall and..."

"He doesn't want to meet in the Great Hall." Daphne said.

Tracey looked confused and Daphne explained everything. Tracey reluctantly agreed, and at half past seven, she followed the instructions Daphne had given to her, and found Harry waiting for her, leaning

against a large portrait of a bowl of fruit.

"Um, Hi." She said very nervously."

"Hi." Harry smiled easily. "You kind of left me hanging this afternoon. We were supposed to go shopping."

"I'm sorry." Tracey said softly. Harry smiled and offered his hand.

"Doesn't matter. I understand. But I think a first date should be something you look back on fondly, you know?"

With that, Harry turned and tickled the pear in the picture. Tracey had often wondered where the kitchens were located, but had never thought to look for them. Harry led her by four long tables that were clearly mirrors of the four house tables in the Great Hall. She saw dozens of house elves who were clearing the tables, and bowing whenever they caught Tracey's eye.

Harry stopped in front of a small round table with two chairs and two plates set out with several platters of food.

"I figured this way no one can interrupt our meal." Harry smiled, and Tracey couldn't help but smile.

"Thank you, Harry."

"Listen." Harry said as he helped her into her seat. "I may need your help. See, I think that girl that bothered us earlier need to be taught a serious lesson..."

9. Chapter 9

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Ok, some of you are really going to hate this chapter, but I assure you it's necessary. I hope you'll read it with an open mind because i think you'll see the catalyst for some big changes. Enjoy.

Chapter 9

Snape sat in his office on Sunday afternoon, his head hung low supported by the arms that rested on his desk. His mood was dark as he weighed his

options and drank his way through a bottle of Ogden's Finest. He'd been given a final ultimatum from the only man who could protect him from death, or worse. The worst of it was that Dumbledore was right, he had done it to himself. But he just wanted others to suffer the way he had. But with every child he'd bullied, the only thing that had happened was that he had sunk even deeper into the ever expanding pit of despair and desperation.

He, Severus Snape had been the one who made all those choices and alienated the few people who had once cared about him or even called themselves friend. He had driven the only good thing in his life away. He had made Lily Evans hate him, and drove her into the arms of James Potter, his worst enemy.

Lily had hated James as much as Snape himself had. Even after they had no longer been friends. But Potter had changed. Everyone said it.

Everyone saw it. Potter had become a man, and Lily had fallen for the man Potter had become. But he, Severus Snape had not. He clung to his hate and his jealousy as if they anchored him to her, even after they had driven her away from him. He still clung to it even now, taking it out on Lily's child. A child that could have been his had he only just let it all go and grown up.

But when he looked at the boy, all he could see was the arrogance of James Potter, the boy who'd spent nearly every waking moment torturing Snape. Mocking him, showing off for the school. How he had hated that boy. And now that hate was focused on a boy who by all accounts was nothing like Snape's school rival.

Snape poured another tall glass of fire whiskey and downed it, coughing as the liquid scorched his throat. He felt his left forearm itch again. He didn't need to look, he knew what he would see. He'd gone straight to

Dumbledore the first night he'd felt it irritating him. It had been nothing more than a faint tattoo until this past summer.

Dumbledore had nodded sadly and they had talked as they often did about preparing for the Dark Lord's return. Dumbledore had always believed that Snape's former master would rise again one day, and that the war had never truly ended. And now, here was the proof that he had been right. Snape knew, as did Karkaroff, who'd come to see him the night before. Snape had not spoken to any of the other Death Eaters, but he knew they must be feeling it as well.

And so, Snape had a choice to make. Live up to Dumbledore's expectations and become a man, or go crawling back to the Dark Lord like a beaten dog, and be another pathetic sycophant to be slaughtered for his master's gain.

Snape was rattled out of his musings when there was a small faint knock on his door. Snape waved his wand, opening the door, and nearly choked when he saw the boy standing in the door way, hand raised to knock once again.

Potter was looking at him, and Snape saw that he actually looked nervous.

"What do you want, boy? Haven't you done enough to me?" Snape hissed.

"I came to apologize, sir." Harry said. He took it the half empty bottle and Snape's reddened cheeks, and glassy eyes. Harry wondered exactly what kind of drunk Snape was, and he flexed his arm, making sure his wand was ready.

Snape sat up suddenly, and regretted it immediately. His booze addled mind swam and the room spun. Snape had to grab onto his desk to keep from falling over.

"What?" He asked incredulously.

"I'm sorry sir. You were my teacher and I disrespected you. I was angry at you for vanishing my potion and not listening to me, and I spoke out of anger. Things got really out of hand."

"I'm confused." Snape said, trying to clear his head, and understand. "Is this some twisted prank you and your godfather have cooked up to humiliate me further, because I swear..."

"Sir, if it were a prank, don't you think it would be done where loads of people could witness it? What good would it be to humiliate you when no one was around. I feel bad about what I said, and for my part in what happened. I spoke out of turn. Don't misunderstand me, I meant every word of it, and I still do, but I was wrong to say it, especially in front of your other students." Harry's voice had gotten stronger as he spoke, his nervousness falling away with every word. He stared at Snape for a moment and then with a slow respectful nod, turned to go.

"Wait." Snape said. Harry turned and Snape motioned for Harry to sit. Harry did so, keeping his eyes on the potions master who poured himself another glass full of the amber liquid.

"I don't know what your godfather," Snape said, putting a heavy sarcastic emphasis on the word godfather. "Has told you about me."

"I know that you were once a friend of my mother and that you grew apart over the years and ended up on opposite sides of the war. But then you learned that my parents were in danger..."

"You were the one in danger." Snape corrected. "If your mother and father had not opposed the Dark Lord, they might have lived. I begged the Dark Lord to at least spare your mother's life. He said that he would, but I knew it was a lie. I also knew your mother and she would never just stand aside and let someone kill her child." Snape slurred as he brought the glass to his lips and took a long swallow.

"I went to Dumbledore as soon as I could and begged on my hands and knees for him to protect her, and your father. The Dark Lord knew that Sirius Black was your father's most trusted friend, and ordered us to hunt him down so that we could learn the secret. Then, one night, he called off the search, and he told us that he had learned where your parents were hiding."

Snape's eyes looked haunted and Harry swore that he saw tears in the man's eyes. Harry looked as if he was about to speak, but Snape cut him off.

"He went alone, and I came here to find Dumbledore. I was arrested at the front gates of the school. I was a known Death Eater, and no one but Dumbledore knew I was a spy. So, while I was being put into jail, the Dark Lord killed your mother and father, and then turned his wand on you."

Harry stared at Snape. He'd heard this story from Sirius, but his godfather hadn't had many details. Hearing it now from someone who was involved was indescribable. It was heart wrenching. Somehow, Harry felt for some reason, like he was listening to a final confession. He didn't know what to say, or even if he could speak at all. His throat felt tight and dry, and he felt his hands shaking, though Harry wasn't sure why.

"In the end, your father proved once and for all that he was in fact the better man. He grew up and stopped bullying me, while I sought any opportunity to hex James Potter. And then, he sacrificed himself to save your mother and you."

"You loved her, didn't you?" Harry asked, his voice small and hoarse. Snape stared at him for a long moment. "I just noticed that you put a lot of emphasis when you spoke about my mother."

"I loved her more than anything and I drove her away because I was

jealous and petty and weak. She died because of me." Snape said after a very long silence.

They sat quietly for a long time then, just staring at one another. Snape looking pitiful while Harry was trying to process everything. Snape brought his glass to his lips and emptied it, refilling it at once.

"I'm not sure what you expect me to say, Professor." Harry said finally. Snape looked into the boy's eyes and saw the ghost of his mother reflected in those bright green orbs.

"I can't give you absolution. I don't have that power." Harry continued. "If you truly loved her like I think you did, why would you spend your life being something you knew she hated. Why wouldn't you try and become something greater, something that she would be proud of?"

Snape looked at Harry almost as if he had been slapped. As he gazed upon the boy, he was taken back many, many years to a simpler time when he lay on a grassy hill with a petite redhead girl staring at the clouds and talking about magic and what the future promised them. She had looked at him with those soul searching green eyes and Severus had felt like he could be anything that she had wished him to be.

"Thank you for your apology, Potter." Snape said tiredly. He gave a weak wave, dismissing Harry from the office. Harry nodded and rose from his seat. He gave Snape one last pitiful glance before leaving the potions master to finish drowning his guilt.

With a flick of his wand, the door shut behind the boy and Snape stared at the nearly empty bottle. Somewhere in the depths of his mind he could hear a very disappointed familiar voice chastising him.

"What have you become Sev?"

What had he become? Was it too late? A new war was brewing, one in which he would be in the very center of. How did he wish to be

remembered by those left behind? Could he actually be the man
Dumbledore knew he could be? The man that Lily had wished him to be?
Did he even have the strength and the courage to find out?

Harry had slept fitfully and awoke feeling more tired than he did when
he'd gone to sleep. Everything Snape had told him was still echoing
inside his mind, and Harry was angry that he hadn't thought to ask the
question that had plagued him ever since he found out as a small child
why his parents were dead. Why had Voldemort come after him in the
first place?

Dumbledore had promised to tell him everything when the tournament
was all over. Snape had spilled his guts and Harry had learned far more
of what had happened the night his life was irrevocably changed forever
than he'd ever even guessed. Sirius had never even known half of what
Snape had confessed to him. But he still had no idea why!

The problem was that Harry didn't feel like he could go talk to the Snape
again. The man had been very obviously drunk yesterday, and Harry
didn't dare bother the man who would most likely be suffering a
paralyzing hangover. Ok, sure, he could brew up a hangover potion, but
they only did so much.

Harry had to push it all to the back of his mind for now. He had more
urgent matters that needed his attention. Pansy Parkinson being the most
pressing matter at hand.

The girl had ruined his first date. He'd embarrassed and hurt Tracey's
feelings, and Harry just couldn't let that stand. So, he'd gone to see Sirius
and Remus early Sunday morning. If anyone could help him think of an
appropriate punishment for the girl that would not even come close to
implicating him, it would be the last surviving marauders.

They hadn't failed him, and Tracey had been very happy to help him,

though she had no idea what she was getting involved in, as Harry wouldn't tell her a thing. He simply asked that she provide him a single strand of Pansy's hair, which she had done an hour later.

Harry went to the entrance of the Great Hall before his regular morning run and warded the archway, keying it to Pansy specifically. He unfolded the parchment where Sirius had written the instructions, and Harry followed them to the letter. When he was done, the archway flashed a dull purple. Smiling, Harry made to do his workout and get back so he wouldn't miss the show.

When Harry was cleaned, dressed and prepared for the day, he practically sprinted to the Great Hall, and took a seat along the Hufflepuff table where he would have a clear view of the entrance. When he saw Tracey and Daphne enter, he waved them over to join him. They looked wary of sitting with the Hufflepuffs, but when Cedric, who'd taken a seat next to Harry scooted up a bit to make room, they sat down.

Harry introduced the two girls to the Hufflepuffs that Harry was counting as friends, and breakfast began. However, Tracey's curiosity got the better of her and Harry had barely begun spreading jam on his toast when she had to ask...

"Why did you want us to sit here?" Tracey asked very curiously.

"Because I'd like it if all my friends could be friends, but also, so you'd have a very good seat for..."

There came a sudden shriek. Every head in the Great Hall turned to see a girl with a very engorged posterior holding handfuls of black hair, which had clearly fallen out of her now shiny bald head.

Tracey's eyes were in danger of popping right out of her head, while Daphne coughed and sputtered and held her nose, where pumpkin juice had just come shooting out in a stream onto her plate of eggs. Susan and

Hannah who were sitting across from Harry were holding on to each other to keep from falling off their bench, tears in their eyes, faces red from serious lack of air as they laughed.

Megan Jones was holding onto Ernie Macmillan who was pounding the table so hard the goblets were shaking. Cedric was turning purple, while Cho Chang, who had decided to join her boyfriend that morning was wiping her eyes. Sally Anne had hid her head in Justin's chest, clinging to his robes to keep from falling while Justin was howling uproariously.

Pansy Parkinson couldn't even begin to believe what was happening to her. As she entered the Great Hall with a few of her cronies in tow, she felt her skirt being lifted in the backside and her balance became thrown off. As she tried to take a step, a loud thunderous bang that sounded like someone had slammed on the head of a drum, sounded. Then, her vision was blurred as her hair fell in her face... and kept falling. Reaching up, She gripped two fistfuls of her shiny black locks and pulled away, her eyes bulging at the sight of her hands full of her own hair.

There was nothing left but to scream in horror.

And then it got worse. Her scream had alarmed the rest of the students who all turned and laughed at the sight of the bald girl with the ginourmous butt.

Pansy turned, nearly toppling over, and ran away, the sound of giant drums being hit ringing out with every step.

"Did you do that for me?" Tracey asked when she was finally able to calm down.

"Do what?" Harry asked innocently, wiping at his eyes. Tracey wasn't fooled, nor was anyone else sitting near them, but they all got the unspoken message. Tracey grabbed Harry by the neck and hugged him tightly.

"Thank you." she whispered in his ear.

"Don't thank me until she apologizes." Harry chuckled, then he smiled widely when she pulled away a bit, and then kissed him, full on the lips.

There was a chorus of catcalls, but Harry didn't feel himself get red.

Instead he just stared into Tracey's grateful eyes for a moment or two before she let him go and they begun enjoying their breakfast.

"So you and Tracey Davis looked pretty cozy this morning." Hermione said as she handed Harry a pot to put his plant trimmings in.

"I suppose." Harry shrugged.

"Are you two a couple?" Hermione asked, watching Harry very carefully.

"I don't know. We've had one date that got ruined. I don't know if that makes us a couple. She's nice, and I like her, but I don't know. I guess I'm just letting things happen in their own course, you know?"

Hermione nodded as she reached out to hold the squirming plant so Harry could continue pruning it.

"You really did a number on Lavender the other day." Hermione said.

Harry looked down the work bench and spied the girl in question looking at him with undisguised desire. Lavender was very pretty. Arguably the prettiest girl in the entire fourth year. She had bright blonde hair that was kind of curly, which was currently being held out of her face with a blue headband. She had blue gray eyes, and a fairly athletic body. Harry was really beginning to hate the Hogwarts uniforms. You really couldn't get a decent look of the girls bodies with those long robes covering them. Harry gave a soft smile to Lavender and she winked.

"I had no idea what I was talking about." Harry admitted lowly to Hermione, who burst into chuckles.

"If that's the case, you fooled all of us. Lavender kept us up half the night speculating on exactly what you've done with girls. She's extremely

curious about you now."

"To be honest, I think she intimidates me a bit. It was fun though. At first I was just playing around, but then it was like I had to see who broke first, you know?"

"A battle of wills, which you clearly won." Hermione nodded her understanding. "She's going to try again. It's a matter of pride that she can make boys blush and cower. I think she likes making boys, umm... I think uncomfortable would work here. You know?"

"She likes embarrassing them?" Harry gave a questioning look.

"Yes, but it's more than that." Hermione's face began reddening. "She likes to um... make it difficult to walk...."

Harry stared blankly at her, an odd expression on his face, and Hermione' got even redder as she tried to think of how too explain it to him without just coming right out and saying it.

"Makes it haaarrrrrrddddd for them to move."

Harry stared at her for another couple of seconds, and then realization hit him like a ton of bricks.

"AAAHHHHH."

"Finally. I thought I was going to have to spell it out for you." Hermione sighed.

"Why didn't you just say she likes to give boys boners?"

"HARRY!" Hermione shrieked and slapped his arm hard. Other students looked up, and Harry just laughed at Hermione's discomfort. "There's really no need to be so crass."

"No, but it's fun." Harry smiled, then he grew serious. "Tell me something. Do girls really like to be grabbed and all that? I mean, you know, pushed against walls and have their hair pulled and all that?"

"You know for as much of a flirt as you are, I'm discovering that you

know very little about girls."

"And I'd appreciate it if you kept it that way.' Harry said pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

"Would you make my rear end blow up or my hair fall out?" Hermione asked, a teasing lilt in her voice. Harry turned and gave her a very pointed look.

"No." He said flatly. "I'd do something much worse."

Hermione blanched a bit, until Harry began to smile again. She really liked talking with Harry. He treated her as an equal. He made fun of her, but not to be mean like just about everyone else in the castle. He made her laugh, and she found that the more she was around him, the less uptight she felt.

"I'd be careful. I do know the Weasley twins, and if I asked, they'd make your life a living hell for the rest of the year." Hermione intoned. The truth was that Fred and George were civil to her, but she had no idea if they'd come to her defense. But Harry didn't need to know that.

"Yeah, I've heard they're quite the pranksters, but have either of them done anything close to what happened this morning?" Harry asked.

"They made Ron's robes turn pink, and he couldn't get them off all day."

Neville said from across the bench. "And he's their brother."

"Pink?" Harry asked, again looking up the bench where the redhead boy was ogling Lavender's chest.

"It had these horrible lacey cuffs and it smelled really pretty, like women's perfume." Neville went on. "I thought his head was going to explode with how violet his face got." Neville began to laugh quietly/

"Parvati said the color of his face ended up going together quite nicely with his robes.

"They can be quite creative." Hermione remarked, smiling along with

Neville, and Harry nodded.

"I need to meet these guys." Harry smiled evilly. "They could help me with an ongoing project I have in mind."

"Oh, gods, what have I done." Hermione thought as she shivered looking at Harry's smile.

"Neville, how early do you usually get up in the morning?" Harry asked, changing subjects. Neville looked up, his face coloring slightly.

"I don't know, why?"

"Well, I'm getting tired of doing my workouts alone, and I thought maybe you'd like to come running with me. You don't have to of course, but you might find that you like it. "

"Yeah." Neville said quickly, nodding. Sure."

"Cool. Meet me in the entrance hall about quarter 'til six. We'll take it slow until you build up your stamina." Harry smiled.

"Why didn't you ask me?" Hermione asked looking put out.

"First off, you look as though you're already in pretty good shape."

Hermione felt her face burn crimson at the ... was it a compliment, or just an observation.

"And secondly, no offense Hermione, but I spend so much time around girls now, that I'd like to have a period in the day where I get to hang around guys. You know, so we can talk about guy things." Harry smiled and Hermione gave him a wry smile.

"You mean girls?" She asked, and Harry smiled and nodded emphatically.

"See, I knew you'd understand." Harry grinned.

Hermione simply shook her head and rolled her eyes while Harry laughed and Neville grinned.

"POTTER!"

Harry, Hermione and Neville all turned to see who had bellowed. Draco

Malfoy came marching up to them with two massive mountains of muscle on either side of him, each looking rather stupidly at the three. Harry remembered seeing them with Malfoy before but couldn't remember if they'd been introduced.

"Thought you were being funny this morning, did you?" Malfoy snarled as he came up to Harry, glaring hard. "Thought you'd make one of your betters look the fool?"

"Ok." Harry said holding up his hands and shaking his head. "You're going to have to explain this to me because I simply have no idea what you're talking about, and I need to get to Charms, so hurry this up."

"You played that prank on Pansy. I heard Davis tell Greengrass that she gave you one of Pansy's hairs."

"So?" Harry shrugged. "That doesn't prove anything. Maybe I am so in love with Pansy that I made a batch of polyjuice potion and became her for an hour just to be close to her."

Neville burst out laughing while Hermione looked simultaneously disgusted and amused. Draco looked at them clearly confused, but one of the hulking gorillas got the joke, because he snickered, causing Draco to snap his head towards him with his eyes hard.

"I'm not amused, Potter. You've insulted Pansy, and you've insulted Slytherin House."

"Will you get to the point?" Harry said, tiring of Draco's diatribe.

"I demand you apologize." Draco snapped.

"And if I say no?" Harry asked, cocking an eyebrow and taking a step forward. The two gorilla's cracked their knuckles in what they must have thought was a menacing manner. Harry simply ignored them, holding Draco's eyes for a long moment.

"What will happen if I refuse to bend to your will, you puffed up

peacock?"

Draco's lip curled and he took a step forward, his eyes narrowing.

"If you refuse, I will make you wish you had."

Harry stared at Draco for a moment, and then guffawed. Draco actually jumped at Harry's outburst. He looked to his two flunkies, who were just as confused, if not a bit more.

"Come see me when you can actually back up your threat." Harry chuckled, turning back to his friends and leading them on.

"Don't you turn your back on me Potter!" Draco snapped, his wand in his hand and the curse on his lips.

Harry was faster.

Dropping his backpack, and spinning Harry's wand flashed and Draco found himself on his behind with large angry looking boils sprouting up on his face. One of his bodyguards for lack of a better word went to help Draco, getting a mouth full of pus as one of the boils exploded.

The other gorilla set his sights on Harry and had his wand in his hand.

"I'm giving you fair warning here pal." Harry smirked as students backed away afraid they might get hit by a stray spell. "If the worst you can do is a stinging hex, I'd leave it alone and see to your friend."

The bruiser snarled angrily and flicked his wand. Harry was very happy that Cedric had taught him the shield charm, as there wasn't much room to maneuver. His shield absorbed the weak blue spell that his opponent had flung his way.

"What the hell was that?" Harry asked with a surprised grin.

"Get him Crabbe!" Draco snapped as his other friend helped him to his feet.

"ENOUGH!"

It was Professor Moody who was stomping down the Hall. "What the hell

is going on here?"

"Sir." Hermione said, her voice soft and unsure. "Malfoy tried to attack Harry. Harry was just defending himself."

"Is that true boy?" Moody asked Draco, who shook his head, boils oozing.

"He started it." Draco snapped, pointing at Harry who was now sliding his wand into his wrist holster.

"He was going to hex me in my back." Harry said flatly.

"Is that so?" Moody asked, eyeing both Harry and Draco. Harry had to suppress a shiver as the electric blue eye focused on him. "Thought you'd best someone when they couldn't defend themselves. Well, perhaps I'll see if you can get the better of me tonight in detention, eh? Eight o'clock, boy. Don't make me come looking for you. Now, off to class all of you."

Harry threw Malfoy one final smirk before picking up his bag and leading Hermione and Neville to their next class.

"How did you know Malfoy was going to hex you?" Neville asked.

"I didn't." Harry said non-chalantly. "But I figured he was going to. If he hadn't I would have had detention, I suppose. So, I guess it was lucky that he did try. The thing is, we had this game back at Salem. I don't know how else to explain it, but we would always try and hex each other. The teachers didn't seem to mind, so long as it wasn't too bad. You know, stinging hexes or things like that. But if it hurt someone, well... I heard one boy got expelled for getting a little too aggressive. Anyway, you get really good at anticipating, and your reflexes get fast. That jinx I used just now would have landed me in detention, but it would have been worth it. Somehow I get the feeling that whatever he was going to use wouldn't have been as kind."

"You've gone and made a real bad enemy." Neville said.

"He's going to make it his personal mission to make life difficult for you."

Hermione agreed as the three took seats at the front of the class. "He thrives on other people's misery, you know."

"I think I have bigger things to worry about, don't you?" Harry gave the two a pointed look just as Professor Flitwick climbed to the top of a large pile of books so he could be seen by his class. Hermione could only sigh. Harry put up a really tough façade, but as they drew closer to the first task, she could see faint glints of worry in his eyes. She wondered if any of his other acquaintances noticed, and if they did, did they mention it at all?

Harry just seemed so sure of himself all the time. Hermione couldn't even imagine a Harry Potter who was insecure or scared. Yet, even as he sat next to her attentively listening to Professor Flitwick talk about summoning charms, Hermione wondered just how well Harry was really dealing with the mounting pressure.

Sirius and Remus were sitting at the table in the kitchen of Sirius' house discussing all they currently knew regarding current events. Both of them were at a great loss for what should be their next move because of their serious lack of information. With barely two weeks before the first task, time was running out and they still had no idea on how to help Harry or what he might be facing.

Remus seemed sure that it had been their former friend Peter Pettigrew who had placed Harry's name into the Goblet of Fire, but Sirius wasn't so sure. Certain details didn't add up in his mind. Peter wasn't the type to do something like this, much less even think of it on his own. Sirius felt that Peter was working with someone else. Someone he felt could protect him. As they debated some of the definitive facts, a great barn owl landed on the sill of the window and began tapping on the glass with its beak. Sirius turned a questioning look at Remus who could only shrug.

Remus got up and opened the window to allow the owl entrance. It swooped to the table in front of Sirius and presented its leg where a small roll of parchment was tied. Sirius took the parchment and the owl immediately took flight out the window.

With a puzzled expression on his face, Sirius unrolled the scroll as Remus closed the window and took his seat across from Sirius again.

"Odd." Sirius said, looking to Remus, who gave him a questioning look.

"What?"

"It's from Dumbledore. It says that he thinks we should go have a drink or two at the Hog's Head tonight. Says it could be enlightening."

"So, by going to the Hog's Head, we'll find enlightenment? I don't get it."

Remus shook his head.

"I'm going to guess that by spending some time in the tavern tonight, we might learn something important. But he doesn't say what time, or who we should be looking for." Sirius commented.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say that it might become very obvious."

Sirius nodded and stood up with Remus following suit.

"I'll get my cloak, shall I?" Sirius shrugged, and in a few moments, they were off.

November had turned bitingly cold in the last few days, and Sirius was sure that snow was coming in the next few days. Just the thought of snow made Sirius crave the warm beaches of Florida. He'd taken Harry there for Christmas ever since the boy had discovered girls. Harry was much like James had been. Incredibly charming and suave, though he didn't realize it, which just made him all the more charming to the females. Sirius never pointed it out for fear that Harry would become cocky, like he himself had been. Sirius' deepest hope was that Harry

would find one girl that captured the boy's heart and become as devoted to her as James had been to Lily.

But before that could happen, Harry needed to make it through this year.

The Hog's Head was on the other side of the village. Sirius glanced into the shops as they passed, already trying to think of what to get his godson for Christmas. Sirius sometimes wondered if he'd spoiled Harry over the years. Harry had never wanted for anything, but he seemed not to care too much for things. He was usually at his happiest when they were just spending time together. He'd been that way most of his life in fact.

Sirius' job had been to give him a normal childhood, but now, as he walked with Remus to the pub, Sirius realized that Harry's childhood had never been close to normal. They had been on the move until Harry was eleven. That's when they'd settled in America, and Harry began school. Sirius doubted that there was another kid in the world who could claim to have done even half of what Harry had done by the time he'd turned eleven. Between the magical and the muggle worlds, Harry had experienced so much. Every great adventure Sirius could think of, they had done together. Sirius sometimes lay awake at night thinking that he knew that Harry would not see adulthood, and that was why he took Harry to do everything, so that Harry could not possibly have a single regret.

Sirius shook those terrible thoughts from his mind as they reached the front door of the tavern. There were only a handful of patrons tonight. Two men who glanced at the newcomers before bending back to their whispered conversation. A hunched back old crone with a long nose reading the Daily Prophet and drinking a rather slimy looking green drink, and three rough looking warlocks.

Sirius and Remus settled in a table in the furthest corner with a clear view of the door. The Barman came bustling over and glowered at them for a few moments.

"Two ales." Sirius ordered, slipping off his cloak as Remus did the same. The barman nodded gruffly and shambled off, returning a few minutes later with two pewter pint mugs. Sirius gave the man a galleon and asked that he open a tab for them.

"So now what?" Sirius asked after he took a long sip from his mug.

"We wait, I guess." Remus shrugged.

They sat in silence, drinking and staring at the door for only ten minutes before the answer to all of tonight's questions opened the door and lumbered inside, calling out an order. Sirius turned a wide smile on his friend, who was chuckling now.

"Is that Hagrid?" Sirius shouted.

The great mountain of a man turned to see who'd said his name and broke out into a great beaming smile.

"Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin!" Hagrid bellowed, holding out his arms.

"By all tha's good. How are yeh?"

Sirius and Remus rose and shook the dustbin sized hands of the Hogwarts Gamekeeper.

"Won't you join us, Hagrid." Sirius asked, motioning to their table.

"You should address him as Professor now, Sirius." Remus grinned. "He teaches Care Of Magical Creatures now."

Hagrid beamed and puffed out his chest as Sirius exclaimed great surprise.

"Well, I can think of no one more qualified." Sirius praised the man.

"Then I insist you join us, and your first round is on me."

"Right kind o' yeh." Hagrid said, taking a seat, which Remus reinforced

with a quick flash of his wand. "I met yeh're godson the other day. Looks exactly like his father, yeh know. Bin meaning to have him down to me hut for a cuppa."

"He mentioned that he met you." Sirius nodded. "Said you looked exactly as he'd pictured you all these years."

"Ah, go on." Hagrid waved one of his massive hands in an embarrassed sort of way. The barman returned setting a large bucket sized tankard before Hagrid. "Thank yeh Abe." Hagrid said taking two very large swallows before setting the tankard down heavily.

"Real exciting year, isn't it?" Sirius asked, probing the man a bit. "Tri-Wizard tournament. Hasn't been held in over a hundred years."

"Oh it has bin. 'Specially when you consider that it brought little Harry Potter back from tha dead, so to speak. He's a right popular lad too. Got nearly all tha girls eyeing him everywhere he goes. A lot of the older girls watching him close like as well. I even got a lot of my third year kids asking after him. Course I don't know the whole story, but they ask me just the same."

"Not much to tell, really." Sirius said. "Dumbledore asked that I hide him and keep him safe."

"Thought it had to be summat like tha." Hagrid grinned, taking another huge mouthful of his ale.

"Have you been involved in a lot of the tournament preparations?" Remus asked. Hagrid shook his great shaggy head.

"Nah. The Ministry's got people takin care of all tha stuff. Keeping it all very quiet. Don't wanna give away anything, do they."

Sirius saw the little of Hagrid's face turn a bit scarlet and his eyes crinkled in amusement.

"You sneaky blighter." Sirius smirked. "You saw something, didn't you?"

"There you are Hagrid!"

The three men turned to see Ludo Bagman enter the bar, a huge award winning smile on his weathered face.

"Ludo!" Hagrid smiled, waving the newcomer to join them. "Glad yeh made it. Though it turns out I wouldn't have bin alone after all. Ludo Bagman, This is Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, Harry Potter's godfather."

"My word." Ludo smiled offering his hand. "It is indeed an honor."

"The honor is ours." Sirius smiled. "Won't you pull up a chair. I was a huge fan of yours when you were with the Wasps."

"Well, thank you my good man." Ludo said as he drew up a chair and sat down. Remus motioned for the barman to bring another round for all of them.

"Ludo's in charge of the Tournament." Hagrid said as he drained his tankard.

"Well not completely, you know. I'll be commentating on all the tasks you know, and I've done a lot to get the tournament going. After I retired from the Wasps, I got a great job in the Department for Magical Games and Sports, you know."

"So I expect it took a great deal of time to figure out what tasks the champions would be facing?" Remus asked and Ludo rolled his eyes, giving a great dramatic sigh.

"Oh my word, this has been in the works for two years. We've been in negotiations with both Beauxbaton and Durmstrang for nearly that long. Madame Maxime was very willing to hear us out, but Karkaroff you know..." Ludo shrugged. "It was Dumbledore himself who got the man to change his mind. He seemed very uninterested in coming at all."

"Karkaroff?" Sirius asked, looking confused. "Igor Karkaroff?"

"Yes." Ludo said taking a drink of his ale.

Sirius looked to Remus who gave a slight nod. Sirius knew they'd be talking about this little fact later.

"All three heads of school were quite worried about the safety of those competing, and so, the first new rule we agreed on was the age of the students who could enter. No one under seventeen. Well, we all know how that turned out." Ludo smiled sympathetically. "What a surprise though. Harry Potter alive after all these years."

"Aye!" Hagrid said lifting his newly refilled tankard in salute.

"What kinds of things were you looking at for the tournament tasks, Ludo?" Remus asked curiously. "I imagine it was very difficult in coming up with challenges that would truly test the champions."

"Aye, it was at that." Ludo said. "It was the third task that gave us the most difficulty. In the end though I think everyone was pleased with what we came up with. Just you wait, my friends. Oh the things you'll see."

Sirius gave a meaningful look at Remus. It was clear this is what Dumbledore had sent them here for. Unfortunately, these two were being extremely tight lipped at the moment. This was going to take great patience, and a lot of ale.

So, they settled in, and turned the conversation to petty things. They endured nearly two hours of Bagman's stories of his Quidditch career. Those stories changed when they started doing Fire Whiskey shots with every round. Ludo began to talk about his gambling troubles. He'd dug himself quite a whole with the goblins at the Quidditch World Cup. He even had a couple of Hogwarts kids hounding him for welching on the bet he'd made with them. Ludo was hoping to make everything right again with the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

"I just know that things will turn around with the first task." Ludo

slurred., pointing a shaky finger at Remus. "I just know that Krum is going to be the fastest with his dr, er... task."

"Don't know bout tha." Hagrid bellowed drunkenly. "They all got an equal chance, don't they. Though I reckon whoever ends up facing tha Horntail's going to have a real job of it. Gave Madam Maxime quite a turn when I took her to see 'em up close an all."

Sirius turned his head to Remus who did the same to Sirius. Both of them nearly falling out of their seats with the movement. They were both quite drunk, but Hagrid's slip had a sobering effect.

"Did you say a horntail?" Remus asked, his speech thick and his eyes glassy. "And the French Headmistress saw it as well?"

"Well I took her to se them." Hagrid beamed. "Thought she might find them interesting. You shoulda seen her smile at me when she first got sight of them. She's a lovely woman."

"Oh yes." Ludo said, clapping his hands. "I know what you mean, Hagrid. A nasty beast I've never seen. They have to keep it stunned all the time. Every time it wakes up, it seems to get nastier and nastier. On the other hand, that Welsh Green is so docile, that champion might be able to just walk right up and pet it on the snout, I dare say. Perhaps I should make that a bet, eh?" It was clear that Bagman hadn't heard Hagrid say he'd brought Madame Maxime to see the dragons. Both Ludo and Hagrid burst into laughter at Ludo's idea to place bets on the tournament. Then Ludo fell back off his seat and passed out on the floor, making Hagrid laugh even harder.

"I think it's time you all be heading home now." The barman bellowed.

"I'll take him with me, yeah?" Hagrid said pointing to Ludo who was little more than a lump on the floor. "He's staying up at the castle anyhow. He can kip on me sofa."

Hagrid lumbered to his feet and gathered the unconscious Bagman in his great arms. "I 'spect I'll see you a lot at the tasks then."

And with that, Hagrid lumbered out into the cold night, followed closely by two very drunk and staggering men.

"Dragons." Sirius said in a hoarse whisper as he leaned against Remus.

"Are they mad?"

"I'm sure there will be some sort of protections, but I think you're right.

Bringing Dragons and making teenagers face them with no help. It's ludicrous."

"At least we can finally give Harry something to aim for." Sirius said groggily.

"First thing in the morning, we'll go to see him." Remus said, stumbling over his own feet. "I just hope we can remember it all."

"Maybe we can visit old Pomfrey and she can fix us up with one of her special potions, eh?" Sirius said giving a pointed though very drunken look to his old friend before they both started laughing like madmen.

10. Chapter 10

Harry awoke at his usual time and stumbled out of bed. His muscles felt a bit stiff. Harry wasn't surprised, really. Cedric had really put him through his paces last night. The older Hufflepuff felt that Harry needed to get faster with his casting, and had dueled Harry in an unused classroom. Harry still smiled when he thought about how impressed Cedric was with how fast Harry was able to dodge his spell work. When Cedric asked, Harry invited him to wake up bright and early and join him and Neville for a run. Then Cedric proceeded to punish Harry with his vast repertoire of spell knowledge.

Harry finished dressing and made his way to the entrance Hall where he was to meet Neville and Cedric. It was bitingly cold, and Harry knew

winter was very close now. He wondered how bad Scottish winters were compared to the Salem ones.

"Good Morning Harry." Neville said as he stood up from the step he was sitting on. Neville had made sure to ask Harry what one wore for this type of thing, as he was sure that his Hogwarts robes would not do. So, Neville gave a questioning look to Harry as his new friend looked over his chosen attire.

"Those jeans will work for now, but I'd get some sweat pants for the future. Trust me, you'll appreciate the roominess. Good tennis shoes, though.

"Oh, good, I'm not late." Cedric said as he came hurtling out of a nearby hallway. He was wearing his Quidditch practice outfit. "Right then, so what happens now?" He asked with a smile. Neville looked a bit nervous, but happy to be in such popular company all the same.

"Right, well, we're going to go to the Quidditch pitch and do a few laps. Since you're both pretty new to this, we'll go slow for now." Harry said, and off they went. All three boys shivered immediately once they were outside.

"Don't worry." Harry said encouragingly. "Once we get moving, you'll be thankful that it's so cold."

Harry began explaining why he'd begun running and everything else as they walked when something caught his eye. Two familiar looking men running up from the front gates towards the castle. He stopped to watch their approach, Cedric and Neville standing at his side.

"Do you know them?" Cedric asked as they got closer, and then he realized that Harry did, and he did as well.

"Is that Professor Lupin?" Neville asked, taking a step forward.

"HARRY!" Sirius said, clearly out of breath.

"Sirius? What happened to you?"

Sirius and Lupin looked as though they'd just come from a very nasty fight. They were both covered in mud and muck, and as Sirius reached him, a very nasty smell reached Harry's nose.

"Oh gods!" Harry said taking an involuntary step backward. "You smell like you slept in a garbage dumpster."

"It was a pig pen, actually." Sirius remarked with a haggard smile. Harry looked between his godfather and Remus, who gave an affirmative nod at Sirius' claim.

"It's a long story, Harry." Remus began, clutching a stitch at his side and gasping for air. "Suffice to say..."

"Dragons." Sirius panted. "That's what you'll be facing. Dragons."

Harry stumbled back a bit and fell on his rear end, staring up with shock.

"Are you joking?"

"Are you certain?" Cedric asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

"We met Hagrid and Ludo Bagman at the pub last night. Dumbledore sent us there." Remus began.

"Hagrid, bless him, has never been very good at keeping secrets. Get enough ale into him, which can be very, very dangerous if you try and match him shot for shot." Sirius chuckled a bit. "After quite a bit of drink, he and Ludo let slip that they've got dragons for you lot to face in the First Task. He also mentioned that he showed the French Headmistress, so you can bet the French champion knows."

"And we just learned that the Durmstrang Headmaster is Igor Karkaroff."

Remus added, allowing himself to kneel down to rest. He and Sirius had sprinted all the way to the castle the moment they had awoken.

"Why is that important?" Neville asked, his voice small and nervous sounding. He felt like he was a part of a conversation that he really

shouldn't have heard.

"Karkaroff was a Death Eater." Sirius said. "Got out of a long sentence in Azkaban by offering his fellows in his stead. Then he left the country, fearing for his life. How he managed to become Headmaster of a school is beyond me. But you can bet he'll use every dirty trick in the book to see that his Champion wins. So at least now you're on equal footing with them Ced."

Cedric nodded and thanked the two men.

"Least we can do for you since you've been helping Harry here." Sirius nodded. "Do you know exactly what we'll have to do?" Cedric asked, but both Remus and Sirius shook their heads.

"What you both keep in mind is that dragons are very tough. Their hides are impervious to most spells, and it takes quite a few wizards just to stun one. But their eyes are vulnerable." Sirius offered. "Keep that in mind. A good conjunctivitis curse to a dragon's eyes will all but blind it."

"Suppose we know what to work on then, don't we?" Harry said looking up at Cedric who nodded.

"I suppose we do, but we can't assume that it's about fighting a dragon. I bet there's more to it."

"Very wise." Remus nodded. "If we find out anymore, we'll let you know. In the meantime, I think it's best if you all act ignorant. It wouldn't do if this got out."

All three boys nodded and Remus and Sirius rose shakily to their feet.

Sirius went to hug Harry who also had gotten to his feet, but Harry held up a hand and then waved at the air, wrinkling his nose. Sirius got the message and gave sheepish smile.

"I'll see you this weekend, and I want to hear that you're training hard." Sirius said, and Harry promised. With that, Harry's godfather and his

adopted uncle turned and left the grounds.

"Dragons." Neville said in a hushed reverent whisper. "I can't believe it.

Blimey, you guys, what are you going to do?"

"Not much we can do until we know exactly what is expected of us."

Cedric said. "But We will definitely be practicing that Conjunctivitis curse. And I'll be working hard with you Harry. If this running thing is what made you so fast, I'm going to be doing my best to catch up to you." Harry felt a little bad when they all separated in the Entrance Hall. He'd pushed Neville and Cedric a bit harder than he'd originally intended, but he had kept imagining a giant scaly, fire-breathing monster intent on eating him. At least now he knew what was coming. That did alleviate some of his worry.

He returned to his room, showered and readied himself for classes, and then went off to breakfast, where he ran into Hannah Abbott.

"Hi Harry." She smiled.

"Hey Hannah. Where's Susan?"

"She's not feeling well. She went up to see Madam Pomfrey. Hopefully she'll be down soon. Would you like to have breakfast with me?"

"Yeah, sure."

They went to the Great Hall together, but they didn't sit in their usual spot. It seemed obvious that Hannah wanted to have him all to herself for a bit. Harry felt himself grow a bit nervous as they sat down, and had to remind himself that Hannah was a really nice person, and there was no need to be nervous.

"So, you've met a ton of people since you've been here, and already you seem to have someone special. You don't waste time, do you?" She asked a coy smile on her face.

"Tracey and I are friends. We had one date." Harry said, looking curious.

"Why is everyone so interested in my love life?"

"Because there are a lot of girls in this school who'd like to be your girlfriend."

"Are you one of them?" Harry asked, looking at Hannah sharply. The blonde shrugged, but her face became a bit pink.

"I haven't really decided yet." She said simply. "Don't get me wrong, I think you're nice and all, but I haven't really had a chance to spend time with you alone and really get to know you. I was hoping tha maybe we could... I don't know."

"Have some type of date?" Harry said with a smile.

"I don't know that I'd say date." Hannah shook her head. "But maybe we could take a walk this afternoon after classes?" She looked hopefully at Harry who thought about it for a few minutes.

"I don't think that would be a problem. I only have one class after lunch."

"So do I. So why don't we meet in the Entrance Hall right after class and we can spend a bit of time together." Hannah smiled and Harry nodded.

"Sounds fun."

"So, how are you doing potions now?" She asked, changing subject.

"Oh. I get my lessons for the week on Monday, and Dumbledore's going to watch me brew in a room in the dungeons. It'll be kind of like self study or something. I still have to write essays and stuff, but they'll be sent to my Potions professor at Salem. Frankly I'm relieved. Do you know you guys are a year behind me?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, I did antidotes last year." Harry said and Hannah frowned.

"I wonder why that is. I don't know why, but I thought schools would be pretty close to the same all over."

"Well, it could be that I typically go year round, and Hogwarts has a long

summer break." Harry suggested. Hannah shrugged and they continued eating and talking about non important things. Hannah was interested in seeing Harry fly against some of her Hufflepuff House mates. Apparently that was the most popular topic of discussion in the common room, besides what girl Harry fancied.

As they were finishing their meal, two people approached them.

"Hey Harry, want to walk to Transfiguration with us?" Neville asked. He looked a lot better than he had when they'd finished their run.

"Yeah, sure. Uh, Neville, Hermione, this is Hannah." Harry smiled as he introduced the three.

"Hi." Hermione said in a soft voice. Neville's face burned crimson as he mumbled a hello. Hannah smiled back and Harry got up from his seat, and said goodbye to Hannah. She gave another brilliant smile, and Harry followed his two Gryffindor friends to class.

"She seems nice." Hermione said once they'd left the Great Hall.

"One of the first people I met. Most of the Hufflepuffs are." Harry shrugged.

"But Hannah's really nice." Neville said in a dreamy sort of way. Both Harry and Hermione stopped walking and Neville turned to look at them oddly. "What?"

"Do you like Hannah?" Harry asked a smirk on his face. Neville turned so red that Harry felt he could feel the heat radiating from his face. "You dog, Neville." He laughed.

"You never told me that you liked her." Hermione said and Neville shook his head.

"I don't feel comfortable talking to you about everything, Hermione. You don't tell me everything, do you?"

"No, I guess not. Why don't you ask her out?"

Neville sputtered and choked until Harry slapped him on the back.

"I'm a bit curious about that myself." Harry said once Neville had stopped choking.

"I can't!" Neville said looking very frightened. "She'd laugh at me, and... I don't think I could stand it."

"Neville, The worst thing she could do is laugh at you, and if she did, that's not a girl you want to be with anyway. You're a good guy, if she can't see that, then you're better off without her. I'll tell you what, I'm supposed to take a walk with her later today. I'll find out what she thinks of you alright?"

"You'd do that?"

"Sure!" Harry said patting Neville's shoulder. "It's what friends do. Just remember, if she doesn't like you that way, it's not the end of the world. There are a ton of girls here, and I'm positive that there's at least three who think you're worthy of them."

"Three girls for Longbottom?" Came a drawling, superior sounding laugh from behind. "Are you going to confound them yourself, Potter, or are these first years who don't know any better?"

Harry and his two friends turned and Harry stared at Malfoy hard.

"Is that how you get a date, Draco? Bewitching poor defenseless first years? It's really sick."

"Not to mention pathetic." Neville said quickly, sounding much bolder than Harry had ever heard the boy sound. Harry gave an impressed smile to Neville who looked ready to run.

"Unlike Longbottom, I have a natural charm that just draws girls to me." Draco smirked.

"Then why is it I've only seen you with these two?" Harry asked, motioning to Crabbe and Goyle. "Unless they're just really ugly girls, in

which case, I've got to tell you, you're charms are broken. Or were you talking about Pansy baldy balloon butt? Hey, has her ass deflated yet?" Hermione and Neville both coughed, trying to prevent themselves from laughing. Draco stared at the both of them in turn with cold narrowed eyes while his two gorilla like bodyguards cracked their knuckles. Harry simply rolled his eyes at this and turned back to Draco who started poking him in the chest.

"You think you're so great because you're a champion and everyone knows who you are. Well, not everyone is going to bow before you and worship the ground you walk on Potter. I for one know just how insignificant you really are. Nothing more than an insect waiting to be squashed."

Draco turned to glare at Neville who took a step backward, though he tried to look tough.

"As for you Longbottom, you should do the world a favor and kill yourself. You fat squib."

"Is that the very best you've got?" Harry chuckled. Hermione turned her worried eyes on him as he began to laugh, while Neville gave a confused look to her.

"Really? I'm an insect?" Harry continued to laugh, grabbing Neville's shoulder dramatically as if trying to appear frightened despite his laughter. "Oh, please, someone save me, I'm an insect. Ahh!" Harry turned and threw his arms in the air, running into the Transfiguration classroom like a terrified child, making many who had now gathered to watch the display burst into raucous laughter. Hermione and Neville both turned to one another and broke out laughing, and with backward glances to the now infuriated Malfoy turned to join Harry in the classroom.

Harry was sitting at his desk, next to where Neville and Hermione were now sitting, still laughing heartily.

"Wow." Harry said when his friends joined him. "Has he always been a supreme jerk.?"

"Ever since our first year." Hermione said taking out her book. "I'd love it if someone really put him in his place."

"Didn't I do that? Like, yesterday in fact?" Harry asked.

"All you did was make him angry. One thing I know about Malfoy is that he hate's being embarrassed. He's going to do something to you soon, and it won't be nice." Neville said, though he was still smiling.

"Bring it on." Harry said as McGonagall entered the class and called it to order.

Potions turned out to be rather relaxing for Harry. He was by himself in a small class while Dumbledore observed him. The Hogwarts headmaster handed him his assignment from his potions teacher at Salem, and by the end of the class period, Harry had put together a rather nice calming draught.

Harry joined up with Hermione and Neville as they were walking into the Great Hall for lunch.

"How was your potions lesson?" Hermione asked at once as she and Neville took seat, with Harry joining them.

"Wasn't too terrible. Bit lonely actually. Dumbledore just sat there watching me, but he wouldn't talk. I guess he wanted me to concentrate or something."

"Wish I had lessons without Snape." Neville grumbled ladling soup into his bowl. "He loves to pick on me for some reason. I'm like his personal punching bag."

"You could always piss him off enough so that he attacks you." Harry

shrugged. "It worked for me."

Neville smiled and shook his head, suggesting he wasn't nearly brave enough to even attempt it and that Snape was likely to hex him or worse.

"Why did I ever let you talk me into taking Arithmancy?" Ginny Weasley snapped at Hermione as she took a seat next to her bushy haired best friend. "I have to read three chapters and write an essay on the formulaic equations that are used in basic spell work. It's mental."

"As I recall, you said you didn't want to skate along and do everything easy." Hermione replied, looking at the redhead with a strange grin of satisfaction.

"I should have just done Runes and called it good." Ginny sighed, reaching for a bowl of crisps. "Do you take Arithmancy, Harry?"

"No." Harry said. "I thought it looked to be challenging, and I get distracted easily."

"No you don't." Hermione argued. "I watched you in Transfiguration."

"You've been watching me?" Harry smirked, making Hermione go scarlet.

"Just how closely do you watch me?"

"You told me you barely look at him." Ginny added, obviously reveling in her friend's clear discomfort.

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" Hermione snapped at Harry.

"And don't you say anything Neville." Hermione pointed a slender finger at the boy who was leaning forward to add his comments. Neville simply smiled, trying to keep from laughing.

Harry was kept from retorting as two girls approached. Harry recognized them both as being from Ravenclaw, but he couldn't think of their names.

He had spoken with them, but he hadn't had any interaction since that nearly disastrous breakfast the week before.

"Hey Hermione." the Asian girl said. "Are we still on for studying after

dinner?"

"Of course Su.' Hermione smiled brightly. "I'll bring my notes and we can compare them. I think we can get that Charms essay done in no time."

"Brilliant." Said the Indian girl. "We'll see you tonight then. Bye Harry."

"Bye." Harry smiled and when they were gone he looked at Hermione.

"Made some new friends have we?"

"Yes, and it's really because of you. Mandy and I got to know each other, and she's been talking about me to the other Ravenclaws. They caught me in Arithmancy yesterday and asked if I'd be a part of their study group. To be honest though, I think they're just being nice to me to get close to you."

Harry shrugged. "Even if they are, it still might have the added bonus of actually becoming friends. At least they're taking the time. If they start asking about me just change the subject or say that you don't know."

"So the First Task is just a week and a half away," Ginny said, leaning forward so she could see past Hermione. "How are you feeling?"

Harry saw Neville look intently at his soup. He heaved a sigh and looked at Ginny. "I don't know how I should feel. I definitely feel anxious, but I'm not sure if I should be scared or what, you know?"

"Because you don't know what you're doing yet?" Ginny asked interestedly.

"Exactly." Harry said. It's hard to prepare for something when you have no idea what's coming. Cedric's been helping me and teaching me loads of new spells, which is great, but is it what I'm going to need? What if whatever I end up facing is something that I can't use magic against?"

Neville coughed, choking on a mouthful of soup.

"I'm sure everything will be fine." Hermione said. "Dumbledore's not about to let anything bad happen to any of the champions."

"Yeah, but he can't prevent what he can't foresee." Harry smiled, rising from his seat. "I'll see you guys, I've got to head to Runes."

"What did that mean?" Ginny asked watching Harry's retreating form.

"Does he know something we don't?"

Again Neville choked on his soup.

"Maybe you should try not to inhale it, Nev." Ginny said helpfully as Neville wiped at his face with a napkin, hiding his face to keep from being asked questions.

Harry darted out of the Great Hall and was about to sprint up the stairs when he collided hard with something that let out an indignant shriek, followed by a flurry of what Harry recognized to be French.

"Petit scélérat stupide! Vous êtes aveugles ? Quelle est la question de tha avec vous, vous le petit garçon fou ?"

Harry got to his feet and saw that he had run straight into the French girl who was one of the contestants in the tournament. She had given him nasty looks during the Wand Weighing ceremony, and whenever he had seen her during meals she usually looked quite stuck up.

The girl standing next to her was laughing her head off as she helped the older girl to her feet.

"I'm sorry." Harry said. "I was in a hurry and I wasn't looking."

"Le séjour de ma voie, enfant. Si vous ne pouvez pas même faire l'attention à où vous entrez dans l'école, comment pouvez-vous vous attendre rivaliser avec moi ?" the statuesque gorgeous blonde sneered, moving past Harry, clearly not caring to hear his apologies.

Harry watched her go with puzzlement, before turning to head off to his class, before stopping short as the younger blonde girl was standing in front of him with a very pretty smile on her face.

"Bon jour." She said, offering her hand. "I am Gabrielle."

"Uh, Hi. Harry, Harry Potter."

But of course I already know who you are." Gabrielle smiled. "My sister hasn't been able to stop talking about you. You've really angered her."

Harry looked at her oddly and then it clicked.

"That was your sister?"

"Fleur, oui." Gabrielle nodded. "She was sure she could compete against two boys. But you have stolen her moments, as she is so fond of saying. She wasn't even mentioned in the paper, none of the other champions were."

"What? Really?" Harry asked, plainly surprised. He'd not read any of the papers regarding the tournament, so he had no idea what they said.

"That's terrible reporting I would think they'd try and get all the facts and report an unbiased and accurate story. Isn't that what they're there for?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "If I were you, I'd try to stay out of her way. She may not look it, but she is quite powerful, and if you really make her mad, she can be vraiment dangerous."

"GABRIELLE!" Fleur shouted from the doors of the Great Hall, looking very angry. Harry swore that her silvery blonde hair was wavy as if there was a light breeze blowing it back.

"I had better go. It was very nice speaking to you Harry Potter. I hope that we may do it again."

"I'd like that." Harry smiled. "Goodbye, Gabrielle."

"Au revoir, Harry Potter."

Harry watched the young French girl go until she reached her older sister who began talking very fast in French. Harry couldn't help but smile as he thought of talking to Gabrielle again. He really liked her heavy French accent, and wondered what it would sound like for her to whisper his name in his ear as he....

"Runes!" He said, bringing himself back to the real world.

As he had promised, Harry met Hannah in the Entrance Hall right after his Runes class. She had already dumped her books in her common room and agreed to go with Harry so he could drop off his things as well.

"You're the first visitor I've had to my rooms." Harry grinned as he opened the door. Hannah giggles softly at Harry's remark and followed him inside. Harry dumped his books on the small table in front of the sofa and told Hannah to sit while he retrieved a hooded sweatshirt.

"How do you stand how cold it gets in the castle?" Harry asked. Hannah shrugged.

"The classes are usually pretty warm, and so are our common rooms." she said.

"So, where are we going on our little adventure?" Harry asked, escorting her back into the hall.

"Wherever our feet carry us." She smiled playfully.

They began walking along, the conversation hanging on classes at first, but then leading into questions about how each grew up, which then led into a few more personal questions.

"So, are you going to ask Tracey Davis out?" Hannah asked after Harry finished a story about his first fishing trip with Sirius which ended with his godfather falling in the lake because he couldn't work the boat's motor.

"Why are you so interested?" Harry asked, looking into Hannah's blue eyes.

"Every girl is interested." Hannah answered honestly. "You remember I told you there are a lot of girls interested in becoming your girlfriend, right? I even overheard a couple of fifth year girls talk about slipping you a love potion. So, maybe be careful about taking food or drinks from

anyone."

"Why is everyone so interested in who I like?" Harry shook his head. "It's not like I'm the only boy in this school. I mean, as far as anyone knows, I'm only here until the tournament ends, right?"

"I'd forgotten about that." Hannah admitted.

"So, does it really make sense for me to get involved with someone long term and then have to go away? We both get hurt that way, right?"

"I never thought of that." Hannah nodded. "So you're going to just date around?"

"I'm going to make a lot of friends and maybe take a few different girls out. I'm not going to rule anything out, because if one of those girls happens to be something really special, it'd be kind of a shame not to pursue her. But who knows? I mean, I've been here only a week. Let me pose a question to you though."

Hannah looked up and listened as Harry took a breath.

"Say there's a guy here in school, someone who's been in front of you all this time, but is too shy to approach you..."

"Someone likes me?" Hannah's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

"Who?"

"Neville." Harry said with a smile. Hannah's own smile faltered.

"Longbottom?"

"What's wrong with him?" Harry asked, getting a bit defensive.

"Well, nothing, I guess. I just never thought about him. I mean, I guess he's okay looking, kind of a dumpling though, you know?"

"You mean he's fat?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Not fat, just chubby. Plus, he's not very smart is he?"

"Actually, he's quite smart. He just has a serious lack of confidence. I think Neville's got it in him to surprise a lot of people. He seems to like

you. Nearly fainted when I introduced you two this morning."

"He's so shy." Hannah sighed.

"Likely due to the fact that he gets picked on so much. Look, I'm not saying that you'll fall madly in love with the guy and spend the rest of your lives together. All I'm saying is..."

"I could be missing a great friend." Hannah smiled. She and her friends had heard Harry say this before.

"Or, he could end up being your greatest love. The one you end up telling your grand children all about." Harry smirked and shrugged.

"Tell you what." Hannah said unfolding her arms and hooking one with Harry's and pulling him along the corridor. "I will give some serious thought into talking to Neville Longbottom if you win the first task!"

"And what if I get killed?" Harry asked with a worried smile.

"Then he'll be my date to your funeral." Hannah grinned. "Do you know what you're going to do?"

"Not yet." Harry sighed. "After dinner, I'm going to do a bit of research. I got Cedric working out with me and Neville, and he's been helping me learn some new spells. I think I'll be okay, but it doesn't make the anxiety I'm feeling lessen. I'll be glad when it's over, you know."

They continued their walk, Hannah occasionally asking probative questions about Neville, most of which Harry had no answer for and he encouraged her to ask the boy himself.

They walked to dinner together and sat with the other fourth year Hufflepuffs. Harry thought he saw Susan, who was obviously feeling better now, give a veiled look of jealousy as he and Hannah took their seats.

After dinner, in which Ernie, Zach and Justin told Harry that they had spoken to both Flitwick and McGonagall about the creation of a broom

racing course and both professors intrigued at the idea, Harry headed up to the library to learn all he could about dragons.

He was in the midst of pulling a few books when he heard a soft voice behind him.

"What?" Harry said as he turned to face a petite girl with shoulder length curly brown hair.

"I-I said hi." She said.

"Hi, uh... I swear I know your name..." Harry said, giving an apologetic smile.

"Mandy." She said. "I'm a Ravenclaw. We met last week."

"Right, you're the one who talked to Hermione. Thank you by the way. I think she enjoyed it."

"She's very nice. I feel bad I didn't try to get to know her before now. It's kind of funny, we don't live that far apart. I think it'll be nice this summer if we can get together. It'll be really nice because all of my neighbors are muggles, and it'd be cool to be able to talk magic with another witch."

"Don't you see your other friends during the holidays?" Harry asked, turning back to the stacks to find more books on dragons.

"Not really. I got to go to the Quidditch World Cup with Su and her family, but that was really the first time I've seen any of my friends outside of school. That's a lot of books, do you need help?"

Harry smiled and thanked her as she took a few books out of his arms.

"You're really interested in dragons." She remarked, looking at some of the titles. Her head snapped up and her eyes grew large. "Is that what the first task is?" Her already soft voice fell to a whisper.

Harry's shoulders shot up and he looked to make sure no one had heard, though how they could have with how quiet Mandy's voice was, he

couldn't be sure.

"A rather large bird let it slip to my godfather." Harry whispered to her.

"Don't tell anyone. Seriously, it could get a lot of people in trouble."

Mandy nodded and then helped Harry pull a few more tomes. "Do you know what you have to do?"

"No." Harry said honestly. "But I'm pretty sure no matter what it is, I'm going to have to subdue it to accomplish whatever I need to do."

"Well, that'll be tough." Mandy said, walking to a small table hidden in a corner of the library with Harry. "Dragons are really tough."

"Tell me about it." Harry nodded opening DRAGONS: Nature's Nobility. "I know that their only real weak point is their eyes, but how am I supposed to hit it? That's taking the risk of really angering it, you know?"

"Definitely." Mandy nodded. Harry noticed that Mandy had a small smile at the corner of her mouth that gave her a small dimple in her left cheek. She kept brushing locks of her brown hair behind her ear as she read.

Harry smiled to himself. Mandy was really cute.

"I hear you fly pretty well, you could do that." Mandy suggested.

"To what end?" Harry asked. "No, I think my best bet is to figure a way to subdue it."

"You could try stunning it, but again, you're talking about trying to hit it in the eye, and they're pretty defensive of their eyes. That's why they keep moving their heads." Mandy said with a sad smile.

"Exactly." Harry nodded. "The problem is I can't exactly figure out what I should do until I know what it is I have to accomplish, which I probably won't find out until I'm about to do it."

"You know what you should focus on?" Mandy said looking up at Harry, her cheeks coloring when he met her gaze. "Transfiguration. You can make just about anything with Transfiguration. You could even conjure a

giant cage to keep the dragon trapped."

Harry's eye lit up as he smiled. "That's not a bad idea at all." Harry nodded. He sat back, making a mental list of things that might prove useful in fighting a dragon that he could transfigure, assuming there would be something he could alter to suit his needs.

"Maybe you could ask McGonagall to give you a few good transfiguration tips." Mandy suggested.

"Thank you." Harry beamed, making Mandy blush furiously. Harry leaned over in his seat and kissed her cheek quickly, making Mandy's blush deepen.

"Anytime."

"No, I mean it. That's bloody brilliant. If I can't think of anything else to do, I can always trap it. That will at least limit its movement. Then it's just a matter of doing whatever I have to do, and if it turns out that I'm supposed to subdue it... problem solved! Genius! Thank you."

Mandy just continued to smile and blush, but Harry was packing up the books he'd just pulled.

"Would you have breakfast with me tomorrow?" Harry asked as he rose from his seat.

"Sure." Mandy shrugged. "That'd be nice."

"Great. I see you around seven thirty then. I have to go find Professor McGonagall." Harry said excitedly.

"Go." Mandy smiled sweetly. "I'll put these away."

"Are you sure?"

"Go. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thank you again." Harry grinned, kissing her cheek again and leaving the library. Mandy watched him go, her hand lightly brushing her cheek where he'd kissed her and smiling to herself.

"Wow."

Mandy turned, her cheeks flushing.

"Two kisses in less than five minutes." Lisa Turpin smiled.

"How long were you watching?" Mandy asked sounding deflated and truly embarrassed.

"Long enough. Listen. I swear I won't say anything to the others.

Especially given how many girls would kill you if they saw what I had just seen. But you have to promise that I get to be your maid of honor at your wedding."

"Oh shut up and help me put these away." Mandy rolled her eyes. Lisa sweet forward and grabbed half the pile, making smart comments as she followed Mandy into the stacks.

"So she said she'd think about talking to me?" Neville asked for clarification as he Cedric and Harry ran the pitch the next morning.

"But if I die, then she said you'll be her date to my funeral." Harry smirked.

"Hey, sounds like a sure thing to me Nev.' Cedric quipped, and Harry gave him a shove, making Cedric laugh.

"Don't put yourself through any trouble, Harry.' Neville joked, making Harry laugh now.

"I'll be lucky the way Cedric's been training me." Harry chuckled.

"Hey, you asked me to help."

"Yes. Help, not kill." Harry said making Cedric roll his eyes.

"I'm toughening you up." He grinned. "You'll thank me one day."

"Only if it ends up saving me." Harry replied dryly.

"Seriously, have you two figured out what you're going to do? The First Task is like next week."

"We've decided that we're not going to tell each other what we're doing.'

Cedric said flatly. "We're going to keep working together, but just keep our tactics to ourselves."

"I'm just trying to survive." Harry said matter-of-factly. "Cedric is trying to win, and I don't want to take that away from him. He wanted to be in this thing, not me."

Neville nodded in understanding. "Well, I'm rooting for both of you."

"Thanks." The two champions said together.

They finished their run and headed back up to the castle, Neville continuing to ask after Hannah with Harry repeating that he just talk to her himself. Neville kept shaking his head, his face burning bright. Cedric encouraged Neville telling him he would gain nothing by being afraid. Harry showered, changed and gather his books for the day, heading to breakfast. He really wanted to thank Mandy for her suggestion. He had rushed to Professor McGonagall's office and had a lengthy conversation about different transfiguration spells. When Harry had left her office an hour later, he had a long list of spells to work on over the next week. He was less anxious now, and feeling like he was actually training for what lay ahead.

"Hi." Mandy smiled softly as Harry approached her.

"Good Morning." He said, motioning for her to follow. "Do you know any of the Hufflepuffs?"

Mandy shook her head, keeping her eyes low.

"Well, let me introduce you then."

They came to the spot where the fourth years were sitting and Harry made introductions as he and Mandy sat down. Harry noticed right away how uncomfortable Mandy looked. He figured she was shy, but at the moment she mad Neville look like... well him. To make matters worse, none of the Hufflepuffs were really paying her any attention.

Harry caught Hannah's eye, and gave her a meaningful look, and gestured ever so slightly to Mandy, who had kept her eyes focused on her plate.

"Mandy, how did you meet Harry?" Hannah asked, and nodded when Harry mouthed a thank you.

"He's in my Runes class, and potions, as well." Mandy's voice was very soft that everyone had to strain to hear her. "Well, until that whole thing with Snape last week."

"Mandy helped me with a very large looming problem last night, and I wanted to thank her." Harry said proudly, nudging Mandy and making her smile that adorable little half smile that gave her dimples.

Before conversation could continue, a great big brown owl landed before Harry and presented it's leg. Harry's smile grew exponentially as he retrieved the envelope the bird carried, grabbing his goblet to keep it from being knocked over as the bird took flight again.

"What's that?" Justin asked.

"It's a letter, sweetie." Sally Anne smiled, patting her boyfriend's shoulder, making the other's laugh and Justin to roll his eyes.

"Who's it from?" Hannah asked.

"My best friend." Harry grinned as he opened the letter.

"oh, can we hear it?" Hannah asked excitedly.

"Hannah, It's private." Susan scolded.

"Not really. Listen up..."

Harry,

I'm still trying to understand everything you wrote about. I remember you talking about wanting to go to Hogwarts, so congratulations on accomplishing it, though Salem's not going to be as much fun without you there with me, and I know that Stacy's going to be upset. You should write her. Better she hear it

all from you than me, or headmistress Blaylock.

To be honest, I had no idea what this tournament was about, so I asked my granddad. He told me all he knew about it, and I got to tell you dude, I do not envy you on iota. No way. Though if you win the thing, you have to buy me something totally awesome. How about a racing broom so I can finally kick your butt! Someone needs to before your head gets too big to fit in the dorm. Ha ha.

So on to important things. I want to know about the girls. You mentioned a few in your letter and I gotta ask if you've...

"We can skip that part." Harry chuckled.

"Oh come on." Susan said. "If you've what?"

"Oh now who's prying." Hannah smirked.

Breaks been pretty boring. I just went home as usual. Though I was looking forward to hearing about your hang gliding trip. Yeah, Imagine my shock when I get an international owl at breakfast one morning. Mom didn't believe it was from you until I showed her the letter.

I'm looking forward to getting back to school. By the way, I asked out Kelly Whitney, and now we're a couple. I couldn't believe it when she said yes.

Turns out, she's kind of liked me for awhile now. I plan on taking your godfather's advice and taking it slow, but treating her the best I can. I gotta tell you though, I don't think I've ever felt as nervous as I do when I know I'm going to see her again. Not even that time we got caught...

"And you don't want to hear about that either." Harry grinned.

"Now I really want to know." Zacharias said throwing his hands in the air.

"Yeah mate, you can't build us up like that and leave us on the edge of our seats." Justin said, getting an elbow in his ribs and a glare from Sally Anne. "You've got to stop elbowing me, love." Justin grinned, earning him

a kiss.

"Sorry, but it's the most easily accessible." Sally Anne smirked.

Anyway, I don't have a lot to say in this letter, and I didn't want to leave you high and dry. Write me soon, and tell me all about the girls. Even better, send me some pictures. I'd love to see the kind of witches England has to offer.

Maybe I'll transfer. Ha ha!

Seriously, I want to hear all about what's going on over there. I know there's going to be a lot of people who miss you, and I definitely will. Keep your eyes up and your ass down, or was it the other way around?

Write soon.

Mark

"He sounds like he's a lot of fun." Megan smiled from her seat next to Ernie.

"Oh hell yeah." Harry smirked. "I wish there was someone here I could compare him to, but to be honest I don't know everyone here well enough to make a good comparison. Suffice to say he's a real good guy."

"Maybe you can get him over here to watch the tasks?" Susan suggested.

"I've thought about that." Harry said. "I keep forgetting to ask Dumbledore about it. I'll get him to send some pictures of my friends so you can all see them."

"We'd be happy to take some pictures so your friends can see what we're like." Hannah smiled and the others nodded. "We can get that kid, Colin Creevey to do it. He's always got that camera."

"That'd be great." Harry smiled in thanks.

"On one condition." Hannah smiled evilly. "Tell us what you and your friend got caught doing."

Harry's cheeks went red and he got up from the table. "Well, this was great, but I really don't want to be late for class. I'll see you guys later!"

"HARRY POTTER!" Hannah Susan and Megan called after the quickly retreating boy.

11. Chapter 11

Harry had been working and focusing all his energies on the coming Task. So much so that he'd inadvertently isolated himself. Between classes, he had his nose stuck in the pages of Advanced Transfiguration, trying to memorize incantations for the Task. He always sat at the end of the Hufflepuff or Gryffindor tables, as they were closest to the door, and eat as fast as he could so he could rush back to the Library to catch up on his homework and look up more Transfiguration and Charms spells.

Hermione Granger was often seen with him in the Library, and more than a handful of rumors started that the two were seeing each other romantically. Hermione always told anyone who asked that she was only helping Harry do research and that he barely spoke to her while they worked.

The only people other than Hermione that Harry spoke to at length were Neville and Cedric during their morning runs. Though Harry was only really half present during those times, as his mind kept creating images of giant fire-breathing dragons chasing him while the whole of Hogwarts laughed and pointed at a smoldering Harry Potter.

Harry had been so deeply focused that he'd managed to actually upset a few people whom he'd ignored over the past week, which was brought to his attention the afternoon before the First Task.

Harry was walking towards the Great Hall for Dinner, his eyes focused on his Transfiguration book as he examined a chapter on creating walls.

Harry thought it a good idea to be able to conjure up stone walls to hide behind when the dragon decided to roast him alive.

"Harry?"

"I can't use a wooden wall, that's stupid. I may as well just tie myself to a spit and let the dragon rotisserie me." Harry thought.

"Harry."

"I need brick or stone. But the main thing is to make a place so I can hit the damned thing."

"HARRY!"

"What?" Harry looked up in exasperation, nearly dropping his book as he turned to face whomever was calling him.

Tracey Davis was standing there looking very angry. Daphne Greengrass was standing behind her looking very apologetic.

"Tracey, you're being ridiculous." Daphne hissed.

"Two weeks, Potter. Two weeks." Tracey snapped, her eyes narrowed as she pointed her finger at Harry. "I know that you're a boy, and as such can be a little on the slow side, but TWO WEEKS?"

"I, uh...I..." Harry stammered, looking to Daphne for some sort of clue.

Unfortunately, the blonde could only shake her head.

"Did I do something wrong?" Tracey asked her eyes pleading. "I mean, I thought we had a good time together. But then, you stopped talking to me!"

"I did?" Harry looked surprised. "I didn't mean to. I just got really busy."

"But not to busy to flirt with every other pair of breasts in the school."

Tracey said accusingly. "I even heard that you snogged Luna Lovegood... AGAIN!"

Harry couldn't help but smile. Luna had once again cornered him last Friday. He had been on his way to his room to work on his homework before Dinner, when Luna had stepped out of an alcove in his path.

"Hello, Harry Potter." She had smiled in her dreamy sort of way.

"Hi, Luna." Harry said looking up from his book, starting to pass her by. Luna

immediately stepped in his way. Harry bumped into her and apologized quickly.

"My apologies, Harry, but it's been pointed out to me on several occasions that when I kissed you I may have done it wrong."

"Uh, I don't think that's true." Harry smiled, remembering how she had lunged at him and locked her sweet, soft lips with his.

"That's very nice of you." Luna said, cocking her head to the side, a the barest hint of a smile on her face. And then, just like before, she lunged at him, her arms wrapping around his neck and her lips connecting with his. Harry felt his hands go limp, his books falling to the floor as he clutched her waist.

This time, Luna's lips massaged Harry's gently, and after a few seconds, her tongue sought entrance. Harry wrapped his arms around Luna's waist. The kiss lasted a very long time, and Harry began to really enjoyed Luna's hands in his hair.

And then, just as quickly as it began, the kiss ended, leaving Harry a bit breathless.

"So?" He asked expectantly.

Luna looked at him thoughtfully for a few moments before shrugging. "Very nice, but still... I don't know what the big deal is about. Maybe we should try it with no clothes on, like Su Li said."

Harry felt his face burn and he quickly bent to pick up his books.

"Luna, I think you did it perfectly. Maybe you're just not attracted to me in that way? Maybe that's why you're not feeling anything."

Luna thought about that for a few moments before slowly nodding. "I suppose that's a possibility." She said after a few minutes. "It could also be that I'm suffering from wrackspurts. Goodbye."

Harry watched her go, bemusement on his face. It was clear that he was never going to get used to Luna, and he only hoped that if he did get a girlfriend, she

would not ambush kiss him like that. It could make things very difficult for him.

Harry realized too late that his smiling over the memory was the wrong thing to do. Tracey's eyes narrowed at once and she stepped closer.

"So, it's true? You kissed that freaky little wench?" Tracey snarled, which made Harry take a step back from her, his eyes widening in fear.

"Um...actually she kissed me. But, what difference does it make?" Harry asked, still confused.

"What difference?"

"Oh, boy." Daphne heaved a sigh, her hand going to her forehead.

"I'll tell you the difference. I have been waiting very patiently for you to ask me out, or at least ask me out on another date. But you've completely ignored me for the last..."

"Two weeks?" Harry asked unhelpfully. Tracey's eyes narrowed more dangerously.

"Am I not good enough for you? Is that it? Do you only go after girls who surprise you in the halls and snog your brains out?"

"Could you just calm down and explain to me exactly what it is you're talking about?"

"US! You and me!" Tracey shrieked. "Are you just some jerk who dates a girl and dumps her because you didn't get to second base or whatever bizarre metaphor you neanderthals use?"

Harry looked over Tracey's shoulder to see Daphne still shaking her head in exasperation. He turned back to Tracey, who had all but closed the gap between them.

"What is it that's going to open your eyes?" Tracey snapped. She suddenly grabbed the front of Harry's robes and kissed him very hard. She held him for a long, tense moment and released him, huffing. "There! Maybe

that got through that thick head of yours!"

With that, she brushed past him and went into the Great Hall Leaving him even more confused than he had been when she'd initially started yelling at him. Daphne stepped a bit closer to Harry, who was watching the auburn haired girl stomp into dinner.

"Just so I'm clear here..." Harry said not looking at Daphne, who had her arms folded over her chest.

"She's been waiting for you to ask her out, yeah. You haven't talked to her since your date, and she's been getting herself all riled up, thinking you just wanted to use her or something."

"I didn't..." Harry began, turning to Daphne, who shrugged.

"I tried to tell her that. Any boy who wanted to just use her wouldn't have tried to fix the date that got screwed up by someone else, or hex the person who had actually caused the date to go wrong in the first place. I also pointed out that you've barely talked to anyone this past week."

"Does she know that she could have come talk to me at anytime?" Harry asked, starting for the Great Hall with Daphne in tow.

"Don't think I didn't tell her that. She's proud. And extremely stubborn."

Daphne stopped Harry, grabbing his arm. "She's my best friend, and I don't want her to get hurt. So, if you're just stringing her along..."

"Stringing her..." Harry looked dubiously at Daphne. He sighed and let his shoulders fall a bit. "Look. I didn't realize that she took the date so seriously. I thought we were just having a nice time getting to know one another."

"I think she was fine with the date." Daphne said flatly. "It was the fact the you stood up for her with Pansy. That meant a lot to her."

"I would do that for any of my friends." Harry said emphatically and Daphne smiled a soft smile. "And besides, I'm only going to be here for

the Tournament. How could she, or any other girl, want to start a relationship that's doomed to begin with?"

"Because it's better to have loved and lost and all that." Daphne shrugged than she looked pointedly at Harry, who was watching Tracey spoon roast potatoes on her plate. "Harry, just keep in mind that a lot of girls who you talk to or spend time with might be thinking the same as Tracey. You're going to end up breaking a lot of hearts, Harry. Try and keep it in mind in the future."

Daphne turned and went off to the Slytherin table, leaving Harry completely flummoxed.

"Harry?" Hermione grabbed his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah." Harry said, then shook his head. "No. I don't know. Hermione, do you want to date me?"

"What?" Hermione asked, looking stunned. "Are you asking me out?"

"What? No." Harry shook his head, then felt really bad at the sight of Hermione's expression. He took a deep breath and attempted to center himself before he tried again. "No, that's not what I meant." Harry said apologetically. "I just... Tracey just yelled at me because I haven't asked her out again, or to be my girlfriend. I didn't even know she liked me that way. I just thought we had a nice time together, and then..." Harry made an expanding gesture with his hands while making an explosion sound.

"Oh." Hermione's smile returned. "I thought you weren't sure how you felt about her."

"I'm still not, but according to Daphne, she's been waiting for me to ask her out. She's also mad that I haven't talked to her since we went out last time."

"Does she know that she could have talked to you?" Hermione looked puzzled.

"That's what I said." Harry replied shrugging. "The more I learn about girls, the less I actually know."

"We are a highly complex and ever changing creature." Hermione smiled superiorly. She headed towards the Gryffindor table where Ginny and Neville were already eating and talking. Hermione sat down and Ginny passed her a platter of pork chops.

"You know, this wasn't a problem at Salem." Harry grimaced. "I was never this popular, and I was always pursuing the girls. Or rather, one girl."

"You had a girlfriend?" Ginny asked. Harry only now noticed that the redhead was sitting next to Hermione, and she was looking very interested. Harry wasn't really sure how he felt about Ginny. She was nice, there was no doubt. But she always looked at him like a lost puppy. It was rather annoying.

"No." Harry shook his head. "I thought I was close, though. I've been friends with Stacy for like a year, and right before my life got turned all upside down, I was trying to get up the courage to ask her to be my girlfriend. Everything felt simpler then."

"I don't know what you're complaining about." Ginny said. "Just about every boy in this school would give their arm to be so sought after by the female population."

"I guess." Harry shrugged. "But, what does it matter if you end up hurting people's feelings and they all end up hating you in the end?"

Ginny and Hermione sat back, neither of them knew what to say to that.

Harry grabbed a couple of dinner rolls and got up. "I'll see you guys later."

"Once again, he ends up making me think." Ginny said. "It never occurred to me that by picking one girl to be with, he'd end up ruining the friendships he's been cultivating."

"Well, only the people who weren't truly his friends to begin with."

Hermione said sadly. "Tracey should have at least waited until after the First Task. I'd be willing to bet he ends up wasting time trying to figure out what to do about the Tracey situation when he needs to keep focused on tomorrow."

"You're worried about him, aren't you?" Ginny sighed.

Hermione simply nodded, and Ginny grabbed her friend's hand and gave a reassuring squeeze.

"Me, too."

The morning of the First Task dawned with a overcast sky and a thick frost on the ground. Harry, Cedric and Neville had all agreed to skip their workout that morning, so Harry had a bit of a lie in, though he had barely slept the night before.

At eight o'clock the previous night, Professor Dumbledore had come to his quarters to give Harry his uniform for the Task, which consisted of something similar to running pants, a pair of boots that were very similar to his sneakers and a jersey with the Salem Academy Crest on the front and his name on the back. He had also received a letter from his Headmistress, which said that she and the rest of the school was firmly behind him and wished him the very best of luck.

Harry wished that Mark and Stacy and a few of his other friends could be there, but Dumbledore had said it would be a bit difficult to get them here to Hogwarts by the time the Task started, but that they would work on it for the next task.

Harry was excused from classes for the day, which he was quite thankful for, as he knew he'd be unable to concentrate with the task looming over him throughout the day. He decided to linger in his room at least until classes started, then he headed to the kitchens for a light breakfast.

When he finished his meal, Harry returned to his room, where he started another letter to Mark. He got as far as addressing the letter when he realized he had nothing new to tell his best friend, having written him just a few days ago. Harry was sure that Mark would enjoy the pictures, especially since they were mostly of the girls. Little Colin Creevey had proven to be most willing to take pictures, and had developed them and returned them to Harry, even going out of his way to create doubles, so Harry could keep some for himself.

Harry spent most of the day going over his plans in his head. He tried to imagine every kind of scenario that involved a dragon, and how he might handle it. He felt unprepared, despite having what he considered to be a solid plan.

At nearly five in the afternoon, there came a knock on his door. Harry rushed to the door and felt a wave of relief when he saw Sirius and Remus standing there beaming at him.

"How are you feeling, kiddo?" Sirius asked, embracing Harry firmly.

"Nervous." Harry answered honestly. "I just want to get it over with."

"Understandable." Remus said, also embracing Harry warmly. "But, you told us your plan last weekend, and like we told you then, it's good."

"Thanks." Harry said taking a seat on the couch before the fire. Remus and Sirius following, taking up the empty chairs. "But, I'm still nervous."

"It's okay." Sirius said. "Actually, I'd be more worried if you weren't nervous. The key is to keep your focus. Tune out the crowds and concentrate on what you need to do here tonight."

Harry nodded. And his godfather and Remus turned the conversation away from the coming Task. An hour later, a house elf arrived with platters of food for them, much to Harry's surprise, until Sirius explained that he and Remus had spoken to Dumbledore before they'd come to his

room, and that the Headmaster had promised to make sure they had a private dinner.

Harry didn't eat much, being far too nervous, though Sirius and Remus did try to get him to eat more.

Finally, at a quarter to seven, Professor McGonagall arrived to escort Harry down to the grounds where the First Task was to take place. Harry, flanked by Sirius and Remus, followed the Deputy Headmistress down to a large tent. He got firm hugs from both men, who were told they could not enter the tent, and Harry entered to find the three other champions, all wearing similar uniforms to his own, each emblazoned with their school crests and their own names on the back.

"Hi, Harry." Cedric gave a nervous nod to Harry, who returned the gesture. Harry found the tent had a large open space, as well as four small rooms, each with a cot set up. Harry went and sat down on one and watched the three others.

The French girl, Fleur, simply sat on a cot, her legs crossed primly, one arm laying across her knees. She was nervously chewing on the nails of her other hand as she stared blankly at a spot on the ground.

Viktor, the Durmstrang champion, paced back and forth, rolling his shoulders and twisting his waist and moving his head, loosening himself up, Harry guessed. Occasionally, Viktor would glance at Harry, nodding at him when Harry would try and smile at him.

Cedric looked as nauseous as Harry felt. The tall blond boy kept standing and then sitting after a quick pace about the tent.

They could hear the noise of the crowd awaiting the beginning of the Tournament. The tent flap was flung open, and the Champions all turned to look as Rita Skeeter and her photographer entered.

"Well, now." She smiled her simpering smile that Harry felt didn't quite

reach her eyes. "Here we are, moments away from what promises to be a very dangerous and exciting event. Hundreds of people prepared to chant your names and scream with ecstasy when you are victorious, or weep over your corpses. What must you all be feeling?"

"Now, Rita!" Ludo Bagman said entering the tent followed by Dumbledore, Karkaroff and Madame Maxime. Once again Harry felt a pang of jealousy that his own Headmistress wasn't there. He would have liked it if she were there to stand beside him like the other champions.

"Miss Skeeter, I'm sure you know that the Champions Tent is off limits to the press." Dumbledore said pointedly.

"Indeed." Rita smiled and swept out without another word, though she winked at the champions. Harry thought her gaze had lingered on him a few moments longer than the others.

Once the annoying reporter was gone, Ludo Bagman gathered the champions around him, holding out a large sack in front of him.

"Inside this bag is a model of what you are about to face, attached with a number which will dictate the order in which you will go. Your task is simply to get the Golden Egg by any means you can. Now, ladies first."

Ludo held out the bag to Fleur, who looked nervously at her Headmistress before reaching into the bag and pulling out the model of the dragon, which turned to look at her scathingly as she opened her hand. It had a tag with a number two around its neck.

"The Welsh Green." Bagman nodded approvingly as he held the bag out to Krum, who stuck his hand in the bag and pulled out his own model dragon, a number three around its neck.

"The Chinese Fireball." Bagman smiled offering the bag to Cedric, who took a great breath and fished in the bag drawing out a rather sleepy looking model dragon with the number one.

"Swedish Short Snout, very nice." Bagman said turning to Harry Potter.

"Which leaves..."

Harry stuck his hand into the bag and gripped the tiny animated model of the dragon he would face. He opened his hand and stared at the tiny dragon, which shook itself out and stretched its tiny wings before turning to Harry and eyeing him coldly.

"The Hungarian Horntail. Now, when the gong sounds, Mister Diggory, just head out that way and when you have completed your task, you'll exit the other side of the arena. Then Miss Delacour, Mister Krum, and finally, Mister Potter. You will get your scores right after while the arena is being set up for the next champion. That's it, and good luck.

Remember, the sound of the gong."

Bagman left, with the Heads of each school following. Harry went back to his cot and stared at the tiny Horntail in his hand, looking it over carefully. As it was supposed to be an exact model, Harry felt it wise to get a good look at it so he had some clue what he was about to face.

The tiny dragon in his hand was a deep black with sinister gold eyes and loads of bronze colored spike along its spine and tail, which Harry felt would be just as dangerous as its front end. Harry wondered what its temperament would be like, as he knew that a few species were rather friendlier than others, though somehow, as he stared at the model, which was watching him in return, was likely not to be one of the nice dragons.

A gong sounded, and Harry looked up as Cedric rose from his own cot, pulled his jersey down, pulled his wand from his wrist holster, and without a glance back, march out of the tent.

For a moment, Harry thought about going to the entrance and seeing if he could watch, but he wasn't sure if it was allowed. That, and his legs felt shaky and he wasn't sure if he would be able to stand.

Ludo Bagman's voice came to them from somewhere outside the tent. He was commentating on the Task, though it was very bad. Harry and the others had no clue what was happening, though they heard the occasional angry roar of a dragon. The commentary was punctuated by light applause and cheers, until, after fifteen minutes, the crowds erupted in very loud cheers and Bagman shouted, "He's done it! He's done it!"

Harry felt a bit of relief. Cedric had made it past his dragon. Harry hoped that Cedric received good marks for his performance and that he would be in the lead by the time this was over. He really wanted Cedric to win, though Harry was a bit biased as he thought of Cedric as a friend.

After ten minutes, and Bagman announcing that Cedric's score was being posted, though he didn't announce them, the gong sounded again and this time Fleur rose to her feet. Harry found it amazing that, as she sat waiting, she had looked so nervous and fidgety. Yet, when the gong sounded, and the French Champion rose, her anxiety seemed to melt off and she looked as if she were made of stone. Just as had happened with Cedric, Harry heard Bagman commentating on Fleur's performance. This time however, the crowd was strangely silent, though Harry heard a few whistles. Even more surprising was the lack of noise from the dragon.

It seemed to drag on and on, and Harry found himself gazing at his watch. Finally after nearly twenty five minutes, the crowds erupted in cheers, and Bagman was heard saying, "I doubt our other champions will use such a unique way of dealing with their dragon. No doubt about that."

On the next gong, Viktor Krum took a deep breath and turned to Harry. "Good luck to you." Viktor said in a low rumbling voice, before he exited the tent, leaving Harry alone to listen to the raucous cheers of the crowd as the world famous Quidditch player took to the arena.

The roars of the crowds were nothing compared to those of the dragon.

Bagman seemed quite worried that Krum was going to get himself killed.

But then, after fifteen minutes, the cheers of the crowds and Bagman's exclamations of "Well done!" told Harry that Krum was now through.

Harry rose from his cot and shook himself out, hoping some of his anxiety would fall away. However, when he bent over to touch his toes, Harry felt like he was going to throw up. Taking several calming breaths, Harry stepped towards the tent's entrance and pulled his wand from his wand holster and closed his eyes, trying to center himself as he often did when trying to master a difficult spell. That's all this was. Mastering a very difficult spell.

The gong sounded and Harry opened his eyes. His heart pounded in his chest as he reached through the tent flaps and exited the safety of the Champions Tent.

Harry found himself in a small arena-like setting that was covered in sharp, craggy rocks. Harry turned and saw the stadium-like seating filled with students and spectators, all watching him in silence. Harry couldn't see the dragon, as the tent opened into a small pit. Harry needed to climb a small hill before he saw the dragon, who was apparently waiting for him.

Harry barely made it behind a large boulder when the Hungarian Horntail let loose a torrent of fiery breath that heated the boulder Harry was hiding behind to near molten. Harry's arms got burned from leaning against the stone.

Harry chanced a glance around the glowing stone and caught sight of a clutch of granite colored eggs that the Horntail was standing over protectively. In the center, Harry spied a hint of gold.

The Horntail stretched out its neck and roared angrily at Harry, its gold

eyes watching him very closely. Harry knew what he had to do now.

Giving the incantation, Harry pointed his wand around the boulder at some of the broken rocks on the ground.

Harry's confidence fell when he saw the long, thin chain that looked like it was only good for decoration. Harry had to move as the dragon let loose another blast of flame. The stone he'd originally hidden behind was still very hot, and Harry didn't like the idea of being cooked on it.

While the dragon was still attempting to melt the boulder Harry had been behind, Harry came round his new shelter and tried the incantation again, focusing harder to get the results he needed. Harry felt a rush of glee as a thick chain was formed from the broken stones near him. Harry levitated the chain up so it would wrap around the dragon and Harry could pull it away from the nest it was so protectively guarding.

The chain flew at the beast, which opened its mouth and caught the chain, shaking its head angrily, trying to kill the chain, which it saw as another threat. To Harry's great horror, the dragon managed to break the chain with its claws and teeth.

"Ok. I need something stronger." Harry said to himself. Moving fast as the Dragon turned its great head, roaring as it rearranged itself between Harry and the nest. It raked its great front claws on the ground, leaving long tears in the stone. It began moving its head back and forth watching the boulder Harry was now trapped behind, waiting for the intruder to show itself again.

Harry's heart was pounding in his chest now. Harry closed his eyes and took three deep breaths. Clutching his wand, he aimed it at the ground and very softly yet firmly spoke the spell one more time.

At once the mess of broken stones at his feet linked, expanded and formed a very heavy, long iron chain. Harry grinned and got to his feet,

and began to guide the new chains to fling around the dragon's neck, and begin to pull it away from the nest. The dragon reacted exactly as Harry had expected, and began roaring and clawing hard at the ground, trying to turn towards Harry, who had become a bit braver now that the dragon was being drug away and was coming out from behind his hiding place. Unfortunately, in all his satisfaction at getting the spell just right, Harry forgot about the dragon's tail. The Horntail twisted and it's long, spiked tail came crashing down, just grazing his shoulder, tearing his jersey and opening a long gash along his arm. Harry's concentration wavered, and the dragon broke loose from the heavy iron chain that had managed to drag it away a few feet from its nest. The Horntail turned and opened it's mouth, a burst of fire issuing forth, singeing Harry as he ducked out of the way and scrambled behind the largest boulder.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid." Harry thought, lightly touching his arm which stung badly. The dragon roared angrily and Harry felt the ground shake as it moved back to the nest. Harry knew he couldn't sit here forever and got to his feet again, flicking his wand at the heavy chains he'd conjured and watched from behind the safety of the boulder as he directed it to wrap around the dragon's neck again, this time making it pull the dragon down to the ground.

The Horntail shrieked and it's tail whipped around to flatten Harry. The teen was ready for this, though, and with another flick of his wand, the end of the chain not currently holding the dragon's neck shot up and wrapped itself around the tail, also pulling it to the ground.

Harry struggled to keep the dragon in check as the beast fought against the chains he was trying to subdue it with. Harry had never done anything so difficult, and found himself tiring with the effort. Harry wanted to transfigure more chains, but wasn't sure it would be wise to do

so, as he thought the dragon would break free while he made a new chain.

The beast stamped and clawed, trying to get out of the thick heavy chains, twisting it's head trying to get a clear shot at Harry, wanting nothing more than to burn him alive for daring to get near it's young.

"Come on, you big bitch." Harry said to himself, still struggling to make the chains hold the dragon down. "Stay down, please!"

Harry was sweating hard now, and he felt like he'd sprinted around the Quidditch pitch a thousand times. He'd never exerted himself this much in his life. Harry prayed that the dragon would just give up and let him take the damned egg so he could just go back to the castle and call it a day.

As if answering his prayers, the Horntail suddenly rolled over, it's struggles lessening up. Harry nearly fell over as the pull on his magic slackened. He thought the Horntail had just given up and Harry was about to shout out, but in the next moment, he realized what the beast had done.

It was exactly like he'd seen some nasty people do before in a game of tug of war. They had waited until the other team was pulling its hardest and then, they just let go, making the opposing team fall backward. The dragon had just done the animal equivalent, and when Harry's magic slackened, the dragon rolled back onto it's feet and turned towards Harry, who had been inching his way towards the nest all during their struggle. Harry didn't pause or turn to run. He pointed his wand at the ground and changed a mess of rocks into long, thick steel bars that rose up and drove themselves into the ground. Stopping the dragon from charging. More and more stones were altered and quickly followed their fellows, driving themselves into the ground, encircling the Horntail. The beast was

displeased and roared loudly, smashing its head into the first bars. And then, eyeing Harry angrily, spread its wings.

Harry was breathing hard now as he once again used his wand to grab a hold of the chain still wrapped around the dragon's neck, and transfiguring a few more stones, drove the new steel bars through the links of the chain, nailing it into the ground, keeping the dragon down. Having only one weapon left to it, The Horntail began spitting long pillars of flame at Harry, who chose not to wait around. Harry darted towards the nest and snatched up the heavy golden egg and sprinted over the uneven ground. His foot slipped and he crashed to his knees, tearing open the legs of his pants and cutting up his knees pretty good. Harry got his feet under him again as he heard the gut wrenching shriek of teeth and claws on steel as the furious dragon tore at the metal spikes keeping it away from its nest.

Harry ran through the exit, slamming hard into someone, who staggered back, but clutched Harry's arms to keep him from falling. Harry looked up and saw a look of sheer amazement on the face of Viktor Krum.

"I got it." Harry said stupidly as the Hogwarts matron came rushing up to him and began to check him over.

"Vell done." Krum said in his deep rumbling voice. He still had Harry by the arms, and it was a good thing, as Harry was swaying on his feet.

"Help me to get him to one of the beds." The nurse said worriedly. Harry felt his head swimming, and a chill that started in his spine and surged up to his brain.

"Harry!" Sirius shouted and Harry turned to look for his godfather, but everything was becoming dark, and Harry felt his body falling. A deep fathomless blackness embraced him a second later as Harry passed out.

The voices were distant at first. He couldn't understand them. There were

many. Though at times there was only two. He could also see a faint light in the distance. It was rather inviting, and he thought he'd like to see it up close.

It turned out that the light and the voices were connected somehow. The closer he got to the light, the clearer the voices became, until he could actually make out what the voices were saying.

"I wish he'd just wake up." A girl said. She sounded very familiar, though he couldn't identify the owner. "I'd feel so much better if he woke up. Then at least I'd know he was ok."

"Well, you heard Madam Pomfrey and the others. He exhausted himself. He was using some really advanced techniques. I'm still amazed by it all." Another voice said. Another girl.

"Ladies?" A third female called, much older sounding. "It is now dinner time. Off you go. You may return afterwards."

Dinner? Food sounded really good to him. He'd really like a hamburger. A huge, juicy burger with cheese and bacon and everything on it. And fries. A whole mess of fries. Wow that sounded amazing. Yeah, he was going to get a hamburger and fries. And a milkshake. How long had it been since he had a huge chocolate milkshake?

"Can you believe that?" Another voice asked. A male. Very familiar. In fact, he knew at once that it was Sirius. "He's got nearly every girl in the school checking in on him. Shame he's been asleep for it all."

"Yes, but those five have come everyday, and stayed for hours. Those five are very devoted to him. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them became his girlfriend before the end."

Remus. Remus was here as well. Sirius and Remus were here, and there were five girls who kept coming in to see him, and by the gods, he really wanted that hamburger.

The light became very clear and his eyes actually stung from it.

"Burger." Harry mumbled.

"Harry!" Sirius said, and Harry felt a weight settle on the bed next to him.

"Merlin, you gave us quite a turn there, lad. How are you feeling?"

"Hungry." Harry said sounding much more awake now.

"Move aside." Madam Pomfrey, a rather fussy looking witch said, pushing Sirius off Harry's bed. Harry tried to sit up, but the witch, who looked like she'd fall over if a good stiff breeze came along, showed a surprising amount of strength and held him down.

"You magically exhausted yourself, Mister Potter. You've been asleep for nearly three days now."

"Three days?" Harry asked, looking imploringly at Sirius and Remus who both wore identical looks of relief.

"You really overexerted yourself out there, kid. Using your magic to subdue that Dragon with magical chains. Incredible, but foolish. You should have just used the Conjunctivitus curse we told you about." Sirius said. "Still, you did put on one hell of a show."

"You took second place. Even Karkaroff gave you high marks. That's saying something, as he scored both Fleur and Cedric low." Remus remarked.

"Dumbledore was really impressed, as was the majority of the spectators. You've had a parade of visitors everyday since the Task." Sirius said as Madam Pomfrey stepped away.

"You'll need plenty of rest, and food, but I think you should be able to leave tomorrow evening. I wish to keep you here one more night and make sure you don't exert yourself." Pomfrey said sternly, before turning her back and walking away from the three men.

"The only thing I want to exert is my mouth. I need a big cheeseburger

with bacon and everything on it, fries and the biggest chocolate milkshake you can get me. In fact, make it two." Harry said looking to his godfather.

Sirius threw his head back and roared with laughter, while Remus chuckled along.

Half an hour later, Harry wrapped his hands around the biggest burger he'd ever laid eyes on and moaned in glorious satisfaction as he took his first bite. Sirius had gone to the kitchens and made a special request of the House elves. Though he didn't get two milkshakes, Harry was quite satisfied with the one Sirius showed up with. Sirius remarked that it would have been small to Hagrid.

As he ate, Remus and Sirius told Harry about all that had happened after the Task had finished. His godfather had thought he'd seen the first signs of Harry exhaustion when he began transfiguring the giant steel poles which kept the dragon back. Remus had know it before then, but had hoped he was wrong, as he'd never seen Harry cast anything before. He'd received perfect marks from Dumbledore, Madame Maixme and Bartemius Crouch, while Igor Karkaroff gave him a seven. Sirius commented that the Durmstrang Headmaster had scored Cedric and Fleur at three, while his own student had gotten a perfect ten.

They then told Harry of the many students who'd come to look in on him. "One of the girls kept apologizing. If I heard her correctly, she thinks that she's at fault for you being here. Something about yelling at you the day before the Task." Sirius quirked an eyebrow as Harry took a long, fulfilling slurp from the bucket containing the very tastiest milkshake he'd ever had in his life.

"I'm going to guess that was Tracey." Harry said, letting out a very obnoxious belch. "She was mad because I hadn't asked her out again, or

really talked to her. I just got so busy with the Task that I kind of ignored a lot of people."

"Well, I'd try to do better this time." Sirius said, folding his arms and leaning back in his seat.

"Speaking of which." Remus said. He nodded at the Golden Egg on Harry's bedside table. "The clue for the next task is in that. It's going to happen early in the morning on February the twenty-fourth. I'd suggest you begin working on it as soon as possible."

Harry nodded and, as he finished his meal, listened as Sirius and Remus told him about what the other Champions had done to get past their own dragons. Harry made a mental note to open the egg and start working out exactly what he was going to do so that he could spend the next two months getting ready.

Despite the roaring fire, he felt cold, and couldn't stop shivering. He desperately wished he could move himself closer to the fire at least, but He was most unfortunately dependent of his servant, who was off somewhere, most likely defiling the Jorkins woman. Ever since he'd destroyed her mind, his servant had spent nearly every night with her, the disgusting pervert.

Still, for now, he would allow it. So long as he continued to serve him correctly, he would not allow his serpent to feast upon the Ministry witch.

Suddenly the fire flared up and the flames turn green.

"Wormtail!" He called out. He heard the fat weakling running from somewhere below, his feet sounding heavy on the steps as he approached.

"Master?" Wormtail called as he entered the room, bowing low and averting his eyes as he came around the large chair.

"My loyal servant calls. Bring me closer to the fire so I may hear his report."

Wormtail gave a jealous look over his shoulder, noticing that the flames were now green. He quickly moved behind the chair and began sliding it forward towards the fire.

"Careful Wormtail. I will be most displeased if you cause me to fall." His voice was cold and threatening. He looked into the green flames and saw the face of his loyal agent looking very pleased. He bowed his head.

"My lord. The First Task is finished."

"It was over three days ago." He snapped angrily. "Why has it taken you so long to make your report."

"I beg your forgiveness, milord. I feared our plan had failed. The boy exhausted himself during the task. I feared he'd killed himself, but I have just gotten word that the boy is well. He is in second place now."

He listened to the report and thought very carefully about what he'd just heard. It wasn't the boy's power he wanted, but it was worth taking note of. After all, the boy was supposedly destined to be his end. He knew there was only one place to get his answer for the question that constantly repeated itself in his mind.

"Continue to monitor the situation, and report to me should anything change. Do not harm the boy or draw attention to yourself."

"As you wish, Milord." The servant bowed his head and withdrew from the flames. At once the green changed back to the warm orange and yellow fire it had been before.

"Milord, May I speak?"

"You may Wormtail." He said, breathing deeply as the fire warmed him now that he was much closer to the fire.

"Please do not misunderstand me, your plan is a good one. My only

concern is that you must wait so long. Surely if we found another suitable wizard, you could return to your full strength much sooner. It seems a waste of time for you to remain here as you are, suffering in this form."

"You would have me select any wizard? Any wizard would do, according to your thinking?" He asked, loving how Wormtail cowered under his glare.

"Surely we could find a powerful wizard suitable to your needs."

"It is true that I could select a powerful wizard and fashion a new body for myself. But I need the boy. For reason far too complex for your simple mind to comprehend, the boy must be the one. I only suffer because of your incompetence. Now, it is time for my feeding. You will milk Nagini at once. No go."

Wormtail bowed and left his master to his thoughts. He was now one step closer to reaching his goal. He would be resurrected and he would destroy the boy, solidifying his power once and for all. Then, he would finish what he'd started thirteen years ago. Very soon the world would tremble once again at the name of Lord Voldemort.

12. Chapter 12

"I'm telling you, not once!" Sirius threw his hands up in frustration.

"Never in his entire fourteen years has he ever complained of his scar hurting this badly. Yes, once or twice over the last three years he's mentioned a bit of a sting, but nothing like what he suffered last night. I mean, for Merlin's sake, the thing almost looked as if it had just been made."

Sirius and Remus were in the Headmaster's office the day after Harry had finally awoken. They had come to see the headmaster about an hour before Harry was to be released. Confident that Harry was fully recovered and would be well taken care of if the mischievous smile on

the auburn haired girls face was any clue, Sirius and Remus bade Harry good bye, promising that they would see him in the coming weekend. Once they had gained audience with Dumbledore, they explained how Harry had awoken during the night trembling badly and complaining about the severe pain in his scar as well as blabbering about having seen Wormtail tending to his master.

Dumbledore nodded, his left hand stroking his beard idly as he thought over all he'd just heard.

"It is most disconcerting that his scar bothered him so powerfully as well as the dream that accompanied it." the old Headmaster said reflectively.

"I confess that I am truly bewildered by it. That his scar paining him should also accompany what seems a vision as opposed to a dream..."

"I just wish he could have told us where it happened." Remus said sullenly. "Wormtail and Voldemort in one place..."

"It would have been most helpful. While Voldemort is still in this weakened state, capturing him would prove most effortless." Dumbledore looked wistful.

"How is it that Voldemort has returned in the first place?" Sirius asked, sitting in a chair once again. "I know that you said that day I took Harry that he might one day return, but how is it possible?"

"I have a theory, though I am not one hundred percent positive about it. I have spent every spare moment I could looking into my hypothesis. It has been enlightening, but unfortunately, I have nothing conclusive."

"You're not going to tell us, are you." Remus gave a chagrined smile and Dumbledore's mouth twitched mirthfully.

"At this time, I do not think it a good idea. I think, for the moment, our focus should remain on getting Harry through this tournament. Once we've accomplished that, we shall all gather for a very long discussion."

My sincerest hope is that it will be mostly historical in nature."

Dumbledore tried to smile, but both men noticed that there was no twinkle in his eye.

"You don't think it will be, do you?" Sirius said, sounding very dejected.

"No. I don't. And given the state of a few individuals, this troubles me more that it would have a few months ago." Dumbledore sighed.

"You're talking about Snape." Remus leaned forward. Dumbledore's eyebrows rose questioningly but he nodded. "Harry told us about what happened."

"He should have gone to Azkaban." Sirius grimaced. "I don't understand how you could have protected that bastard all these years."

"Have you forgotten that it was he who warned us of Lord Voldemort's interest in Harry?"

"No." Sirius shook his head. He lifted his head to look at Dumbledore sternly. "But one good deed does not correct a lifetime of wrongs, does it?"

"It was not a lifetime." Dumbledore said kindly. "You could have very easily been in his position, save for one or two differences, Sirius. Unlike Severus, you had good friends who inspired you to be the very best person you could be. Severus had one, whom he foolishly drove away, thanks in large part to his immature jealousy as well as his naivety in listening to his fellow Slytherins, who all felt that Lord Voldemort was the second coming of Salazar Slytherin himself. I will not deny that he tortured and murdered, nor I think would he. However, He started on the road to redemption the day he came to me, begging that I protect James and Lily."

"But he still served that blighter." Sirius started to argue.

"Do you remember when we started really countering Voldemort? All the

lives we were able to save near the end of the war? Do you have any idea how I knew of all the attacks in advance? It was Severus. He turned spy for our side, and it was because of him that the both of you are alive, as well as Amelia Bones, Moody, Augusta Longbottom, The Greengrasses, the entire Bobbin, Radford and Everard Lines, not to mention the countless muggles and muggleborns. Severus has repaid his debt."

"So why'd he attack Harry?" Sirius countered, looking unconvinced.

"Harry, I believe represents the very best and worst things in Severus' life. He is nearly a mirror image of James Potter, and for Severus it must be a horrible reminder of his time as a student here at Hogwarts, but I think it is Harry's eyes that hurt Severus the most. Imagine if you can looking into Harry's eyes and being reminded over and over again how you pushed away your only true friend. A friend that you love with all your being. I can think of no worse punishment."

"But the way he treats the students?" Remus tried. "My gods, Dumbledore..."

"Despite what many people believe of me, I have always been aware of how Severus treats those in his care. It seems every year I had to remind him that he was supposed to be a teacher. It was my deepest hope that he would just let go of the hate he clings to, and turn into the man I know lives deep within him. But I'm afraid the hatred he held for you two and James turned inward and has poisoned him. His assault of a student forced me to serve him notice. He is now on probation, and has until the end of the year to make a change, or he will be released from service."

"You're firing him?" Sirius looked surprised.

"It is not my desire to do so. Severus, for all his faults, would be ideally suited to step back into his role as spy for our side, should the need arise. I fear what may become of him if he is let go. He would not survive very

long. Those still loyal to Voldemort would try to kill him. He's been serving this school, and to their minds, me for the last thirteen years. A greater betrayal they would not be able to think of. Then there are the many former students he's taught." Dumbledore shook his head sadly and leaned back further in his chair, looking at both men in turn.

"I believe still that Severus can turn his life around, and I believe that all the ingredients for that change are now here at Hogwarts. He knows what's at stake, and I believe that he has at least looked down the road to redemption, thanks in part to our young Harry."

"Harry apologized for what happened?" Remus asked, looking awed.

"I have heard rumor that the two spoke at length in private. If the rumor is to be believed, Severus was quite drunk, and I seem to recall him suffering quite a hangover a few weeks ago. I must admit that I hoped by Harry coming here to Hogwarts, Severus might be able to find some peace with his past and let go of his own hatred."

"Wait a minute." Sirius said, holding up his hands as he rose out of his seat once again. "I hope that you're not about to ask us to apologize to him."

Dumbledore watched Sirius for several moments before he sighed heavily. "It is not only Severus that I worry over. You Sirius, have clung just as tightly to your own hatred of Severus as he has of you. Perhaps it is not only Severus who needs to let go of their hatred."

"I never murdered anyone!" Sirius barked and Dumbledore shook his head.

"Sirius, Calm down." Remus said grabbing hold of Sirius' wrist and forcing him back into his seat. Sirius looked for a moment like he was going to argue, but sat down.

"Apologize to that... That..."

"Sirius!" Remus shouted and his friend turned his angry eyes on the werewolf. "You can not honestly tell me that you do not regret how you treated Severus while we were at school. You've told me, and I've seen how you've raised Harry to despise bullies. You don't have to like him. But perhaps Harry has just shown you how well you've raised him. Perhaps the student has become the teacher."

"Oh how very enlightened of you." Sirius said sarcastically. However, Sirius' anger had clearly melted away and he sighed. "Alright. I'll think about it. But I think it can wait a bit."

"Very good." Dumbledore said, rising from his seat. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I do need to begin preparations for the Yule Ball. We're in talks to have the Weird Sisters as the band. It should give the students quite a thrill, I think."

After a few promises to talk again soon, and that they would be able to see Harry again any weekend they wished, Remus and Sirius left the castle for their home in the village.

Harry walked out of the Hospital wing with Tracey Davis at his side. He was finally allowed to rejoin the students nearly a week after the First Task. Harry was extremely happy to finally being able to leave Madam Pomfrey's care. He'd only been awake for two days of his stay, but found the matron to be a bit... overbearing.

It hadn't been all bad. Hermione, Neville, Ginny, Cedric and Cho, Hannah, Susan, Luna, Mandy, Su, Padma and Tracey had all come to look in on him, each giving a different perspective on the First Task. Well, everyone except Tracey who'd come to apologize for losing her head and shouting at him the day before the Task. She had clearly convinced herself that she was responsible for Harry's exhaustion.

Tracey had been with him most of the time he'd been awake. Harry

thought she would have skipped classes to stay with him a bit longer if Madam Pomfrey hadn't hovered as much as she did.

The two teens had really enjoyed the time they spent together, and Tracey was just as sweet and easy going as Harry had remembered her being before their first date. Harry did notice however, that Tracey got a bit tense when any other girl came to visit with him, and barely spoke while anyone else was present.

Still it was nice, and as he headed down to the Great Hall for his first dinner out of the Hospital wing, Tracey was chattering up a storm, keeping Harry smiling.

Harry got a bit of a surprise when he entered the Great Hall. Just as he and Tracey were about to find seats along the Slytherin table, a thin girl with sleek shining silvery blond hair stepped in front of him.

"Bon Jour, Harry Potter." Gabrielle Delacour smiled sweetly.

"Uh, bon jour... Gabrielle, right?"

"Oui. It is very good to see you out and about once again. How are you feeling?" She asked sweetly, looking into his eyes intently. Harry felt as if she was trying to hypnotize him or something, but all she seemed to be doing was angering Tracey.

"I'm good. Actually I don't think I've ever felt better. Forgive me, this is my friend Tracey Davis." Harry smile introducing the two girls. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought Tracey looked as if she was forcing her smile.

"Bon jour." Gabrielle smiled offering a friendly hand, which Tracey took.

"I wished to visit you before, but my sister thought it was improper, as we are not friends. It is something I wish to remedy, if you are not opposed."

"No." Harry smiled. "I don't believe you can have too many friends."

"May I join you?" Gabrielle asked. Harry looked at Tracey who was very

clearly forcing her smile now. Harry sighed inwardly.

"I would like that very much, however, I did promise to spend a bit of time with Tracey. Perhaps we could have breakfast or lunch tomorrow?"

"Oui. Très bien." Gabrielle smiled brightly and with two quick kisses to each of Harry's cheeks, Gabrielle returned to the Ravenclaw table. Harry watched her go and sit next to her sister Fleur.

"Shall we get something to eat?" Tracey asked, though most of her good mood was gone.

Harry followed the auburn haired girl and they sat next to Daphne and Blaise Zabini, who were enjoying their meal and discussing the latest charms assignment.

"So, Harry. Back from the dead?" Blaise said.

"So to speak." Harry smiled.

"You put on one hell of a show. I don't think many seventh years could have done what you did." Daphne remarked.

"It was basic transfiguration." Harry looked confused.

"Sure, the chains, but the way you controlled them and then the metal bars..." Blaise said, then gave an impressed whistle. "I can't even imagine the power you must have used to fight against that dragon. No wonder you passed out when it was over."

"Yes, we're all impressed by Harry's power." Tracey remarked. "Everyone's really impressed with Harry Potter."

"Oh no." Daphne muttered. Blaise rolled his eyes, setting his fork down as if he were preparing to run from the table.

"Ok." Harry said turning to Tracey. He was doing his best to keep his voice even and not get angry, but Tracey's sudden mood swing was going to get irritating. "Not even five minutes ago, you were in a great mood. What did I do?"

"How about flirting with that French trollop?" Tracey said scathingly.

"Flirting?" Harry looked surprised. "How was I flirting. She wants to be my friend."

"They all want to be your friend, Harry." Tracey said sweeping her arm around the Hall. "But that's not what I'm upset over. It's that you made a date with another girl while you were with me."

"I didn't make a date!" Harry said quickly, now looking incredibly confused. "I said I'd have breakfast with her. I didn't say 'hey let's go to the village and make out until our lips fall off'."

"You may as well have." Tracey snapped. "Let's not forget how you stared at the girls who came to visit you in the hospital wing. Like a starving man staring at a buffet."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked, though he wasn't even sure if he wanted to know. "You're talking like a crazy person."

"Oh boy." Daphne said from Tracey's side, her hand going to her face in apprehension. Harry looked at her then back to Tracey who looked ready to smack him.

"So now I'm crazy?" She said in a low, dangerous tone. "You know what Potter? I don't think I want to be around you anymore."

At this she got up and stormed out of the Great Hall, leaving a very bewildered Harry in her wake.

"Did we just break up?" Harry asked, turning to Daphne, who was nodding. "But, we weren't even a couple!"

"She got it in her head that when you accepted her apology that it was just a formality." Daphne sighed. "I tried to make her see that you weren't together and that if she really wanted to be with you, she should ask you, but... Like I said, proud and stubborn."

"Oy." Harry said leaning forward and rubbing his temples. "Any chance I

can fix this?"

"Do you want to be her boyfriend?" Daphne asked and Harry looked at her with confusion.

"I don't know!" He sighed with annoyance.

"Well, unless you do, I'd just leave it alone. I'd never tell her this, but she's rather high maintenance, and she'll need a boy who's so devoted to her, he worships the very ground she stands on." Daphne said a bit sadly.

"Someone who's much less independent than you are."

Harry nodded and with Blaise's help, they managed to change the subject and finish dinner.

When it dinner was over, Harry went straight back to his room where the Golden Egg waited for him. Harry took the heavy gold object and sat on the couch in front of the fireplace to examine it. He had been told that the egg contained the clue for the next task, and Harry still had almost two and a half months to figure it out. He knew he'd need every minute of that time to prepare, he was certain.

Harry took hold of the latch at the top of the egg and twisted. The panels fell open and an ear splitting shriek echoed in his room. Harry slammed the panels shut and stared at the egg horrified.

"How is that a clue?" Harry asked of the egg. He twisted the latch and went to his trunk and got quill and parchment and went back to the egg. He opened it again and listened to it as long as he could before slamming it close again. He began making a list of what the sound could possibly be.

"Banshee, Harpies, Syrens... " Harry said as he wrote. As he looked at his pitiful list, Harry thought that it wasn't much to go on. It seemed a truly weak clue. Just a strange glass shattering shriek. How were any of them supposed to figure out what it was they were supposed to do next?

"Maybe Cedric has an idea." Harry said, making sure the latch was tight on the Egg as he set it on the mantle. He then turned his attention onto his homework, It had piled up quite a bit while he'd been in the hospital wing. Four hours later And still feeling very overwhelmed, Harry decided it might be a good idea to get a bit of help from his friends to catch up. Still feeling very tired from the First Task, Harry changed and got into bed falling asleep almost at once.

Harry only had three days of classes before the weekend came, and Harry welcomed it. Thanks to some of his friends, Hermione, Susan, Mandy, and Hannah specifically, Harry had managed to catch up with all his homework, though he still felt behind.

Tracey hadn't spoken to him since he'd been released, and Harry chose to follow Daphne's advice and let the girl be. He felt sad that things had become so strained, but he reminded himself that he'd done nothing wrong. Though he was sure that Remus and Sirius were going to harass him a bit about it all.

It wasn't a Hogsmeade weekend, but as Harry was not officially a part of the Hogwarts student body, he was allowed to go to the village and visit with Sirius and Remus. He was up very early and once he was showered and dressed, He made for the village, the Golden Egg stuffed into his back pack.

Neither Harry nor Cedric had managed to crack the egg's clue, and Harry was hopeful that Remus or Sirius would be able to guide him in the right direction if not just tell him flat out what he was going to be facing.

Harry shivered in the cold, but smiled as he cast a glance over his shoulder to take in the sight of Hogwarts castle. The first snow had fallen and Harry couldn't help think how amazing the grounds looked covered in a blanket of snow.

He arrived in the village and noticed at once how empty it looked without loads of Hogwarts students roaming the streets. Harry thought that if he had time, he'd stop by the sweets shop and get a few thank you gifts for the girls who'd helped him catch up on his work this week. They had all promised to ease up on him during the weekend, especially now that he was caught up, though Hermione hinted that she'd like him to continue working hard during the week. Neville had mentioned that Hermione was really driven in her schoolwork, and had a habit of "encouraging" her friends to work just as hard as she did.

Harry arrived at the small cottage where his godfather had taken up residence and was greeted by a beaming Sirius, who pulled him into the house.

"You're looking much better." Remus smiled as Harry sat down at the table. The sensuous aroma of sausages cooking made Harry smile a bit.

"I'm feeling loads better. I know you said magic was like your muscles, Sirius..."

"You got to work them to make them stronger." Sirius smiled as he leaned against a counter, his arms folded.

"I feel like I can do anything right now. I've even had an easier time with some of my spell work." Harry said, looking proudly at his godfather.

"Well, next time don't over do it. Magical exhaustion is a very serious thing, Harry. Some wizards have never fully recover, and can actually lose their magic. You have to be more careful."

"Are you caught up on your school work?" Remus asked, setting a platter of toast on the table, which Harry immediately fell upon.

"Yeah. Hermione really pushed me hard over the last couple of days, and I was able to get caught up."

"Hermione?" Sirius smiled, looking to Remus. "Was she the redhead?"

"No, That was Susan Bones. The one who had you blushing like an idiot most of the time." Remus smirked. Sirius threw his head back and laughed as Remus went on. "Susan and Hannah always came together. Though I can see how you'd get confused. Hermione usually had Ginny Weasley with her, and she's a redhead as well."

"So which one was Hermione? The really shy one who barely ever spoke and just stared at Harry while he slept?"

"Wrong again." Remus smirked. "That was Mandy. And, just so you don't screw up again, Luna was the one with the long blonde hair and the big silver blue eyes. Hermione was the one with the really curly hair."

"Right, The one who kept asking us questions like we were living encyclopedia's. Scary smart that one. You had so many girls coming to look in on you, it was hard to keep track." Sirius shrugged, finally taking a seat once he'd finished making his tea. "But five girls came everyday, every moment they could spare."

"Who was it?" Harry asked curiously. "No one's mentioned visiting me."

"Huh." Sirius looked puzzled. "Well, Hermione was there. Actually, I think she and Susan were there the most. Sometimes Hermione had that other redhead with her..."

"Ginny." Remus remarked.

"Right." Sirius nodded. "Susan was there nearly as much as Hermione, usually with that feisty little blonde."

"Hannah." Remus smiled dishing up eggs to everyone.

"I think those two fancy you. Hermione and Susan, that is." Sirius said giving Harry a sly grin.

"Maybe, but I think it more likely Hermione just cares about me as a friend. She doesn't have a lot of friends, or she didn't before I got there. I've helped her make a few more, I think." Harry shrugged.

"Don't rule her out.' Sirius said, pointing his fork at Harry. "Sometimes great romances come out of great friendships."

"I'll keep it in mind." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Is there any girls who've caught your eye? Last we talked you were taking out...uh..." Remus looked to Sirius for help, but the man just mirrored Remus' puzzlement and shrugged.

"Tracey. We broke up a few nights ago. At least I think we did. It's all really strange."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Sirius asked with concern, noticing the strange look on Harry's face. Harry launched into the full story, explaining how Tracey had accosted him the day before the tournament, and how she had apologized they day he was released from the hospital wing, and how they had gone to dinner and met Gabrielle.

"Then she just starts yelling at me, and breaks up with me. But the thing is, we weren't even dating!" Harry finished looking pleadingly at his godfather and uncle.

"Obviously she thought you were, or that you should have been." Remus commented.

"That's what her friend told me after Tracey stomped out of the Great Hall." Harry said, sinking in his chair a bit. "I'm not even sure I want a girlfriend. I mean, I haven't even decided if I'm going to stay at Hogwarts after this year. I mean, I love it and everything, But I have all my friends at Salem and everything."

"And Stacy." Sirius quipped, making Harry turn an evil eye to his godfather who was very interest in the bit of sausage on his fork.

"The point being, I don't want to end up hurting someone if I decide not to stay. I mean, yeah, I'd like to go on dates, but to commit myself to someone when I'm not even sure what's going to happen?"

"Harry," Remus said placatingly as he looked at the boy who so reminded him of his long lost best friend. "while it's noble of you to be so concerned for other people's feelings, you are cheating yourself out of something that could be very nice. There is no law written that says that whom ever you date will be the one for you for the rest of your life, and one or two dates isn't going to tell you everything you need to know about someone either."

"The thing is..." Sirius said, setting his fork down. "People act differently when they first begin dating. It takes a while for you to get comfortable with the other person before you truly let your guard down and all your ugly secrets come out. If a girl still loves you after she hears you singing Backstreet Boys songs in the shower..."

"Oh, One time!" Harry rolled his eyes. "I told you it got stuck in my head. Why can't you let it go?"

"... And she still loves you, that's a girl who you might want to have the rest of your life." Sirius finished trying not to laugh at Harry's indignation. "Got it?"

"So you're both saying I should get a girlfriend?" Harry asked, but both men shook their heads.

"All we're saying is to do what feels right to you." Sirius said pointedly. Harry smiled weakly and they continued eating, talking of inconsequential topics until the meal was finished. Sirius asked if Harry had had anymore nightmares.

"No." Harry shook his head. "But my scar twinges every now and again. It feels like someone's putting a really hot knife to my forehead. But then it goes away and I'm fine."

Sirius looked worried, but he said nothing.

"If you have anymore nightmares, go see Dumbledore right away. Do

your best to remember everything, write it down if you have to, but go and see the headmaster." Remus said. "He's very interested in these dreams."

"Are they important?" Harry asked, now sounding concerned.

"We don't know, but they could be. Dumbledore wouldn't tell us, but we think that you might not be having dreams at all, but actually witnessing events as they happen." Sirius explained.

Harry nodded his understanding. Once again the topics turned and jokes were made. Harry really enjoyed spending time with his godfather, especially now with the added bonus of having Remus. Sirius stories became even better with the second, more honest opinion added to them. At last, Remus broached the topic of the second task, which lead to Harry removing the golden egg from his bag, and opening it for them to listen to. It didn't take long before Sirius reached out to close the shrieking object.

"See, not a lot to go on." Harry sighed heavily. "Every time I open it, I'm afraid I'm going to rupture my eardrums. I think it might be syrens, or a banshee."

"Actually Harry." Remus said, folding his hands. "What's interesting about our world is how one creatures language sounds very different outside of its normal environment."

"I don't follow." Harry replied.

"Think about it Harry." Sirius said catching on to what Remus was saying.

"How many different, truly different types of habitats are there in this world?"

"Hundreds." Harry answered at once, still looking puzzled.

"While that is technically true," Remus smiled. "Most of them have something in common. Can you figure out what that is?"

Harry hated this. He wanted an answer and he was feeling like he was in class again. Harry looked at both men who were smiling back at him and knew they weren't going to get a straight answer. So, he thought about it. Jungles, mountains, caves, deserts. What did they all have in common?

"I don't know." Harry said out loud, still thinking.

"Come on Harry." Sirius said. What is it that every single creature in the world needs to survive."

"That's easy, air." Harry looked puzzled, and then he sat up suddenly.

"Whatever this thing is, it doesn't need air. At least not air like we breathe." Harry shouted triumphantly.

Very good." Remus applauded while Sirius beamed.

"Whatever it is lives in the lake, right?" Harry asked and both men beamed. "So in order to hear the clue, the egg needs to be underwater."

"I think he's got it." Sirius grinned and reached out to pat his godson's shoulder. "Now that the hard part is over, you still have a big decision to make. Who are you going to ask to the Yule ball?"

"The what?" Harry's eyes got as round as dinner plates and Sirius looked to Remus who was shaking his head.

"I thought they'd have announced it already." Sirius looked liked he'd just been caught stealing cookies. "Whoops."

"Well done Sirius."

Sirius and Remus made Harry swear not to speak of the Ball to anyone until it was announced. That turned out to be quite easy as at dinner that night, Dumbledore stood before the students and made the formal announcement.

All around him, Harry saw girls bending close and whispering. Harry couldn't say why, but he suddenly felt like he had a target on his back. He realized that Sirius had been right, and that it would be a good idea

to ask someone right away to avoid a lot of awkwardness and hurt feelings later on. The problem was, Harry didn't know who to ask. Tracey was out of the question. She wasn't even talking to him anymore. Harry thought for a moment about Hannah, but quickly decided that the Yule Ball would be a perfect opportunity for Neville to man up and finally ask the her out.

Harry was torn from his musings by the sound of giggling to his left.

Harry turned and saw some third year Hufflepuffs looking at him. He decided that it would be a good idea to get away as fast as he could.

Bidding goodbye to his friends, and noticing the disappointed looks on Hannah, Susan and Megan's faces, Harry scurried out of the Great hall as fast as he could without looking like he was running for his life.

Harry went to his room and gathered his homework. He thought he might be able to get some work done and maybe he could figure out the answer to the problem of who to ask to the Ball. As he headed back out and towards the Library, he passed to groups of girls, who all stared at him as he passed, making him feel like he was a rabbit prancing in front of packs of starving wolves.

"Oh sure, I can face a dragon, but a few girls look at you and you're the god damned cowardly lion." Harry berated himself. So lost in his thoughts about which girl he was going to ask to the ball, that he wasn't paying any attention to where he was going. That was why he found himself on his butt staring up at Viktor Krum.

"I am sorry." Viktor said offering a hand to Harry. "Actually I am very glad to be seeing you."

"Yeah?" Harry asked a bit surprised.

"Yes. I was wondering if you could help me. Your friend. The girl."

Harry cocked his head and smiled. "You need to be a bit more specific."

Harry said with a bit of a laugh.

"I suppose. I see you with many girls. But I am talking about the one who usually joins you in the library. The girl with the very curly hair."

"Hermione?" Harry asked and Viktor smiled. "The girl with the really bushy crazy hair."

"Yes this is her." Viktor nodded. "She has a very pretty smile. I have been coming to the library trying to talk to her, but she is always with that redhead girl, or with you."

"Do you want me to introduce you?" Harry asked, and knew at once this was what Viktor was trying to ask.

"I'd be happy to, but, just so you know, I'm sure you could do it on your own. I mean, you're famous and all."

Viktor nodded, but Harry saw that he didn't want to use his fame to get close to Harry's friend.

"I've seen you and the Hogwarts in the mornings." Viktor said, changing the subject as he turned and followed Harry into the library. "I wonder if I may join you some mornings. Running is a very good way to keep in shape, and I feel like I am wasting away here. I have not been on my broom in months."

"I know exactly what you mean." Harry said as they took a seat. "I really miss being in the air."

"You play Quidditch then?"

"Oh yeah, and racing." Harry nodded. "I prefer the racing."

"I have heard of broom racing, though I have not been fortunate to witness a race myself. I was hopeful that I might go to America this summer to see one." Viktor said and Harry smiled.

"Why do that when you could be a part of one right here." Harry smiled.

"I haven't talked to the guys since before the First Task, but we were

trying to put together a race right here at Hogwarts. You're absolutely welcome to join us as soon as we get it all figured out."

Viktor agreed and the two champions began talking about what had happened in the first task. Harry hadn't seen Viktor but enjoyed listening to his tale. It wasn't long however before someone joined them.

"There you are Harry." Hermione smiled as she approached the table, a small smile on her face. She noticed who he was sitting with and looked oddly at Harry.

"Hermione Granger, Viktor Krum." Harry said, and Viktor rose from his seat and bowed to Hermione who blushed. It got worse when Viktor took her hand and kissed it.

"It's very nice to meet you." Hermione smiled though her voice was really shaky. She hesitantly took the seat Viktor offered. "So what were you two discussing?"

"Broom racing." Viktor said, stammering a bit. Harry thought it was a bit odd that someone like Viktor who was extremely famous would be shy around someone like Hermione.

"Excuse me for a moment, I really need to find a book." Harry said as he rose from his seat. He didn't know why, but he suddenly felt the urge to leave Krum and Hermione alone together. He disappeared into the stacks but found a spot where he could see them.

They sat silently for a few minutes, and Harry wondered why Krum should be so shy. He could understand Hermione, but Viktor was very famous, known throughout the world. He was the youngest professional Quidditch player, and one of the very best seekers in the world. Surely he had girls flinging themselves at him.

And then it struck him. Maybe that's why Viktor liked Hermione. She didn't care about Quidditch. He'd seen her eyes glass over whenever he

and Neville brought up the topic. Like Harry, perhaps Viktor didn't care about his fame and wanted someone who liked him for who he was, not his fame.

Harry was just about to return to the table and see if he could help them start a conversation, when Hermione suddenly turned and asked Viktor a question. They began to talk, and Harry could actually see Krum relax.

"Hmm. Krum and Hermione." A sweet dreamy voice came from behind Harry. He turned and smiled as he saw Luna Lovegood looking through the stacks at the two. "They'd have very adorable babies."

Harry choked on his laughter and shook his head at Luna. "I think it's a little soon to plan a wedding. They just got introduced."

"I hope he snogs her silly. Hermione really needs a good release. I've told her that she should masturbate more."

Harry felt his face burn with mortification.

"I am sometimes she can even function properly with all those Snizzlegroves around her head all the time."

"Snizzle whats?" Harry asked, trying not to fall over with laughter.

"Snizzlegroves. There a lot like fruit flies, though they're invisible.

Constantly buzzing in your ears and breaking your concentration. The only way to deal with them is to have at least one orgasm a day. I've never seen anyone so infested with them before."

"I'll make sure and let her know." Harry grinned, trying to keep from roaring out with laughter.

"So, who are you going to ask to the Yule Ball, Harry?" Luna asked with her normal dreamy smile. "I hope it's not me. I'd hate to turn you down and hurt your feelings."

"You don't want to go to the Ball with me?" Harry asked a bit surprised.

"It's not that you're not attractive, and you're a very pleasant kisser, but I

am hoping that someone else will ask me. I like him very much, and I'm sure he likes me as well, though he may not have figured it out just yet. He can be very slow sometimes."

"Who?" Harry asked very curious now.

"Ron Weasley. His sister Ginny and I used to be very close friends when we were little, but after my mother died, I kind of withdrew, and we lost that closeness. But I used to go play at her house all the time, and I always thought Ron was very sweet. He's changed since coming to school, but I think it's a phase. One day very soon, he's going to understand that no one likes the person he is now, and he'll go back to the sweet boy who used to kiss my knee when I fell down." Luna smiled, her eyes distant now as she was remembering a time long ago.

"I wouldn't hold my breath." Harry said sadly. "Besides, you can do much better than Ron Weasley."

"Perhaps. But my mother always says that the heart wants what the heart wants."

Harry nodded at her wise words. "Look, just promise me that you won't wait for him forever. You're very pretty and a truly amazing person Luna. If you find someone who treats you right, don't let him get away."

"I promise, Harry. But what about you? So many witches wishing to be on your arm. Who will you choose?" Luna asked, her eyes focusing on Harry's.

"To be honest, I really don't know."

"I'm sure you will pick the most suitable partner, though I am sure you will have a very full dance card." Luna said, with a sudden smile. Harry couldn't help but smile in return. He knew she was right.

"Do you have any suggestions?" Harry asked, but Luna simply shook her head. "I wouldn't presume to suggest anyone, as I don't know exactly

what you look for in a girl, and having no experience with girls myself..."

"That's okay, Luna." Harry smirked holding up his hands. Part of him wanted her to finish her statement, but only a very small part. Luna simply smiled and Harry shook his head. Luna gave a little wave and bade Harry a good evening, leaving the boy smirking at her retreating form. He really liked Luna, she was always so interesting to talk to even though she didn't seem to have any sort of mental filter and just said whatever came to her mind. Still...

Harry turned back to see how Viktor and Hermione were doing, and was shocked to see they were both gone. Harry wondered if they had left together.

Deciding he was not going to get any work done, Harry gathered his bag and headed back to his room where he ended up staring at the egg for an hour before he decided to see if what Remus and Sirius had told him would work.

Harry was disappointed that he only had a shower in his room, and the sink wasn't big enough to completely submerge the egg. It was too late to go and find Dumbledore to see if the castle had someplace to go where he could get the egg and his head under water. So, placing the egg back on the mantle piece, Harry vowed to seek out the Headmaster first thing in the morning. The sooner he heard the clue, the sooner he could figure out what he had to do in the next task.

13. Chapter 13

Harry woke early on Sunday morning and went straight to the Great Hall to wait for Dumbledore. He didn't have to wait for very long before the Headmaster walked in, having a discussion with Professor Snape. The two men were muttering as Harry approached them.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir?" Harry said politely. Dumbledore and Snape

looked at him, and Harry was struck by the fact that Snape did not sneer, or even look irritated at him.

"Good Morning, Mister Potter." Dumbledore smiled. "How can I help you?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but I need a bit of help. You see, I was wondering if Hogwarts had a swimming pool, or something similar."

"A pool?" Snape looked confused. Harry nodded looking at the Potions master, then back to Dumbledore.

"I have this problem that I think a good long swim might help to clear up." Harry said, trying to communicate with his eyes his meaning.

Snape looked very puzzled until he saw Dumbledore's beard twitch.

"While this school is not equipped with a swimming pool, I think that you might find the Prefects bathroom on the fifth floor suitable to your needs.

It is inside the fourth door on the left side of the hall, past the statue of Boris the Bewildered. I do not think you will have any trouble identifying that particular statue, but if you do, you should find a name plate at the bottom. I believe that the password for the door is Pine Fresh."

"Thank you, sir." Harry smiled and turned to go when Snape called out to Harry.

"Potter?"

Harry turned to see Snape take a few steps closer. "I wished to pass on my appreciation for your candor."

Harry wasn't exactly sure what Snape was talking about, but thought it must have had something to do with the last time they spoke. Harry wondered how the Potions master even remembered that conversation, given how drunk the man had appeared.

"Not a problem, sir." Harry said, and began to turn away again.

Snape looked as if he wanted to speak further, and he looked as if he was

chewing on his tongue. Dumbledore had passed them and was now taking a seat at the Head Table. Harry gave the Potions master a nod and left him, glancing over his shoulder when he was nearly out of the Great Hall to see Snape watching him go.

"That was odd." Harry said to himself as he headed to his room.

As it was so early, Harry was sure that the Prefects bathroom would be empty. Not that he was overly shy. He'd shared a dorm with three other boys for the past three years, and dignity had never been a problem. Harry just didn't want to bother anyone while he was trying to figure out the egg.

Back in his room, Harry grabbed fresh clothes, ink, quill and parchment as well as the golden egg and stuffing it all into his backpack, and then headed off for the fifth floor.

Dumbledore had been right. The statue depicted a very confused looking cross-eyed wizard with his gloves on the wrong hands. Harry counted the doors and whispered the password at the fourth door.

Harry gasped when he saw the room. It was done in all white marble with nearly a hundred golden taps aimed into what could be a long rectangular pool set in the floor. On the furthest wall was a giant stain glass picture of a gorgeous mermaid sitting on a log.

"Wow." Harry muttered as he took in the room.

He went over to the taps and turned on the first one. Thick pearly white foam poured out and Harry grinned widely.

"Oh, the trouble Mark and I would get into with this stuff." Harry couldn't help but chuckle to himself.

In no time at all, the pool, for lack of a better word, was filled with steaming, sweet smelling water topped with a very thick, nearly solid blanket of foam. Harry took out his quill, ink and parchment and placed

them close to the pool and set the egg near the edge and undressed, sliding himself into the water.

Unable to resist, Harry swam a few laps, smiling immensely with every stroke.

"If there's a chance to become a Prefect, I might think really hard about staying. It'd be worth it just to use this place whenever I wanted." Harry thought as he swam up to where he'd placed the egg.

"What's interesting about our world is how one creature's language sounds very different outside of its normal environment."

Harry lowered the egg under the water, cringing as he unlatched it. No sound came, though there was a steady stream of bubbles rising out of it. Taking a great gulp of air, Harry sank under the water completely.

There were no shrieks, but a rather beautiful sounding voice singing out.

"Come seek us where our voices sound, We cannot sing above the ground, And while you're searching, ponder this: We've taken what you'll sorely miss, An hour long you'll have to look, And to recover what we took, But past an hour- the prospect's black, Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"

Harry came up out of the water and brushed his hair out of his face, quickly going over to the edge of the pool and drying his hand so he didn't get the parchment wet as he wrote the clue down. It took five more times under the water before he had it all written correctly. Once he was done, he pulled himself out of the pool. As he was dressing, two Prefects from Ravenclaw entered and looked at him strangely.

"What are you doing here?" The older of the two boys asked as Harry gathered his things up.

"Dumbledore let me in." Harry smiled at them. That seemed to satisfy the Prefects and Harry headed back to his own room. He read the parchment as he walked, trying to decipher its meaning.

"Clearly it's going to be underwater." Harry said to himself. "So, that's where the voices sound, and they're going to take something of mine which I have to get back within an hour."

"Harry?"

Harry looked up and saw Tracey Davis standing in front of his door.

"Hi, Tracey." Harry said cautiously. Tracey looked truly sad, her hands were fidgeting at her sides as she watched him approach his door.

"I tried your door, I wanted to talk to you before you went to Breakfast or anything, but you weren't there. Obviously." She said shrugging.

"Okay." Harry said, hefting his bag more securely on his shoulder. "What did you want to talk about?"

Tracey sighed. "I wanted to apologize for everything." She said now looking into his eyes. "I assumed when I shouldn't have, and I expected too much of you. I was being selfish, and I'm sorry. I should have expressed my feelings better and allowed you to make a decision instead of just letting myself believe we were together."

Harry relaxed a bit and smiled, waving it off. "It's fine."

"No, it's not." Tracey said quickly. "I realized, partially thanks to Daphne, that you and I wouldn't be a good match, anyway. You're really sweet and good looking and all, but you're not what I really want in a boyfriend. You need a girl who's confident enough in herself to know that when you flirt with other girls, that it doesn't mean anything. I'm too possessive, and I'd end up hexing any girl who even looked at you. I think you and I would be better off just being friends, if you'll have me."

Harry had to smile now, and he closed the space between himself and Tracey and hugged her tightly.

"Of course we can be friends. I'm sorry that I'm not a better fit for you, but I'm sure that you'll find exactly the right guy."

"Oh, no, I'm not worried about that." Tracey smirked as they pulled apart.

"I mean, look at how hot I am."

Harry fell on the floor laughing now and Tracey laughed at her own joke.

Monday morning, Harry, Neville and Cedric were joined during their morning run by Viktor Krum. Cedric was very surprised when the Bulgarian showed up, but welcomed his fellow Champion, but not nearly surprised as Harry was when Viktor thanked him for introducing Viktor to Hermione.

"She has accepted my invitation to the Ball." Viktor smiled. "After you left to find your books, we spoke and then we went for a walk around the castle. She is much nicer than I hoped."

"Glad I could help out." Harry smiled, still shocked by how fast Viktor had worked.

"Who are you taking, Harry?" Cedric asked.

"I don't know yet." Harry answered honestly. "There's a lot of really nice and good looking girls. Still a bunch I haven't even met yet. What about you?"

"Cho, of course. I asked her right after Dinner when the Ball was announced." Cedric smiled proudly. "What about you, Neville?"

The round faced Gryffindor looked up at the other three boys, blushing slightly.

"He's going to ask Hannah." Harry smiled. Neville's face looked as if it were close to bursting.

"I...I..." Neville stuttered.

"Oh, come on, Nev. You couldn't have asked for a more perfect set up."

Harry pointed out. "The worst thing that can happen is she says no."

"She could laugh at me." Neville said dejectedly.

"They always laugh." Cedric smirked. "It's what girls do, that's not

necessarily a bad thing."

"How do you mean?" Neville looked at Cedric who was still smirking.

"It's kind of how they deal with nervousness. It doesn't necessarily mean that they don't like you."

"And so what if she doesn't like you?" Harry added. "Like I told you before, I'm sure there are girls who think the world of you that you don't even know about yet. So, you've got nothing to lose."

"Ask her at Breakfast." Cedric said.

"What?" Neville looked terrified.

"Your friends are right." Viktor nodded as they came to the end of their run. "You vill gain nothing by keeping silent. Do not vait, or you could miss your chance."

"Says the guy who had to get me to introduce him to the girl he wanted."

Harry chuckled. Viktor smile and nodded.

"Yes, but once I was introduce, I did not vait."

"Ok," Neville nodded, taking a deep breath. "Ok, I'll do it. I'll do it today. I'll see you guys later."

Neville trotted up towards the castle while Cedric, Viktor and Harry watched him go.

"Man, I hope she says yes to him." Harry said, and Cedric nodded.

"No kidding. I think I might feel bad if she turns him down."

"He vill be fine. I think he is a good man." Viktor said with confidence.

"Have either of you guys figure out the egg clue yet?" Harry asked, now looking at the Black lake.

"The screams hurt my ears." Viktor said with a disturbed tone in his voice. "It sounds like someone being tortured."

"My roommates threatened to kill me if I open it in the dorm again."

Cedric smiled. "How are you getting on?"

"I cracked it." Harry said looking to the two others. "You have to put it underwater."

"How did you figure that out?" Cedric looked awed.

"And why are you telling us?" Viktor asked very shocked.

"Because I don't care about winning." Harry said. "You may recall that I wasn't even here to put in my name. My godfather and Remus helped me figure it out, and yesterday Dumbledore gave me access to the Prefects bathroom, and I got the full clue. I haven't figured out exactly what it means yet, but..." Harry shrugged and the two older boys looked at one another with astonishment.

"You are a very unique individual, Harry Potter." Viktor said at last.

"Thank you."

Krum offered his hand and they shook. He then waved to Cedric, and turned to head towards the Durmstrang ship.

"I think you might have broken him." Cedric grinned as he and Harry headed back towards the castle. "Here we are all trying to win the glory for our schools and ourselves, and you're just along for the ride. You know what would be kind of weird would be if you ended up winning the whole thing."

"Honestly, I think it would be cooler if the four of us tied for it. As far as I can tell, it's never been done before. We'd all go down in the history books for it if the four of us lifted the cup in victory together."

"Somehow, I don't see it happening. First off, that girl Fleur won't even look at us, much less want to work together for a four-way tie. Secondly, I get the feeling that the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons Headmasters are likely pushing their Champions to work hard to win. They want to beat Dumbledore. You just gave Krum a leg up."

"So, maybe I should let Fleur know then, too. Then we're all on a level

playing field again." Harry grinned and Cedric chuckled.

"So, we're going to start training for the next Task, I take it?"

"Let's talk after you've heard the clue. Then we can decide what we should do next." Harry smiled as they split up in the Entrance Hall.

Harry had a brainstorm late Monday evening in regards to the Yule Ball.

"STACY!" He shouted in his room as he was getting ready for bed.

He felt so stupid now. Why not extend an invitation to the girl he'd been crushing over for a year and a half. How impressive would it be that they finally got to have a date, and it was in Scotland for a really posh Ball?

Of course, there was more than a few hurdles to go through, the hardest would be getting Stacy here. But, Harry was confident that Dumbledore would be able to help him out. Which was why Harry went to see the Headmaster right before he went to classes on Tuesday morning.

"I do not see a problem with getting your friend here for the Ball, though I will have to ask permission from her parents, as I believe she will likely be home for holiday. I should be able to get an answer for you by tomorrow afternoon." Dumbledore promised, and Harry felt very happy for the next two days while he waited for a response.

He could feel the predatory stares from girls as he walked the halls and sat in classes, but he wasn't worried about them now. He was sure he had a date for the Yule Ball now, and he could now focus on the Second Task now.

But everything came crashing down when Dumbledore caught him in the hall after his last class of the day Wednesday afternoon.

"I'm very sorry, Mister Potter, but Miss Harris' parents wished for their daughter to spend Christmas at home with them. As it was, I had a very difficult time in initially asking for permission as I'd forgotten that you had been under the name of James Black at your old school. Miss Harris

herself kept insisting that she didn't know anyone named Harry Potter."

"Oh." Was all Harry could say when he'd been given the bad news.

"Cheer up, Harry. I am more than confident that you will find a suitable escort for the Ball." Dumbledore smiled softly and patted Harry on the shoulder, before heading off again to wherever he'd been heading for in the first place.

"Harry, are you okay?" Hermione asked coming to Harry's side.

"Yeah, I guess. I just... I don't know what I'm going to do."

"About what?" Hermione had been uncharacteristically cheerful ever since Krum had asked her out. Harry had also noticed the two spending a bit more time together, though if Viktor had his way, they'd likely spend a lot more time together. Harry couldn't help but wonder if Luna was right about Hermione needing a good snog.

"I wanted Stacy to come over for the Yule Ball, but her parents said she couldn't. But I feel bad because I've had to lie to my friends because I've had to protect my identity."

"Why don't you write them and explain. I'm sure they'll understand."

Hermione smiled, linking her arm through Harry's and began dragging him towards the Great Hall.

"Oh, I'm sure they will. Especially Mark. He's always said that there was something more to me. But, he's also crazy." Harry chuckled. "But it doesn't solve my date problem."

"I thought you and Tracey were getting along again." Hermione pointed out.

"And that's exactly why I'm not going to ask her. It's better that we just be friends, and going to the Ball would change that again, and we'd end up hating each other and this time we can't fix things. No, I need to go with someone else."

"I don't think you're going to have any difficulty finding someone, Harry."

Hermione smiled wryly.

"I guess I just need to ask someone, shouldn't I?" Harry rolled his eyes as

Hermione playfully nudged him with her shoulder.

"The sooner you do it, the sooner you can focus on more important things."

"Like the next Task?"

"Exactly." Hermione grinned.

Hermione's optimism did not rub off on Harry, especially whenever he spoke to any of the other girls he was friendly with. Most all of them dropped subtle hints about not having dates for the Ball yet. Su Li kept talking about her dress during Runes, while Megan Jones bragged about how great a dancer she felt she was. Parvati Patil, whom Harry had never really talked to, sighed dramatically when expressing her disappointment that she'd not been asked yet. Ginny Weasley complained that she desperately wanted to go and hoped a fourth year would ask her.

Nearly every girl seemed to be dropping subtle hints that they wanted to go to the Ball with Harry, or at least that's how it seemed. By Friday, Harry was really starting to feel the pressure to ask someone. He was even starting to get a few rather disgusted looks from boys. Harry guessed they were waiting on answers from girls who were waiting to see who he asked.

After dinner on Friday evening, Harry sought refuge in the Library once again. Every night that week, he'd gone to do his homework and research for the Second Task.

"Hi, Harry." Mandy Brocklehurst said softly as she came up next to him.

"Did you take Promising Potion Making?"

"No, sorry." Harry smiled. Mandy just nodded, her faint smile falling

away.

"Oh." she said simply. "Are you okay? I've noticed that you've pretty distracted lately. Usually, you're one of the first to finish our assignments in Runes, and this week you've been one of the last. Is it the Second Task?"

It was then that Harry realized that not once had Mandy brought up the Ball when he was around her in class. In fact, the only time he and Mandy ever actually spoke was when they ran into each other in the Library, and then it was pretty much about homework, or about their lives outside of school. And Mandy was pretty. She had a very sweet smile, and shoulder length slightly curly brown hair and soft brown eyes. She was very slender, from what Harry could tell. Again, the Hogwarts robes did a great job of hiding a girl's shape.

"Mandy, do you have a date for the Ball?" Harry asked suddenly.

"What?" Mandy's eyes widened in shock. She looked around to see if someone else was around them, ready to spring out and start laughing.

"I was thinking that we could go together. I mean, if someone hasn't already asked you yet."

"Y-you want to go to the Ball with me?" Mandy gasped, she was still having trouble believing what was happening. Harry Potter, THE Harry Potter was asking her out.

"No, he's just a boy. Just a normal, everyday, average boy." Mandy started thinking to herself. "Ok, Aa boy is asking you out. A very cute boy. A boy that every girl in this school would cut their right arm off to be with..."

"Yeah. You've always been nice to me, and I think we might have fun."

Harry shrugged. "But if you don't want to go with me, that's ok."

"No, I do." Mandy said quickly. "I do, it's just that, well, I figured you'd want to go with someone more fun, like Su or Morag, or someone else."

I'm not what you'd call the life of the party."

"So?" Harry said making a face. "It's just a dance. We'll go, we'll dance and hopefully have a decent time."

"Alright." Mandy said nodding. "I think that would be really nice. Thank you, Harry."

"No, thank you." Harry smiled, pleased he'd solved the dilemma. Now he could move forward, and he had a pretty good looking girl as his date. Harry invited her to come study with him, and they worked together on their Runes work and talked a little about the Ball itself. When Harry went back to his room that night, he was confident that his problems were now over.

"I asked her, Harry!" Neville cried out as he met Harry in front of the Entrance Hall Saturday morning. "I did it and she said yes! Can you believe it?"

"Great, Neville. Why'd it take you so long?"

"I wanted to do it Monday after you and Viktor and Cedric gave me all that advice, but, well, I could never catch her alone, and you guys kept ribbing me about it all week. Well, I finally got her by herself last night. Well, not totally alone. Susan Bones was with her, but I figured it was the best I was going to get. So, I asked her if we could talk, and then I told her I thought she was really nice and I asked her. She didn't even laugh!"

"That's great, Nev. I told you she'd say yes."

"So, have you asked anyone yet?" Neville asked as he and Harry took seats along the Hufflepuff table. Zacharias Smith and Justin Finch-Fletchley looked up as they heard Neville's question.

"I asked Mandy last night in the Library."

"Mandy? Mandy who?" Zacharias asked puzzled.

"Mandy Brocklehurst." Sally Anne said not looking up from her

newspaper.

"How do you know who she is?" Zacharias asked.

"Because I'm not a self-centered prat." Sally said looking annoyed. "She's been in our Potions and Transfiguration classes since first year. Could you be more unobservant?"

Zacharias started to retort when Justin held up his hand. "Drop it, before she embarrasses you again."

"Anyway..." Harry said turning back to Neville. "I asked her, she said yes, so now I have a date."

"You got a date?" Susan asked as she, Hannah and Megan Jones sat down.

Hannah smiled at Neville, who blushed slightly but smiled back.

"Mandy Brocklehurst." Zacharias said, still seething from Sally Anne's remarks.

"Oh, she's sweet." Megan said. "Intensely shy, though. And pretty, too.

Good on you, Harry."

"Thank you." Harry smiled, taking some toast from a plate.

"Will you save me a dance?" Megan asked with a smile and a wink.

"I don't see why not." Harry shrugged.

"And me, too." Hannah said. "But just one. You see, I intend to spend a lot of time with my date."

Neville coughed into his goblet and Harry had to thump him on the back.

Hannah giggled and Susan smirked at her friend's antics and Neville's anxiety.

"I will save you all a dance." Harry smiled.

"Harry!" Ernie Macmillan smiled as he, Wayne Hopkins and Stephen Cornfoot took seats at the table. "You've been so busy we haven't seen you lately. We talked to McGonagall and Flitwick about setting up a race. McGonagall said she would talk to Dumbledore."

"Great." Harry smiled.

"In the meantime, we thought we could put together a pickup game of Quidditch. You know, today."

"Sure." Harry smiled. "Who are you getting to play?"

"We just thought of it on the way here." Stephen shrugged. "But, I'm sure we can get enough players in no time. Cedric already said he was in, and went to talk to Madam Hooch about supervising."

"And she said yes." Cedric grinned as he came over. "So let's eat and get teams together."

"Oh, yeah." Susan grinned. "I can't wait to see you fly, Harry."

The entire school seemed to agree.

Word spread like wild fire that there was to be a pick up game of Quidditch that morning, and every single House team, and many others, turned up to play. Madam Hooch suggested that four teams be put together, and an elimination sort of competition be instituted with each game lasting one hour unless the Snitch was caught. Four Hogwarts students were selected to be captains, and the rest of those who'd come to play lined up according to the position they wished to play. Before teams could be picked, however, there was a flurry of excitement as Viktor Krum walked onto the pitch, broom in hand and slight smile on his face. He stood next to Harry, Cho Chang, Draco Malfoy, and Zacharias Smith. Zacharias took one look at the four others and with a deep sigh, headed to where Chasers were being selected.

Cedric had been made a captain, and as he was a Seeker already, had no need for one on his team. Harry remembered Cedric's dream team, and wondered if he were going to get it today.

Harry wound up on Angelina Johnson's team along with Katie Bell, Roger Davies, who along with Angelina would make up the Chasers. The Keeper

was a big sandy haired boy named Cormac, who started talking to Harry about his ideas about how to run a team, and Rupert Summers and Alexander Summerby as Beaters.

Harry's team would be facing Cedric's team first, and Harry couldn't wait to get in the air. Harry noticed that the stands had filled and was suddenly back at Salem for one of the years matches. He felt his muscles tense with excitement and on Madam Hooch's whistle, launched himself into the air. Harry did a quick lap around the pitch, keeping his eyes open for the Snitch. Cedric pulled up along side him with a roguish smile.

"I gotta tell you that I'm not going to go easy on you!" He smirked, and Harry returned it.

"Good. I don't want you to have any excuses to why you lost."

Cedric laughed and pulled away, attempting to spot the flying golden Snitch before Harry.

Harry didn't even pay any attention to how his team was doing. None of it mattered to him. As far as he was concerned, it was just he and Cedric up there. Harry kept one eye out for the little golden ball and one eye on Cedric, in case he spotted to ball first.

He need not have worried, as he soon spotted the barest glint of gold zipping near one of the goal posts. Leaning forward, Harry shot off like a rocket. Cedric saw him shoot off, and gave pursuit. Cedric was almost flat on his broom and he quickly caught up with Harry who glanced back and smiled. They were nearly caught up with the Snitch when it shot straight up. Harry pulled back on his broom and shot up after the ball, Cedric close on his tail, and pulling even in a moment.

Harry narrowed his eyes, never taking them off of the little golden ball.

He could hear Cedric next to him, but Harry pushed it out of his mind.

The Snitch angled off to Harry's left, towards Cedric. Harry started to

reach out, but put his hand back when he saw the Snitch whiz past Cedric's outstretched hand. Harry flipped himself over, aiming his broom at the ground. He'd lost sight of his goal for a moment, but found it almost at once. The little golden ball was zigzagging towards the ground. Harry sped on his broom straight down at such a speed, Harry wondered if the skin of his face might be ripped right off his skull. He could not stop himself from smiling at the thought of Cedric getting hit in the face with Harry's own face.

Harry could hear Cedric catching him up once again, and it was now a race for the tiny speeding gold ball. Closer and closer, they approached the hard frozen ground, and Harry was not relenting. He felt, rather than saw, Cedric cast a glance in his direction, but Harry didn't flinch. Urging his broom faster, Harry flattened himself along his broom.

The ground was now roaring up at him, but the Snitch kept up its descent, and Harry kept up his pursuit. At the last minute, the Snitch pulled up and took a quick course along the ground, only inches above the snow.

Harry pulled up hard at the last possible second and launched himself in the air off his broom, his fingers clasping around the tiny fluttering ball, tucking and rolling as he hit the ground with a heavy thud.

There was a roar of excited shouts from the stands as Harry got to his feet and held up the Snitch. Cedric landed next to him first, and offered his hand.

"I'm now convinced you're out of your mind." He grinned. "I thought for sure you were going to crash, and pulled up a good ten feet above the ground."

"That's nothing. Wait until you see me race!" Harry grinned. Cedric threw his head back in laughter as the others began to land nearby, shaking

hands and congratulating each other for playing so well. Harry's team had won their match at 210 - 60. They'd also won the match in twenty minutes.

Harry and his team went to the sidelines to watch the next match. He was very excited to actually get to watch Krum fly. He was not disappointed. Harry learned a lot by watching the famous Seeker. The first thing he learned was that Viktor liked to play with his food. He would hover above the pitch, and then shoot off as if he'd seen the Snitch. Cho would follow Viktor, and three times nearly ended up a crumpled pile of broken bones on the ground. After the third time, however, Cho seemed to have learned her lesson. However, it cost her the match. The fifth time Viktor shot off, He had actually seen the Snitch, and Cho, being much more cautious now, remained up in the air, until she saw for certain that Krum had actually seen the Snitch. By then, it was too late.

Harry felt a bit bad for Cho, who looked very disappointed as she landed and was greeted by Cedric. Whatever Cedric said to her cheered her up immensely and they went to congratulate Krum, who bowed and shook hands with Cho. Krum's team had won the match at 250-20.

Harry felt excitement course through him as he realized that his team would be facing Viktor's. Harry saw that Viktor's team's Chasers weren't quite as good as his own, but the Beaters, Fred and George Weasley, were intensely vicious. He'd have to be careful of them.

Harry took to the air once again, and noticed that more than a handful of teachers had now come to watch the game.

Once again, Harry shut out everything else except finding the Snitch.

Krum tried to trick him into crashing to the ground just as he'd done with Cho, and while Harry usually did shoot off after Krum, he kept his eyes

focused in front of Krum to see if he had indeed found the tiny golden ball, and pulling away once he saw that Krum was playing with him. Krum quickly figured out that Harry was not falling for his charades, and decided to actually find the Snitch. But it was Harry who spotted it first. Viktor tore after Harry and caught up to him in no time. The two combatants wove, dodged, and thread their way through the other players in desperate chase of their common goal, which led them on a very intense pursuit. The Snitch shot into the air, and then dove back to the ground. It looped, zipped, and spun with both Harry and Viktor hot on its tail.

In moments, Harry found himself shooting towards the ground, just as he had been with Cedric. This time, however, he knew that Krum would not yield as Cedric had done. However, there was no need for that worry, as the Snitch pulled up and shot off to Harry's immediate left.

Rolling his broom and turning, Harry found himself suddenly behind Krum, who'd pulled up and over Harry. Harry grimaced and was able to gun his broom to pull even with his opponent. Harry tried to cut under Krum to gain ground on the Snitch, but Krum anticipated this move, and dropped suddenly, knocking into Harry's shoulder.

"No wonder he's considered the best." Harry smirked to himself.

The Snitch shot up again and headed towards the seats where the teachers were enjoying the match. Harry and Krum both pulled up and rolled themselves to give chase. Harry had managed to pull ahead, but Krum was only a breath behind him, and Harry pushed his own broom past its limits.

Harry was getting ever closer to the tiny golden ball, and knew that in just a few seconds it would be his. He just needed to reach out. Taking a hand of his broomstick, Harry lay flat on his broom squeezing every last

ounce of speed from his beloved Firebolt.

Harry could not believe it. His fingers were just a breath away. He was going to beat Viktor Krum. He was going to beat a world champion Quidditch star. And in those moments, as he let his focus wander, Viktor Krum came up from underneath him and snatched the tiny golden ball right out of Harry's imminent grasp.

Harry moaned in agony as he pulled up to avoid crashing right into the stands. Viktor was already heading for the ground, as the crowds cheered.

"And that's why he's a world famous Quidditch star." Harry bemoaned. It had been one of the best matches of Harry's short life, and he would always look back on it with deep fondness. He had gone toe to toe with the best in the world and very nearly scraped a victory. There weren't a lot of people who could say they got that close. Harry'd learned so much from watching and flying against the best, that he knew he would be unstoppable next year.

Harry touched down, and immediately turned to Viktor and congratulated him.

"You fly incredibly vell, Harry." Viktor smiled, patting Harry on the shoulder. "For a moment, I thought you had me beat, but in that last second, you lost your focus."

"How could you tell?"

"You started to slow down." Viktor grinned and Harry couldn't help but laugh.

The Great Hall was a buzz of conversation at Dinner that night with everyone still talking about the matches. Harry arrived to Dinner and took a seat with the Hufflepuffs as he usually did. He was greeted with congratulations, condolences and exclamations of amazement.

"I thought you were suicidal." Megan Jones said as Harry sat down next to Cedric and Cho. "Diving straight for the ground like that against Cedric."

"None of us could even see the Snitch." Zacharias pointed his fork at Harry. "Justin and I thought you were trying to trick Ced, but Wayne said he saw the Snitch just in front of you."

"It was really great." Susan smiled from Harry's other side.

"Thanks. Where's Hannah?" Harry asked noticing that Susan's blonde best friend wasn't present. Susan got this devilish smile and nodded towards the Gryffindor table. Harry cast his gaze over the Great Hall and spotted the missing Hufflepuff sitting with Neville, talking and enjoying Dinner.

"She's become very curious about him since he asked her to the Ball."

Susan commented. "Says she got a rather interesting recommendation from someone a while ago."

Susan gave Harry a pointed look, but he simply smiled. "I may have mentioned that Neville thought she was cute or something. I'm happy for them. Neville's a really good guy. He just needs some confidence. Maybe hanging out with Hannah will help him."

"Seems like you enjoy helping people, Harry." Cedric remarked. "You've helped me with the Tournament."

"We've been helping each other." Harry quickly countered.

"You helped Viktor with the clue and introduced him to Hermione Granger." Cedric nodded towards the Gryffindor table where Krum was sitting next to Hermione and getting hounded by Ron Weasley and a few others. From where Harry was sitting, it looked as if Viktor was struggling to remain polite.

"And you've been trying to show us all how stupid it is to just associate with people in our own houses." Justin pointed out. "I don't think I would

have ever made friends with Anthony, and he's been great. Which reminds me. I owe him a galleon."

"Why do you owe him a galleon?" Sally Anne looked up curiously.

"I bet him that Harry would beat Krum to the Snitch." Justin shrugged.

"That was stupid." Wayne laughed and Justin glared at him.

"I almost won, didn't I?" Justin said defensively.

"You're a good man, Harry, and I'm honored to call you a friend." Cedric smiled, ignoring the now heated discussion going on with the fourth year boys.

"I am too, Harry." Cho said from across Cedric. "By the way, I'm supposed to ask you to save Marietta a dance at the Yule Ball. She was a little disappointed that you didn't ask her, but she ended up making a date with this really cute boy from Beauxbaton, so I think she's pleased."

"Glad I could help?" Harry said looking confused. Cho and Cedric laughed and Harry joined them in their mirth.

"I'm a little sad I didn't get to fly against you." Cho said when she finally stopped laughing. "I think it would have been good fun. You really put Ced and Krum through their paces. And, you didn't fall for Krum's tricks."

"Well, I got to watch him before I flew against him. I saw his tactics work on you, so whenever he made a dash, I simply looked to see if he had really seen the Snitch. I think most people just go after him because they want to beat him and they forget to look first."

"That's what I did." Cho admitted. "Still, how many school-age Seekers can say they flew with Viktor Krum?"

"We're an elite group, that's for sure." Harry nodded.

When Dinner vanished, and deserts appeared, Dumbledore rose from his seat and went to the podium to address the students.

"I wish to inform you all about a special event that will be taking place

on the day before Christmas. Due to a growing interest, we will be having a series of Broom Races on Christmas Eve. Anyone who is interested in participating should sign up with their Head of House, where they will receive a copy of the rules to study in preparation. Those of you from our guest schools should speak with Professor McGonagall..."

McGonagall stood so that the students could see who Dumbledore was referring to.

"The races will commence at ten o'clock on December the twenty fourth. After today's exciting Quidditch matches, I hardly need tell you what a sheer treat I believe we are in for. Thank you."

Applause broke out and excited conversations broke out.

"I assume all of you are going to enter." Susan smirked as she looked at the boys in her year.

"I can't." Justin shrugged. "I don't have a broom, and there's no way I'm going to try and fly on one of the school brooms."

"Of course I'm in." Zacharias grinned. "Harry made it sound so fun, I can't wait."

"Me, too." Ernie smiled.

"Good luck to you, Harry." Susan smirked. "With all these dolts on brooms, I don't fancy your chances."

"You don't think I'm fast enough?" Harry looked offended.

"No, I'm sure none of these idiots know which end of the broom is which." Susan smirked and Harry laughed while Ernie, Zach, Wayne and Stephen all glared. Harry ended up shielding the redhead from a volley of chocolate pudding, which was seen by Professor Sprout who happened to be walking by.

"Smith!" She shouted, causing Zacharias's face to go scarlet. "Detention!" Susan helped clean Harry up, and offered to help him with his Charms

work in the Library.

"With Hannah occupied, I don't have anything else to do." Susan said by way of an explanation. They walked to the Library, and set to work, though by the time Harry returned to his room for bed that night, he'd hardly done any work at all. He'd spent nearly three hours alone with Susan, just talking. She was funny, and smart, and just easy to open up to. Harry felt that he could trust her with his deepest secrets, and wondered if she felt the same about him. He was also taken with the way she would brush her deep red hair behind her right ear. Or the way she would suddenly look away from him when she would say something uncomfortable. A secret or an embarrassing anecdote. She was really very sweet, and as Harry closed his eyes, he imagined holding Susan's hand and looking into her sweet brown eyes as he leaned in to...

"Oh, no." Harry said sitting bolt upright. "No. I can't be falling for her. I made a date with Mandy, and she deserves to be treated right."

"But, you're not Mandy's boyfriend." A voice said in his head.

"True, but it's not fair to any of us if I make a date with Mandy and then try and get Susan as my girlfriend. Besides, I'm only here for a few more months."

"But Remus said you shouldn't deny yourself if you find some one special, and let's not forget, you do have the option of staying at Hogwarts, remember?" The voice said.

"I forgot about that." Harry said aloud. "And apparently, I'm going crazy, because I'm talking to myself."

"Sirius said you're only crazy if you answer yourself." The voice in his head reminded him.

"AHHHH!"

14. Chapter 14

Harry managed to get through the next few weeks after having convinced himself that his interest in Susan that night had been nothing more than a passing infatuation. She had been the first girl outside of Hermione and Luna whom he'd had a good long conversation with that didn't consist of winks, sly glances, or giggling. Harry had also noticed that she didn't look at him like most of the other girls in the school. Like some sort of conquest. She simply seemed to like him as just another boy.

Susan was becoming a real friend, and over the last few weeks, she'd proven how much she cared. She'd studied with him and listened to his stories, and never once alluded to wanting anything more from him. Like Hermione, Susan was happy just being Harry's friend. Harry also knew that they would likely not be spending so much time together if Hannah and Neville weren't studying together and taking long walks alone.

Harry had tried to spend time with Mandy, but her friends had become constant companions, and tended to overrun their attempted conversations. Mandy couldn't even go to the Library alone anymore.

Harry thought Mandy was starting to look a little surly over this. Harry hoped that he wouldn't be the cause of her friendships falling apart.

On top of this, Harry's thoughts had become centered on the beautiful French Champion, Fleur Delacour. Ever since he'd told both Cedric and Viktor about the Egg, he'd felt a growing urge to try and speak to Fleur about it as well. Harry didn't like the thought of the three boys having any sort of advantage over Fleur. He felt they should all be on equal footing.

The problem was, Fleur was still turning her nose up at him at every turn. He even thought he heard her mutter in French whenever she passed him.

Thankfully, Fleur's younger sister Gabrielle was not so snobbish. In fact,

the little French girl took every opportunity to talk to Harry, usually batting her eyes, and tossing her sleek silvery blonde hair. Harry knew she was being extra flirtatious whenever they spoke, and took every opportunity to touch him in some way, whether it was a playful pat on his arm, or a extra long hug and kiss on his cheek.

Gabrielle was very obvious with her intentions, and Harry sometimes felt as if there was some sort of spell or bewitchment struggling to take hold of him whenever they spoke. Still, Gabrielle was always sweet, and promised she would tell Fleur about the egg in a way that would make it seem like an innocent suggestion. Gabrielle was confident that Fleur would dismiss the idea if she knew it had come from Harry. Then, she had asked him to please save a dance for her at the Ball, mentioning that she was to be escorted by a seventh year boy from her school. Harry wondered how Fleur was feeling about this.

Harry got a desperately needed reprieve from thinking about girls as he and Cedric, now joined by Viktor, had begun training for the next Task. Once again, the agreement was made that they would not share their individual plans, but would work together in training. The three boys were using the Prefects bathroom to improve their swimming, as well as braving the frigid waters of the Black Lake on the weekends.

The build up to the Yule ball was reaching a fevered pitch as Christmas grew closer. Actually, the female populace focused on the Yule Ball, while most of the male populace was anticipating the Broom races. Harry was actually surprised that barely anyone mentioned Christmas itself, not even on the last Hogsmeade weekend before the coming holiday.

Harry had to get his Dress robes, as he'd been unprepared for the Ball to begin with, and felt truly frightened when he saw so many girls picking out dresses, shoes and jewelry. Thankfully, he wasn't the only boy who

needed proper robes for the event.

"Thanks for letting me come with you, Harry." Neville smiled as they made their way to the selection of men's robes. "I feel better not being here by myself."

"Save it, Nev." Harry shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, you're doing me a favor. I have no idea what I'm supposed to be getting."

"Well," Neville said as he shrugged and pulled a rather nice set of robes from the rack and held it up to himself. "I don't think it matters all that much, so long as they're nice looking. I think I'll just go with basic black." Neville shrugged.

"A classic never goes out of style I suppose." Harry sighed looking through the robes.

"No, they don't." A sweet flirtatious voice came from behind the two boys. Harry and Neville turned to see Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil standing behind them. "But, there's a lot to be said for living on the wild side. For instance, Harry, you might think about these."

The stunning blonde smiled as she pointed out a set of bottle green robes. "I think they'd bring out your eyes, and that seems to be one of your most talked about features, right below your incredible butt."

Harry snorted and Neville snickered at Harry's discomfort. But Neville nearly fell over when Harry turned to present his posterior and tried to get a look at it.

"Is it really incredible?" He asked, loving how Parvati had to turn away to keep from howling with laughter. "I guess it's alright, but I think yours needs to be immortalized in stone or a painting, or maybe a poem."

Lavender rolled her eyes. "I don't think a poem is really the way to immortalize someone's rear, Harry, sweetie."

"I don't know." Harry said pretending to look thoughtful. "Your sweet

elegant cheeks are like the shape of..."

"Ok, enough!" Lavender said, placing both her hands over Harry's mouth.

He'd been talking very loudly and more than a few people had turned to listen in on Harry's lamentations on Lavender's hind end. Lavender was quickly looking around to make sure people went on about their shopping.

"So, is there any chance you have room on your dance card for me, then?" Lavender asked. "I'd like it to be something slow so I can get real close to you. Close enough so I know just exactly how hard you work out, if you catch my meaning."

Harry fought the blush that he could feel creeping up on him.

"I don't see why not." Harry said, determined to embarrass Lavender. "I think a slow song would be good. Then I can see if the rumors are true or not."

"What rumors?" Lavender cocked her head.

"Just something some rather envious Slytherin girls were saying about you umm..." Harry nodded towards her ample chest, which Lavender puffed out to accentuate a bit more.

"You mean whether or not my boobs are real or if I use some sort of Engorgement charm on them?"

"That'd be the one." Harry smiled.

"Well, after our dance, I think you'll have no doubt in your mind. Might even let you give them a very thorough examination." Lavender grinned, as Harry's face burned a brilliant shade of cherry red. She blew a soft kiss and, with Parvati in tow, left Harry there with his mouth hanging open.

"I think she won this round, Harry." Neville said gasping.

"But not the war." Harry said determinedly. Harry took Lavender's advice and purchased the bottle green robes, while Neville selected a set in

charcoal gray. They were fitted and once the alterations were made, headed over to the Three Broomsticks to meet with some friends for lunch.

Having finished his Christmas shopping, Harry was thankful not to be one of the scrambling, last minute shoppers. The stores were so crowded that Harry didn't think he'd be able to get into any of them. The tavern turned out to be quite packed, as well. Thankfully, Harry and Neville weren't the first ones there, and Justin waved them over to their table. Neville took the seat that Hannah had saved for him, and Harry had to hide his smile when Hannah gave Neville a peck on his cheek, making the round faced boy go pink.

"How'd you boys do?" Susan asked as Harry took a seat.

"Good. Got our robes just fine. We are quite capable of getting clothes."

Harry said, giving Susan a look that made her chuckle.

"Did you try them on or did you just hold them up to yourself and call it good?" Susan looked pointedly at Harry.

Megan and Sally Anne burst into giggles as Zacharias looked at Susan.

"Try them on?" he asked, his face paling.

"Of course we tried them on. We even got them altered to make sure they fit right." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Excuse me." Zacharias said standing up from the table and grabbing a shopping bag at his side. "I'll see you lot later." He called over his shoulder as he made his way through the crowded pub.

"Guess we know how he bought his robes now, don't we?" Hannah laughed as Zacharias bumped a third year on his way out.

"How did she do it?" Megan asked, looking at someone over Harry's shoulder. He turned to see Hermione walk into the pub with Viktor, their arms linked together, Hermione smiling brightly as Viktor was talking to

her. "How did she land one of the most eligible bachelors in the world?"

Megan asked.

"Partly because of me." Harry said, turning back to the table. "She's my friend, and he wanted to meet her, so I made the introductions."

"Wait, he wanted to met her?" Megan asked pointing at Hermione.

"Come on, now." Susan said quickly. "Granger's alright."

"Yeah, but look at her."

"What's wrong with her?" Harry asked, his tone becoming a tad angry.

"Well, for one thing..." Megan started, but was cut off by Hannah who recognized Harry's irritation.

"Nothing is wrong with her. Megan's just jealous." The blonde smiled, trying to diffuse the situation.

"Maybe Viktor likes her because she's one of the few girls around here who doesn't fall all over themselves to get close to him because he's famous." Harry said irritably.

Megan had the good sense to look shamed and the topic was dropped.

"Oh, my gods, I totally forgot to tell you all yesterday." Hannah sat up suddenly. "I was coming out of the bathroom on the second floor right before Lunch yesterday and I saw the whole thing happen."

"Well, don't leave us hanging in suspense." Susan said urging her friend to share whatever story had her so excited.

"Well, you know that Ron Weasley's been striking out with every girl he's asked to the ball, right?" Hannah said sitting forward so much that she was practically on top of the table.

"He asked me like I should be honored that he was even talking to me or something." Sally Anne said with a shiver.

"He asked me a couple of weeks ago, right after Herbology. I just looked at him like he was out of his mind. How does a boy like that come from

such a nice family. Ginny's sweet, and the twins are loads of laughs. Even Percy wasn't that bad." Megan exclaimed.

"He's been telling everyone that he was going to have the best looking witch on his arm for the Ball." Neville sighed. "He even said he might just ask Fleur Delacour, you know, the French Champion? Like it was going to be some big thrill for her or something."

"Well, he's clearly been striking out everywhere." Susan said flatly.

"And we're not the only ones to have noticed." Hannah said conspiratorially. "Eloise Midgen shoved him against the wall yesterday and told him that he was taking her. She actually threatened him. She said that if he refused, she knew a spell that would turn his manhood putrid green and make it smell like really old cheese and that the only way he'd ever get a girl to be with him is if she had no sense of smell. She was so scary that I think Weasley might have wet himself." Hannah laughed and the others had no choice but to join in.

"Well, at least he's got a date." Harry smirked. "Tracey Davis told me that Malfoy's two trolls, Crabbe and Goyle, might have to go to the Ball with each other. I just wonder which one will be the girl."

"Oh gods, Harry, my brain didn't need that mental picture" Susan nearly shrieked and swatted Harry's arm playfully.

After Lunch, Harry headed to his godfather's house. He had promised to join Sirius and Remus for Dinner, and was looking forward to seeing them, as always. His work towards the next Task had hit a dead end, and he desperately needed their advice now.

When he arrived, he was greeted as always with a warm hug from his godfather, but he was surprised to see they had company.

"Harry, this is my cousin Andromeda and her husband Ted. And the lovely young lady there is Nymphadora, but if you value life at all, you

will simply address her as Tonks."

Andromeda was a slender woman with shiny black hair, heavy lidded eyes and a friendly smile. Ted was a rather burly man. Not fat, but stocky, with a shock of sandy blonde hair and an easy going aura.

The young lady, as Sirius had introduced her, was very interesting looking. She was dressed in high work boots and fishnet stockings over ripped red leggings over black leggings and torn black denim shorts. She had a black hooded sweatshirt over a t-shirt with a picture of the Weird Sisters. Her hair was the brightest shade of bubble gum pink Harry had ever seen.

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks grinned as she waved to Harry, who smiled and waved back.

"It's nice to meet you all."

"We invited them to Dinner tonight because they're the only family I get along with."

"Yeah, you told me. Any family members who were even remotely interesting and..."

Harry and Sirius mimed blasting something with imaginary wands at the same time, and then laughed.

"We read about your participation in the First Task, and Sirius was filling us in on the details." Ted smiled as Harry took a seat in the sitting room.

"I must say I'm impressed. I don't think I could take on a dragon they way you did, even now, much less at fourteen."

"I should have come up with a back up plan. I had no idea I would exhaust myself." Harry said ruefully.

"How are you coming on preparing for the next Task?" Andromeda asked sweetly.

"Funny you should bring it up." Harry smiled. "I'm kind of stuck."

"What do you mean?" Remus asked from the kitchen, where he and Tonks were working on Dinner.

"I need a way to breathe underwater for an hour, at least. I thought of and have been practicing with a Bubblehead charm, but I can't see clearly. I thought of transfiguring myself, but I think it would be best if I keep my arms and hands, so I can use my wand. Are there any potions or something I could take?"

Everyone fell into silent contemplation for a moment. It was Ted that spoke up first.

"I don't know about potions, but there are a number of plants that might give you the desired effect."

"I was just thinking that, sweetheart." Andromeda said, patting her husband on the leg. "Something like Gillyweed."

Sirius clapped his hand to his forehead. "We should have thought of that, Moony."

"Right! That time in sixth year." Remus roared with laughter. "I'd forgotten that."

"I smell a story." Harry grinned, leaning forward in his seat. Andromeda and Ted also leaned forward, and Sirius began laughing, which left Remus to tell the tale.

"Peter was very gullible. And he was very much in love with Catherine Thompson." Remus began the tale. When Sirius could breath he added his comments to help the story along about how James convinced Peter that he could capture Catherine's heart by diving to the bottom of the lake and finding a true pearl. The story went on that Sirius managed to convince Peter that in order to get a pure pearl, one had to enter the lake without the taint of clothing.

"Since the pearls..." Sirius said, making air quotes when he said pearls,

"were supposed to be in the deepest part of the lake, we had to figure a way for him to breath, and we were studying water plants at the time.

So, we pooled some money and got a bit of Gillyweed. We then marched him down to the lake, watched him disrobe and dive into the lake."

"Once he was under the water, James ran into the castle and gathered as many girls as he could to greet Peter when he emerged."

"Peter comes spluttering out of the lake, confident he's found a true pearl, which of course he hadn't, as what James and I told him was a true pearl was just a pebble. But there he was, holding it in the air like a champion.

When he got his hair out of his face and saw all the girls staring and pointing and laughing, he dove right back in the water" Sirius howled, and everyone joined in.

"You two were awful, awful people." Andromeda said when she was finally able to breathe again.

"That, we were." Sirius confirmed with a smile, though Harry noticed a glint of shame in his eye.

"I think Gillyweed would be a good idea for you here, Harry, though I'd like it if you kept working on the Bubblehead charm as a back up." Sirius said, and Harry nodded.

"We'll place an order for you on Monday. I think we should get a few samples, so you can experiment, and know what to expect during the Task." Remus remarked.

"We've been trying to get familiar with the lake, but it's just so dark and cold." Harry said as he and the others went to the table to eat at Remus' invitation.

"Well, when Peter started talking to us again, he told us how useful the Gillyweed was. You should have no problems." Sirius said as he took a roll and passed the plate along. "Did you manage to get your dress robes

for the Ball?"

"Yes." Harry smiled. "Finished my Christmas shopping, as well. Sent Duncan's, Mark's and Stacy's presents this afternoon."

"Good on you." Sirius nodded proudly.

"Dumbledore told us that he was unable to convince Stacy's parents to let her come to the ball." Remus said. "Who did you end up asking?"

"Mandy Brocklehurst. But since then, I've barely had a chance to talk with her. Her friends are constantly popping up and interrupting us. I think she's starting to get really upset." Harry replied, dishing up roast potatoes.

"Well, you'll get plenty of time at the Ball, I'm sure." Ted smiled.

"To be honest, I really wish Dumbledore could have gotten Stacy over here. It would make things a lot easier."

"Well, Harry, you can't really blame her parents for wanting her at home on Christmas." Sirius looked at his godson.

"It might not have helped that Dumbledore kept calling him Harry."

Remus commented.

"Isn't that his name?" Tonks asked looking to Harry and Sirius, who was shaking his head now.

"We had to keep Harry's identity secret, so he was James Black while he was at Salem," Sirius explained.

"I always felt bad that I lied to my friends." Harry said. "I mean, just about my name. I was always honest with everything else, though. I was finally able to explain things to them in my last letter. It was nice to come clean, and they both said in their responses that they understood."

The Tonks family all agreed on Harry's belief in honesty, and the Dinner topics changed as Sirius' cousins got to know Harry better. Harry was fascinated by them, especially Nymphadora, who Harry discovered was

in her first year as an Auror. He knew that Sirius and his father had graduated the Auror program, but due to circumstances, they had been unable to begin active duty.

"Thought for sure I was going to fail because I'm so clumsy. I can barely walk on my own without tripping over my own feet, but, there's no one better in concealment."

"You're that good?" Harry asked interestedly.

"Dora's a metamorphagus." Ted said proudly, smiling at his daughter.

"A what?" Harry looked confused.

By way of explanation, Tonks changed her spiky pink hair to a deep shade of violet and grew it down to her shoulders before making her chest much larger. This last stunt gave both Remus and Sirius fuel for ridicule, as Harry had been unable to look away.

When Dinner was over, Harry said goodbye to the Tonks family and Remus as Sirius wished to escort Harry back up to the castle. They spoke about nothing of great importance, and Harry wondered if Sirius was just missing his godson. Since they'd come back to England, they hadn't seen each other quite as often as they were used to. Sirius insisted that Harry spend as much time as he could preparing for the Tournament, which meant Harry often stayed at the castle on the weekends. If things hadn't happened the way they had, Harry was sure he'd be packing for their annual trip to Florida, and the oceans of bikinis.

With that thought, Harry succumbed to a wave of depression.

There was a palpable feeling of excitement as the last week of classes went by. When the last class bell rang on Friday, Harry thought for sure that the castle would shake with all the cries of joy. Instead, it felt as if the level of intense anticipation rose.

Harry realized the day before Christmas eve what had the school so

wound up. As he, Cedric, Neville and Viktor met for their morning run, they saw McGonagall, Flitwick, Sinestra, and Hagrid working to finalize the rings for the Broom races the next day. Harry felt rather idiotic, as the topics of conversation were limited to that and the Yule ball.

"Are you guys ready for that?" Neville asked as he nodded towards where the professors were working in their thick winter cloaks.

"It's just another race." Harry shrugged. "Though I am excited to get up there. Does anyone know how many people signed up?"

"Only three people from Durmstrang, besides myself." Viktor said. "I think they were all intimidated by the idea, though they are anxious to witness it, I am sure."

"Loads of people in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw signed up." Cedric said as he watched the professors. "Cho told me she was going to, until she saw how many people were already signed up. She decided it might be more fun to watch this time, but she's hoping it catches on and maybe she can participate next year or something."

"Everyone who has a broom in Gryffindor signed up." Neville sighed.

"Did you?" Harry asked turning to Neville.

"No." The boy shook his head. "I don't own a broom. Besides, Hannah's happy I'm not competing. She said I could keep her warm."

Neville blushed as the other three boys wolf whistled.

"You guys have been spending a lot of time together." Harry observed.

"Yeah. She's so much nicer than I imagined, and she's been really patient with me and all. She helps me with my homework, and I've been able to help her with Herbology. By the way, you remember the advice you gave me when we first met, Harry? About focusing on the incantation and your intent? Well I told that to Hannah and she said it's helped her loads in Charms."

"Glad I could help you help your girlfriend." Harry smirked.

"We're not together." Neville quickly said. "But, if I don't make a complete ass of myself, I think I might ask her at the Ball."

"Smart move." Viktor said.

"What about you and Hermione?" Neville asked.

"Yeah. I've hardly gotten to spend anytime with her since you two met."

Harry said.

"I didn't mean to steal your friend." Viktor blushed, but Harry waved it off.

"I'm happy for her. I think she needed someone like you in her life, but I do miss talking to her outside of class."

"I will try to remedy that." Viktor grinned.

"It's not a super huge deal. Susan's been cool to hang out with, and Tracey and I have finally managed to fix our friendship. She's much cooler as a friend than she would have been as a girlfriend." Harry shrugged.

"She seemed a little possessive." Cedric pointed out.

"A little?" Harry's eyes were wide and all four boys laughed, remembering Harry's stories of Tracey's bizarre behavior.

The rest of the day, Harry spent in his room preparing his broom for the race the next day. He'd been rather flippant about his excitement, but now that it was only hours away, Harry could feel the oh-so-familiar rush of adrenaline coursing through him as he clipped the twigs and polished the handle of his Firebolt. So far as he knew, no one else owned a broom like his, but he also knew it wasn't the broom that won the race, but the person riding it. If he'd learned anything from all his year in the racing game, it was don't get overconfident.

The next morning, Harry and the others decided to take a break from

their routine. Harry woke up an hour later than he usually did, showered, dressed in his racing uniform from Salem, and went out to check the weather conditions. There was a fresh blanket of snow on the ground, and the air was bitterly cold. But, it was a bright, overcast day. Harry knew this would be good, as there would likely be no glare so he could see each ring clearly. On top of that, there was only the barest hint of wind.

Smiling, he went into the Great Hall for a light Breakfast. He was unsurprised to see it so full this early in the morning.

As he entered the Hall, he noticed a large group of people surrounding to redheads, he'd finally learned were the infamous Weasley twins. He remembered what great Beaters they were, but other than Quidditch, he'd not really spoken with them. He drew closer to find out what was going on when he heard his name.

"Five Galleons on Malfoy to win it all." Someone said.

"Pretty long odds on that." One of the twins said. "You've got nearly a hundred people out there today."

"Five galleons..." The unseen voice said and the redhead shrugged took the boy's money and gave him a slip of parchment. The boy, who Harry saw was wearing Slytherin colors dashed past him and took a seat at the Slytherin table, showing the parchment to Draco Malfoy, who smiled smugly.

"You guys are making bets?" Harry asked. Both twins looked up with identical grins.

"Indeed, we are." The first twin said. "We made a killing on you after the First Task."

"You're the long shot, again." The second said. "Viktor Krum is the shoo in, especially after what he did a few weeks ago."

"But he's never raced before." Harry pointed out. "In fact, I'm the only one out there today who has any experience."

"But, you are competing against the very best that our fair Hogwarts has to offer." The first said.

"And the worst." The second added.

"Good point." Harry smiled and waved as he headed up towards the Hufflepuff table, where Susan and Megan were talking over their toast.

"Good morning, Harry." Susan smiled as he took his seat. "Big day, huh?"

"Yeah. Did you make your bet?" Harry asked, nodding towards the twins.

"No. I don't like to gamble. Especially when I already know who's going to win it all." Susan smiled brightly.

"Yeah, who's that?" Harry asked, noticing the bright sparkle in Susan's brown eyes.

"Cedric, of course." She laughed, making Harry drop his head to the table with a heavy thud.

"Don't worry, Harry, I'll be cheering for you." Megan laughed.

"So will I."

There was no mistaking the almost ethereal voice of Luna Lovegood, and Harry spun in his seat and gave the short blonde a friendly hug. When he pulled back she handed him a thin chain with a single Butterbeer cork on it.

"It'll bring you luck." She smiled.

Harry immediately threaded it over his head and around his neck, and tucked it in his jersey.

"Thank you, Luna."

"You're very welcome, Harry." Luna smiled brightly. As she turned to go, Susan stopped her.

"Luna, would you like to sit with us in the stands?" The redhead asked.

Harry saw Megan give a puzzled look but chose to ignore it for now.

"Oh yes, I would. Thank you, Susan." Luna said, a little of the dream-like expression on her face dissolving as she smiled.

"Then, we'll save you a spot." Susan smiled and Luna wandered off to get her Breakfast.

"That was really sweet of you." Harry said, and Susan shrugged.

"I just thought it might be nice to get to know more of the people you seemed to be friendly with." Susan shrugged picking up a muffin.

Harry felt a surge of the infatuation he'd buried a few weeks ago when he'd convinced himself that Susan was nothing more than a friend.

"Yeah, but she's so weird." Megan pointed out.

"It's part of her charm." Harry argued. "Trust me, you hang around her for just a little while, and you will want to spend a lot more time with her.

She's blunt, but in a very charming way."

At nine o'clock, Dumbledore rose from the Head Table and asked that anyone who was competing in the day's races bring themselves down to the Quidditch Pitch.

Harry, along with around a hundred others rose and made their way out of the Great Hall. Harry went to his room to collect his broom, gloves, goggles and a cloak to keep himself warm when he wasn't racing.

When he arrived at the pitch, he found Cedric and a few of the older Hufflepuff's friends.

"They're lining us up by year." Cedric said, pointing out the long lines that were forming. Harry thanked Cedric and headed over to the fourth year line. Harry saw that the shortest line was made up of second years. He also saw that there wasn't a single first year. Harry wondered if the youngest students were too frightened to compete, or if there was another reason. He was pulled from his musings by two voices.

"My gods, Weasley. What did you do, go into the forest and collect twigs to attach to that branch? We all know you can't afford a real broom."

"Stuff it, Malfoy. I'll be surprised if you actually finish the first heat.

Everyone who's seen you play Quidditch knows you can barely stay on your broom."

Harry turned to see his least favorite people nearly nose to nose, which was saying something as Ron Weasley was so tall. Other fourth years were gathering around to watch, and Harry actually felt a bit of concern for Ron, as Malfoy's two hulking goons were standing on either side of him, as usual.

"At least I'm on the team." Malfoy sneered. "The best you could do is to daydream about licking my boots when I finish a game."

"But, I thought that was your father's job." Weasley countered. Malfoy's pale face blanched and he shoved Ron, who went to throw a punch.

Luckily, Dean Thomas caught the hotheaded Gryffindor and pulled him away.

"If you get in trouble for hitting him, you won't get to race. Save it." Dean said wisely, as Seamus stepped between Malfoy and Weasley, glaring at the Slytherin.

Harry shook his head. "There's at least one in every race." He thought, as he looked over all the other competitors.

It was then that Madam Hooch stepped up, whistling to get their attentions.

"You should have all read the Rules, so I won't waste time going through them all again." She said loudly. Harry then noticed the stands were filling up and the noise from the crowd was getting louder and louder. He also noticed a few seventh year volunteers standing behind Madam Hooch, all clutching very old and tired looking brooms that Harry

guessed belonged to the school.

"Good, they've got monitors." Harry smiled. Monitors hovered near rings to make sure no one tried to cheat and say they'd made it through. Even though the rings were charms to glow as people passed through, some racers were known to try and cheat, saying they'd passed with someone else.

"As there are only ten second years, they will participate in the first heat. The winner of that heat will wait until the semi-final eliminations. As for the rest of you, we will be running heats of no more than twenty racers at a time. When you hear your name called, you will proceed to the starting line. When the cannon sounds, you will then be allowed to mount your broom and take off. You must complete five full laps, passing through each hoop. If you miss a hoop, you will be disqualified. The top three racers in each lap will move into the semi-final eliminations. Second years, you may now take the field.

Harry and all the other participants went to the side lines and sat down to watch the first heat. Harry grimaced when he saw not a single one of the competitors take off their cloaks. He suddenly realized that it was likely that no one would remove their cloaks, and that he would have a strong advantage when he took to the air. Any racer worth his salt knew the less drag you had, the better. Still, they all had to learn on their own. It was just common sense, really.

The second years proved to be quite entertaining. It was clear to Harry that none of them had really spent a lot of time on a broom. They were slow and unsure, focusing more on getting through each hoop than getting a head of the pack.

In the end, two girls and a boy were advanced. None of the second years seemed upset about failing, though. In fact, they were all laughing and

patting each other on the backs as they headed off the field.

"Listen for your name to be called, and take the field." Madam Hooch called out. The next heat were made up of third years, and again, none of them removed their cloaks. Though all of them were much better than the second years, with a few notable exceptions. Harry was unsurprised to see Ginny Weasley place first in her heat. She was an exceptional flyer in Harry's opinion. And from the moment she kicked off the ground, she outstripped everyone she'd gone against, and looked fully exhilarated when she touched down.

When the third years were done, Madam Hooch once again began calling names, this time from the fourth years.

"Finnegan, Thomas, Weasley, Entwhistle, Boot, MacDougal, Midgeon, Turpin, Cornfoot, Hopkins, Macmillan, Smith, Crabbe, Goyle, Malfoy, Potter, Romanovsk, Petronov, take the field."

Harry rose and stripped off his cloak, adjusted his gloves and with his broom in his hand, took to the field. He saw all the others looking at him strangely as he stood there looking up at the first ring. He knew they were all wondering why he'd taken off his cloak as it was so cold. They weren't allowed to wonder for very long.

The thunderous sound of the starting cannon sounded, and Harry threw his leg over his broom and kicked off. He was almost flat on his broom, elbows tucked in, head as low as he could keep it without losing precious field of vision. Harry didn't spare a glance behind him, but he knew that, thanks to his years of experience, he'd left his fellows far behind. As such, he had no difficulty slipping through each and every ring with ease. He even began passing stragglers on his second lap. With each lap, it became harder to slip through the hoops, as the stragglers bunched up.

Still, Harry touched down well ahead of his competition. He turned to see

who else made it on to the next bracket. Lisa Turpin landed next to him, her face bright red from the cold. Harry smiled when he saw that she had lost her own cloak, and guessed she must have shrugged it off right before taking to the air. Harry had to give her a high five as she bent to retrieve her cloak. She had been the only one to follow Harry's example, and it had paid off.

Draco Malfoy landed next, looking very smug. He gave Harry a superior nod and began heading for the sidelines again.

"He tried knocking me off my broom." Lisa said contemptuously "I hope someone runs him into a tree or something."

"Don't worry." Harry smiled. "He'll get his."

The rest of the participants landed nearby, and Harry noticed that Ron Weasley was just ahead of Crabbe and Goyle. Harry thought the redhead was going to cry with as pitiful as he looked. Harry wondered if Malfoy would rub it in his face that he'd done so poorly, and then realized that he most likely would. Malfoy was a bully after all.

"Ron." Harry said, sidling up to the redhead. "Don't worry about it. To be honest, I'm surprised most of you are doing as well as you are. My first Race, I ran right into the post holding the first hoop."

"S'alright." Ron said sulkily and wandered off. Harry wondered if Luna might take advantage of his sour mood and show him what a great girl she was by finding a nice empty broom closet.

"Why do I think of these things?" He asked himself after feeling the bile rise in his throat.

Harry watched the next three heats with interest. Apparently, everyone learned from Harry's run and all the competitors removed their cloaks before taking to the field. One seventh year boy even removed his shirt to much laughter and cat calls.

Harry was unsurprised to see Cedric and Viktor place in their runs.

Viktor, of course, placed first in his heat, while Cedric led the sixth years.

Harry congratulated each of his friends as they finished and returned to the sidelines.

With the seventh years finished, Dumbledore called from the stands that the final race would be run immediately after Lunch.

Harry was met by Susan, Hannah, Neville, Luna and Hermione.

"That was amazing flying, Harry!" Hermione smiled as she hugged her friend.

"Thanks, Hermione." Harry smiled

"I told you that charm would bring you luck." Luna smiled as she hugged Harry as well.

"I never doubted you, Luna." Harry smiled. "Speaking of which, I think someone else could use a bit of Luna magic."

Harry pointed to Ron, who was following Seamus and Dean up to the castle.

"While nothing would please me more than to take his mind off of his horrible defeat, I'm afraid that he would be most unwelcoming of my company at the moment. His head is so full of wrackspurts right now, I don't even think he'd noticed if I were to remove all of my clothing in front of him."

Harry gave her a squeeze and told her he thought that was unlikely. Luna shrugged and simply stated that it just wasn't the right time for them yet. Susan and Hannah hugged Harry as well and Neville clapped him on the back.

"We were all wondering why you took off your cloak," Hannah was saying. "Then when you took off, Neville spotted it right away. He said by the way you positioned yourself, you were obviously eliminating as

much drag as you could."

"He's a smart one that Neville." Harry smiled.

"Hands off, Potter." Hannah grinned, linking her arm through Neville's possessively. "Get your own boy."

"Thankfully, I'm not interested in dudes." Harry grinned. Hermione and Susan both whispered "Thank Gods."

"Why didn't you tell us about taking our cloaks off?" Ernie Macmillan shouted as Harry and the others sat down. Cedric, Cho and Viktor had met up with them on the way in and they all sat together at the Hufflepuff table.

"Oh, come on, it's just basic common sense." Harry looked appalled.

"Besides, would you have told me if the situation were reversed?"

Ernie looked as if he were going to say yes, but realized immediately that everyone would see through that lie.

"I didn't even know Lisa Turpin could fly, much less beat out all those others." Justin remarked. "She was stunning."

"Should I be jealous?" Sally Anne asked, looking a bit perturbed.

"No, sweetie. She's much too tall for me." Justin grinned, kissing Sally Anne on her cheek. "Besides, I like my girls feisty."

"There's some really good flyers left now." Cedric said before taking a long drink from his goblet.

"That third year girl who placed first." Viktor said. "Your friend, right?"

Hermione nodded. "She was flying one of her brother's brooms, but she's still really good. She wants to play Chaser on the house team next year, and she's been flying since she was six."

"She will be one to watch out for out there." Viktor said determinedly.

"What's this last heat going to be like, Harry?" Cho asked.

"Traditionally, the number laps are doubled and the rings are made a bit

smaller. So it's not as easy for say three or four people to fly through at once. It's more competitive for placement. If you're running neck and neck with someone, someone's going to have to give up and allow the other person through the hoop first, or risk missing it. And just so you guys know, I'm not letting you go before me." Harry grinned wickedly. "If you can even keep up with me, that is."

Laughter broke out at the table, and they enjoyed their Lunch, listening to Harry, Cedric and ,to a lesser extent, Viktor trash talk each other.

When Lunch was finished, Dumbledore announced that the last race would take place in a half an hour. Harry was heading out of the Great Hall along with the rest of the school when he felt someone tug on his arm and drag him out of the throng of student.

"Hey, Mandy." Harry smiled when he finally saw who'd taken him out of the herd.

"I didn't get a chance this morning to tell you good luck, but after that race, it was clear that you didn't need it."

"I still appreciate the sentiment." Harry smiled, and Mandy couldn't stop her own smile.

"With Krum and Cedric out there, I think you're going to have a much tougher time." She said. Harry shrugged, and reached up to brush a lock of hair out of her face, making her shiver slightly.

"So, I was thinking I could wish you luck now." she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Before Harry could say anything, she stood on tiptoe, holding his biceps for support, and softly placed her lips on his in a very sweet, lingering kiss.

Harry had been stunned by her boldness, but could not say that it was unwelcome. He smiled and thanked her. Mandy simply blushed and started for the door. Harry caught up with her and they walked down to

the pitch in comfortable silence, each stealing glances at the other.

Mandy went up to the stands, while Harry headed to the starting line where the others were all lined up, each and every one of them having discarded their cloaks. Harry smirked as he saw Draco Malfoy hugging himself, his teeth chattering, while just behind him, Ginny Weasley was doing stretches to loosen herself up.

"Alright." Madam Hooch said as she stepped in front of the competitors again. "This is the final race of the day. There will be twelve laps all together. So you are aware, as per the rules, the hoops have been made smaller. You may find that you won't be able to go through a hoop if you are right next to someone. As before, you must pass through each hoop or risk disqualification. At the sound of the cannon, you may mount your broom and kick off."

Harry wished luck to Cedric and Krum, who had taken spots next to Harry. Once again, Harry made sure his goggles were secure and his gloves were on tight. He dug his right foot in the ground and bent at the knees, holding his broom to his left so he could mount and kick off at once. Most every one would wait until both feet were on the ground before kicking off, but Harry knew you lost precious seconds in that.

The cannon thundered, and Harry threw up his left leg while kicking up hard with his right. Harry was the first in the air, followed closely by Lisa and Ginny, with Krum, Cedric and Malfoy right behind.

Tucking his elbows in and flattening himself as much as he could afford, Harry made it through the first ring with Cedric behind him. Harry heard a loud moan from the crowd and wondered what had happened, but didn't dare look around.

After he passed the third ring, Harry saw Krum in the corner of his eye. Harry had never had any illusions about the threat that Krum posed, but,

Krum was inexperienced at racing. On the Quidditch field, Krum was king, but this was Harry's yard, and here, he was the big dog.

Harry barrel rolled through the fifth hoop, angling himself to the left for a straight shot through the sixth hoop, Krum having to give ground and then pulling even with Harry after every hoop.

After passing the tenth hoop, Harry was shocked to see that he and Krum now had Cedric keeping pace with them. Harry grinned widely as he was now neck and neck and neck with his friends. But it was still his sport, and they needed to be schooled. Harry dropped his head a bit and slipped through the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth rings easily, trying hard not to laugh at the thrill of racing with such good competitors.

Krum managed to slip past him on the fourteenth ring, but Harry quickly resolved that slipping under Krum and popping up right in front of the Bulgarian.

Cedric had fallen prey to Ginny Weasley, however, and was having to really fight for each ring with the talented redhead.

"You are making this very difficult." Viktor shouted at Harry as he once again managed to pull even with the fourth Champion. Harry simply laughed and shot through the twentieth hoop, starting his second lap. He was followed by Krum, Ginny Weasley, Cedric, Lisa Turpin, Katie Bell, Angelina Johnson, Marcus Belby, Michael Corner, Marcus Flint, Matthew Farnswood, Romilda Vane, William Roberts, Draco Malfoy, Benjamin Dickinson and finally little Daniel Watson.

The standings stayed like that for the next six laps, with Harry and Krum seeming to fight for first place. Anyone with a set of Omnioculars would be able to see the wide grins each boy had as they passed through each hoop. The crowds were on their feet now as the racers shot through for their eighth lap. It was in this lap they had their first disqualification, and

to no one's surprise it was Draco Malfoy.

Draco had slammed into the side of one of the hoops early on in the race, and had been fighting to gain ground ever since. At the start of the eighth lap, he had finally managed to crawl out of the last five flyers, but had the choice of allowing second year Matthew Farnswood through the hoop first or go around. He chose unwisely, and Madam Hooch with her incredibly keen eye sight, had seen him try to cheat.

The next three laps were nail-bitingly intense, as Cedric and Ginny fought for position right behind Krum, who was battling Harry for domination.

Krum was beginning to realize that Harry was far too well practiced at this game. He now understood how Harry must have felt when they flew against each other during the Quidditch match. He was flying against one of the best, and it was a privilege to be doing so well. That didn't mean he was going to make it easy on the younger boy. He was going to make Harry earned each and every hoop.

The flyers tore through the twentieth hoop, starting the final lap now, with Harry still leading the pack and Krum tearing at his heels. Ginny was very close behind the Bulgarian and Cedric nearly on top of her.

Katie Bell came next with Angelina Johnson, Michael Corner, Lisa Turpin, Marcus Flint, Michael Corner, Romilda Vane, Marcus Belby, Matthew Farnswood, William Roberts, Benjamin Dickinson and Daniel Watson bringing up the rear still.

Viktor tore after Harry, hating that he had to give up each hoop, but Harry had them dialed in, and was already angling his broom for the next ring before he'd even passed through the current hoop. What was worse was that he'd been unable to get any sort of retort to his jibes and trash talk. It was like Harry was nothing more than a grinning guided rocket. Cedric was having his own issues with the tenacious redhead girl, who

was making this race one of the hardest things he'd ever done. When he'd chanced a glance at the girl, all he saw was the most intense look of focus he'd ever seen on someone's face in his life. Ginny was not going to give up.

Harry led Viktor through the seventh, eight and ninth hoops with the Bulgarian trying to pull ahead after each ring. Harry knew that in the open air, Krum was king. His was so agile on his broom, and incredibly fast. But in a race it wasn't about how well you could maneuver. It was about how in sync with your broom you could be. The slightest misjudgment could force you to the back of the pack with little to no chance of gaining it back. While during a Quidditch match you could fly by the seat of your pants, during a race you had to be thinking three turns ahead.

As he passed through the twelfth hoop, Harry glances at Viktor and gave a predatory smile. Viktor could only smile in return as Harry suddenly put on a burst of speed, dropping his head a bit and shooting forward through the last few hoops.

Harry touched down and turned to greet Viktor as he landed just a few seconds later and the two boys shook hands, both smiling like five year olds.

"That was impressive." Viktor said. "Now, we can both say that we went against the very best."

"As much as it would please me to say I'm the best..." Harry began, but Viktor shook his head.

"Today, my friend, you are the best." Viktor said with authority, and Harry thanked his Bulgarian friend.

Ginny set down next, screaming in delight that she had placed behind Viktor Krum. She was followed by Lisa Turpin and then Cedric.

"I was gaining on Ginny there, and had to pull back to avoid hitting a ring. I had no idea Lisa was right behind me. She just ripped through the hoop right behind Ginny, and I knew I was never going to get my spot back." Cedric grinned as he greeted Harry and Viktor.

One by one the other racers came in, some looking grumpy while others, especially the younger kids, looked absolutely thrilled, especially Daniel Watson who been dead last the entire race. Harry shook hands with each racer.

"That was so fun!" Daniel Watson grinned as Harry greeted him. "Can we go again?"

"Now why is it you never fly like that in the races at home?" Sirius shouted as he and Remus came over to congratulate Harry.

"Oh, please, like you could do better." Harry laughed as he was hugged by his godfather.

"Damn proud of you, kid. Damn proud." Sirius laughed holding his godson tightly.

Harry was no stranger to winning, but this race had been different. He was sharing a passion with his new friends and an entire country. Even if he'd lost, he would have felt as good. Well, maybe a little less so, but still today had been one of the very best days of his life.

At Dinner that night, Harry, Cedric and Krum were hounded by people wishing to hear their thoughts on the final race. Harry was just happy to be among so many friends, as Viktor went on about how much like a grinning statue Harry had been. With Mandy joining them for Dinner and sitting close to him, Harry felt like things just couldn't get better.

15. Chapter 15

Harry awoke Christmas morning feeling stiff and sore from the previous day's races. It had felt like an eternity since he'd competed like that, and

his body was making him pay for it. Still, as he lay in his bed, he just could not stop smiling.

Harry had the opportunity to introduce his friends to Sirius and Remus, the latter of which knew nearly everyone, as he had been their Defense teacher the previous year. They celebrated with Harry and his friends and then went to speak to Dumbledore, as they did at least once a month.

Harry guessed they dropped off his presents as well, as they had plans to journey south into London the next day. As Harry would be quite occupied, Sirius felt it would be a very good time to go call on a few "old friends".

Harry was momentarily saddened knowing he wouldn't see his godfather on Christmas, but it passed when he sat up and beheld the very large mountain of packages waiting to be opened.

The first gift he snatched up was from his best friend Mark. Harry opened the envelope first and read Mark's messy scrawl.

Harry,

Wow, it's still weird writing that. Look, when I see you, if I call you James... well, you're just going to have to deal with it.

So, a lot's happened here. First off, we're doing terrible at Quidditch this season. It's like the spark has gone out of the team. You need to come back and whip these guys into shape. Seriously.

On the other hand, our race team is doing better than ever. Maybe you were holding them back all this time. HA HA! Actually I think it was that Hanson and Travis graduated. I think you'd be in the top five this year now that they're gone.

Kelly and I broke up, though I think I saw it coming for a while. She'd been flirting with that total dick Ken Waters. You know, that big jack ass with the really strange looking chin? Yeah, well, they started going out. I was bummed,

until Jennifer Bakerson started talking to me. JENNIFER BAKERSON! We've been dating three weeks now. She is so much cooler than we'd ever hoped she could be. Looks, brains, and she's got this incredibly dark sense of humor. It's like we're meant to be!

Stacy and I still hang out. She told me that the Headmaster for that school you're at came to talk to her parents about her attending some Ball with you. She was really upset that she couldn't go.

Dude, I think I should tell you. I don't know if you've been writing to her or not, but... brace yourself... She started going out with Duncan. Yeah, our Duncan. I kind of think she's dating him just because she can't be with you, and I would never cross that line. I know how much you like her. I can't say I blame her, really. She's super hot, and you're not here and all. I just thought you should know.

Anyway, I need to get this out so you get it by Christmas. I hope you enjoy your gift and show it off to all your new friends. I miss you. It's just not as fun getting into trouble without you here.

Mark

P.S. Thanks for all the pictures of your friends. The picture of that girl Tracey is the most popular picture in our dorm! Let her know she has a growing fan club.

Harry laughed hard as he imagined letting Tracey know that she had admirers across the pond, and he picked up Mark's gift. He tore off the wrapping to find a photo album, overflowing with pictures from his first year at Salem Academy to the presents. Every page had photos of his friends waving and running and making faces. The last ten pages were all pictures of his friends and teachers taken quite recently, the last one being Mark standing next to Jennifer Bakerson, who was holding his hand and leaning against him as he waved. Duncan, a thin boy with

longer dark blonde hair and a sly grin hands stuffed into the pockets of his trousers. And Stacy, looking just as beautiful as she had the last time he'd seen her.

Harry felt a stab at his heart as he looked at Duncan and Stacy. Sure, she was free to date whomever she wished. After all, he wasn't there, so they couldn't be together, but still, he felt a bit betrayed that Duncan had stepped up. Yet, at the same time, he couldn't think of anyone other than Mark who would treat Stacy the way she deserved.

Closing the album, he set it aside, deciding he would take it to Breakfast to show his friends, and dove into the rest of his presents. Sirius and Remus had gotten him several interesting new things, including a pocket Sneakoscope, new Quidditch gloves, and to Harry's astonishment, a dragon hide jacket, made from a Hungarian Horntail. Harry ran his fingers over the black material and smiled. The jacket was simply too cool for words.

Hermione had gotten him a very nice broom servicing kit, which was kept in a leather case. Duncan had sent him a set of Omnioculars with the last school race recorded on them.

"Forget what Marks says, we needed you out there." The note had read.

Harry had to agree after he watch the dismal performances of his teammates.

Tracey and Daphne had gone in together on Harry's gift and gotten him a very fine silver chain with a fang of some sort on it. Harry put it around his neck at once, admiring how macho it made him look, and then laughing when he heard Sirius and Remus laughing at him in his head. Having Sirius as a Godfather had the wonderful effect of keeping you humble.

Cedric had given him a book on advanced transfiguration. Harry read

through a few pages quite captivated by some of the spells held within.

Harry felt he would need to study this book carefully.

Harry opened Mandy's gift to find a book on Runes. Harry remembered more than a few conversations with the shy brunette in the Library revolving around their mutual interest in the subject. Harry thought it might come in handy in future assignments.

Hannah had gotten him a rather fancy set of inks and quills, with a note which told him that he was to use it to write his friends, no matter where he went.

Susan had sent him a journal, which she had written in the first page.

Harry,

This is a self-dictating journal. All you need to do is set the quill it came with on the page, and then speak out loud. It's similar to a quick-quotes quill. The journal is charmed so that only you can read it, too, so it will always be private. I hope that you will use it to document your time here at Hogwarts, so that you never forget the people whose lives you impacted the most. Mine especially.

I am so grateful that I've had the opportunity to become your friend over the last few months. After spending time with you and getting to know you, I felt that you might appreciate something like this journal.

Love,

Susan

Harry made a mental note to specially thank Susan for her thoughtfulness. He dove back into his pile of presents, which had been seriously decimated now. He found a book on Quidditch teams of Europe from Neville.

There was a package from Stacy which contained a very warm looking scarf and matching gloves.

"For those cold winter nights, when you have no one to keep you warm. I miss you. XOXO" the note had read. It came with a picture of the two of them taken right before Autumn break, moments before she had kissed him, and then his life got all discombobulated.

Even Ginny, whom he'd barely spoken to, had gotten him a small crystal dragon, which he set on his bedside table, where it would catch the sun each morning.

The most interesting gift yet, was from Luna. Harry suppressed a shiver as he tore open the paper. He was torn between laughing and finding the girl to discern the meaning of the gift. After all, he'd never received underwear from a girl before. Harry felt he should consider himself lucky that they were boxers. They could have been something truly embarrassing.

Truth was, they weren't bad. Three pairs, all of which were decked out with different patterns. His favorite was the fire breathing dragons, which he chose to wear when he finished with his shower and dressed for breakfast. He just hoped she didn't ask to have him model them for her.

The very last gift came with a note in a very tidy scrawl.

"Your father left this in my possession before he died. I think it is long past time that it was given to you, as I'm sure he would have wanted."

Harry opened the package to find a very beautiful cloth that looked like woven liquid. He pulled it out of the box it had come in and found that it was a cloak. But not like any cloak he'd ever seen before. He wrapped it around his shoulders and nearly fell over when he saw his body disappear.

At once he knew what it was. He'd heard about this very cloak many times over the years. Sirius often mentioned it when he spoke about pranks he and Harry's father had committed. It was the infamous

Invisibility Cloak.

Harry couldn't wait to tell Sirius about its return, much less the chance to try it out. Immediately, Harry began to imagine the places he and Mark might go, and how their adventures would reach a new level of excitement with this in their arsenal.

He was broken out of his thoughts and plans when his stomach gave a very audible grumble.

Harry practically ran to the Great Hall with his photo album clutched in his hand. He arrived at the same time as the Ravenclaw fourth years, and he hugged Mandy and thanked her for the Runes book. She smiled and held up her wrist to show she was wearing the silver charm bracelet he'd gotten her.

"What's that?" She asked noticing the book he held.

"Come sit with me and you'll see." He smiled. The shy brunette waved to her friends and headed over to the Hufflepuff table, where most of Harry's friends were gathering. Hermione rushed over to him and hugged him tightly, thanking him over and over again for the two books on Salem Academy he'd gotten her.

"Calm down, Hermione, I just thought you'd like to read about another school. You're always talking about Hogwarts, A History. I thought it would make a nice change of pace."

"I can't wait to read them both." She squealed in delight.

Neville patted his shoulder and thanked him for the wand holster and showed that he was wearing it now. Others came by to thank him for his thoughtful gifts and Harry, with Mandy at his side, sat with the Hufflepuffs to enjoy breakfast, where Harry started passing around the photo album so his new friends could see pictures of his old friends.

Most of the boys had similar reactions of lust to Stacy and Jennifer, while

most of the girls swooned over Mark. Harry decided never to tell his friend about this, or he might find it difficult to get into his room with Mark and his ego. There was a small amount of chortles when Harry called Tracey Davis over to let her know about her growing contingent of fans at Salem Academy. Tracey simply smiled and told them all that they needed to fall in line with the obviously intelligent masses at Salem Academy.

When breakfast was finished, people began heading off in different directions. Some to more closely inspect their presents, others to study. Actually that had only been Hermione, but Harry guessed that her plans changed when she ran into Viktor, who was getting a late start.

Harry asked Mandy to take a walk outside with him for a bit. Mandy, smiling bashfully, agreed and had to run up to Ravenclaw tower to fetch her cloak and gloves. Harry took the time to get his own cloak and put on the new scarf and gloves Stacy had sent him.

He met Mandy in the Entrance Hall, and they headed out together into the snow covered grounds. They headed down to the Lake, both feeling incredibly nervous.

"Have a good Christmas so far?" Harry asked.

Mandy nodded and brushed some of her breeze blown hair out of her face. "Sure. But, then again, any morning you wake up to a pile of presents is always nice."

"Good point." Harry nodded and Mandy chuckled softly.

"Thank you for asking me out for a walk. To be honest, I don't know if I wanted to listen to Su, Padma, and Lisa talk about their dates for the rest of the day. If I have to hear one more bit of advice from them, I might just pull out all of my hair."

"That would be an interesting look." Harry smiled, and Mandy shoved

him playfully, looking appalled, but her eyes were bright with mirth.

"We haven't been able to spend much time together since I asked you to be my date." Harry smiled.

"At least not alone. Not to put any pressure on you, but they seem to think we're going to get married or something." Mandy's blush had nothing to do with the cold. "I'm curious as to why you're here. I thought you would've gone to see your godfather or something."

"I would have, but he and my uncle went to London for the day." Harry shrugged.

"Well, their loss is my gain, I suppose." Mandy smiled and Harry felt himself get warm. They spent the next couple of hours simply strolling the grounds. As they got cold they walked closer together. Mandy eventually linked her arm with Harry's as they made their way around the grounds.

They were beginning to head back towards the main entrance of the school when Mandy was hit in the head by a snowball. She gasped in surprise and quickly wiped the excess snow of her face. Harry looked for the assailant but couldn't figure out who exactly had thrown the projectile, as they had unwittingly walk right into a wild snowball fight. Mandy, angry about being hit, gather up a large handful of snow, shaped it haphazardly and threw it at the closest person, missing them badly.

"Wow," Harry smirked, "That was rather pathetic."

"Oh, shut up." Mandy rolled her eyes.

Another white missile whizzed past them, narrowly missing Harry. So far as he was concerned, it was a formal declaration of war. Mandy laughed as Harry scooped up some snow, formed it into a near perfect sphere and threw it hard, hitting Dean Thomas right in the side of the head.

"I'm getting out of here before I get hurt." Mandy laughed, quickly

running for the safety of the castle. She didn't go in as Hermione, Viktor, Susan and Luna were all sitting close to the castle where they could watch the battle safely.

So engrossed was Harry in the fight, that he never saw Mandy or many of the other girls slip back into the castle. It wasn't until nearly an hour after he'd joined in the battle that he caught sight of Neville, who was laughing hysterically at Zacharias Smith, who'd just been pelted with a number of snowballs courtesy of Fred and George, masters of banishing their weapons at their prey.

"Hey, have you noticed that this has become something of a sausage fest?" Harry asked Neville, who looked at him strangely.

"A what?"

"There's no girls. I was sure Hannah was out here covering you a while ago." Harry pointed out, ducking under one of Fred Weasley's projectiles.

"She went in to get ready for the Ball. A lot of the girls did." Neville smiled right before he got hit right in the face by one of Lee Jordan's weapons.

"It's still four hours away!" Harry exclaimed.

"Oh, Harry." Fred shouted as he banished another snowball at Harry, who dodge it and returned fire. "You know so little of women."

"No kidding." Harry said rolling out of the way of a bigger boy's volley.

"So, oh very wise one, please to explain."

"It takes them much longer than guys because guys don't spend much time on their hair, nor do they wear makeup." George said. He then let out an ear piercing high pitched shriek that would have embarrassed little girls, when Lee Jordan snuck up behind him and dumped a handful of snow into the back of his pants. Everyone still out in the freezing winter afternoon who had been a part of the battle fell over clutching

their sides in laughter. The snowball fight pretty much ended after that, as George was much more interested in making Lee pay for his crime. Harry and the others began heading back up to the castle when it became too cold outside, and the sun started going down. He knew the Ball was supposed to start with dinner, and he was already very hungry. He went to his room to begin getting ready, waving to the others who were all heading in different directions to do the same.

After a quick shower, Harry attempted to tame his hair into something less porcupine-ish. His hair had apparently decide to give him a bit of a reprieve as it cooperated to a small extent.

Harry then got into his dress robes, which he was very pleased to discover were much more comfortable than he'd hoped. In fact they were only a bit less comfortable than his favorite jeans.

Having promised to meet Mandy in the Entrance Hall at a quarter to seven, Harry gave himself one last, long look to make sure he was presentable, tucked his wand into its holster, and headed out to meet his date.

Harry was suddenly struck by an attack of anxiety. He was just now realizing what a big deal this whole thing was. The Entrance Hall was already beginning to fill up with students, all dressed smartly in dress robes or exquisite dresses. Well, mostly. Harry saw Ron Weasley in what looked like a bad throw rug. The shirt of his robes was a mess of yellowed ruffles, and he looked incredibly surly. His expression changed to one of embarrassed fear when Eloise Midgeon, who was wearing a rather flattering dress for someone of her size, took his arm and lead him towards the front of the cue.

"Hey, Harry." Neville greeted as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

Ginny Weasley had walked down with him, and came to greet Harry as

well.

"Looking good, Nev." Harry said. Neville smiled and pretended to flick some lint of his shoulder, making Harry laugh. He turned to Ginny and smiled.

"You look amazing."

Ginny was wearing a shimmering pale green dress, with her fiery red hair pulled back into a simple braid.

"Thank you, Harry, but you're a bit too late. I have a date." She grinned.

"But, you will save me a dance, right?"

"Of course." He smiled.

"Oh, wow." Neville said, looking over Harry shoulder. Harry turned to see Hannah, followed by Susan, who was being escorted by Ernie, who looked very nervous.

Hannah seemed to float to Neville, who took her hand and just stared in awe at her appearance. Harry had to admit to himself that he now understood why all the girls had gone to get ready so early. There wasn't a single one of them who wasn't breathtaking.

Hannah had given her blonde hair an elegant curl, giving her the look of some movie goddess from the forties that Harry had seen on TV. Her dress was a bright red, which she had painted her lips to match.

"I have no words." Neville said softly, which made Hannah smile brightly.

"That's praise enough." She said and allowed herself to be escorted into the line.

"She takes the praise, but I did all the work." Susan grinned. Her hair was tied in a sophisticated knot showing off her slender neck. Her lilac dress accentuated her natural curves, and Harry found it hard to keep from drooling a bit.

"But she said that she did your hair and stuff in the Common Room."

Ernie said, earning him a small glare from his date.

"You look fantastic, Susan." Harry smiled. She did in fact look better than fantastic, but Harry was still fervently denying that he felt anything more for Susan than friendship. The truth was, he wanted to punch Ernie and escort Susan himself. That is, until he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to behold the closest thing to perfection he'd ever seen.

Mandy's dress was a strapless powder blue wonder. She wore a pair of silver strappy heels that put her nearly as tall as Harry. Her shoulder length brown hair was curlier than usual, but left to fall around her cream colored shoulders.

"I...uh...just...just, wow." Harry remarked and Mandy blushed, lowering her eyes. Harry lifted her chin so her could see into her soft brown eyes. He bent forward and kissed her lips ever so softly, making her blush a bit more. "You really do look like a vision." Harry smiled.

"Thank you." She said staring into his green orbs.

"Mister Potter!" Called Professor McGonagall. "Mister Potter, over here, if you please. No, no, Miss Brocklehurst, you as well."

Harry and Mandy walked over to the Deputy Headmistress and found that she had herded all the Champions and their dates together. Harry greeted Cedric and Cho, Viktor and Hermione, who had undergone a near impossible transformation, and he even tried to compliment Fleur who gave a polite smile, but said nothing to him. Cedric gave a soft shrug, while Krum looked at her with disdain. Clearly, he thought the French girl was being immensely rude.

The doors to the Great Hall opened and students began filling inside.

Harry turned to head in with the others when Professor McGonagall stopped him.

"No, Mister Potter. The Champions will make their entrance when the

rest of the students are seated. You will all be sitting at the Head table with the judges." She informed them all. "When Dinner is finished, you will take to the dance floor, and officially open the Ball with the First Dance."

"Wait, we have to dance in front of everyone?" Harry asked, a bit of panic in his voice.

"Yes." McGonagall said looking at him intently.

"Oh gods, Harry, you do know how to dance don't you?" Cedric asked, afraid for his young friend.

"Yeah. One of my friends is a girl, and Sirius thought it would be good if we both learned, but I've never danced with hundreds of people watching me." Harry said, breathing a bit hard. Mandy gave his hand a squeeze.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine." She said softly, and Harry got himself under control.

"Ok, Miss Delacour, Mister Davies, you first." McGonagall said, ushering Fleur and her date into the Hall, followed by Cedric and Cho, Viktor and Hermione, and finally, Harry and Mandy.

The Hall burst with applause as the four Champions and their dates entered what to Harry looked like the inside of a crystal cavern. Gone were the four House tables, replaced by dozens of smaller round tables with room for about twenty students each. Harry followed the other Champions up to the Head Table, where Dumbledore, Madame Maxime, Karkaroff, Ludo Bagman and a wiry looking redheaded boy with horn rimmed glasses stood applauding. Harry and Mandy took seats next to the redheaded boy, who introduced himself as Percy Weasley, Mister Crouch's personal assistant.

Harry held out Mandy's seat as he'd seen done in an old movie he'd once seen, and Mandy thanked him. He then took his seat next to her, and saw

the menu sitting upon the empty plate in front of him. Before he could ask Mandy what it was about, Dumbledore spoke very clearly, "Pork Chops."

The menu faded into nothingness and Harry saw his plate fill with a sumptuous looking meal.

"I guess that's how it's done." Mandy smirked, and Harry suddenly realized that she had been just as confused as he had been. They shared a smile, and both chose the chicken pasta.

Harry was unable to talk with Mandy, as Percy Weasley kept up a very steady stream of one sided conversation, and Harry, not wishing to be rude, was forced to listen to Percy go on about what a great job the Ministry seemed to be doing with the Tournament thus far. Harry really wanted to point out that it wasn't doing that great a job. His mere presence there was proof of it, but Percy never gave him an opportunity to retort. Percy went on talking about how much he did for his boss, Barty Crouch, who was unable to attend the Ball due to illness, and how he, Percy, might actually have to take his boss' place as a judge for the next Task, if Mister Crouch's condition did not improve.

Harry was actually quite thankful when dinner was over, and Dumbledore stood to announce that it was time for the first dance. He along with the other judges, and Percy stepped off the platform that held the Head Table, followed by the Champions, who all took up position on the dance floor with their dates. Dumbledore vanished the Head Table, where it was replaced by a group of musicians.

"Oh my gods, he really did get the Weird Sisters." Mandy exclaimed softly. "They're amazing."

Harry smiled at Mandy's uncharacteristic excitement, and took her hand, placing his left hand around her waist. He smiled to himself when she

closed the gap between them, and gave the barest of smiles as she looked into his eyes once again.

"It's just us out here, no one else." She whispered. Harry knew she was trying to reassure herself as much as she was him. He could feel her shaking in his arms and knew she was likely far more nervous than he was now that the moment had come.

The music started, and the four Champions began to dance with their dates. Harry promised to thank Sirius for making him go to those stupid dance lessons the next time he saw his godfather. He managed not to step on Mandy's toes, and after a few moments, he believed that there was no one else, save the two of them.

It wasn't long before the champions were joined by others. Dumbledore led Professor McGonagall onto the floor and began to lead her around the floor. Hagrid and Madam Maxime cut an elegant rug, which surprised many of the onlookers. Even Snape took to the dance floor with Madam Pince.

"Something's happened to him." Mandy said, nodding towards the Potions master, who looked as if he were trying to fight off a smile. "I don't know what's going on, but I'm not the only one to notice. He's... it's like he's someone else."

"How do you mean?" Harry asked.

"He's been actually explaining things in class, and I heard he actually helped someone." Mandy gave Harry a bewildered look. "We all think you did something to him."

"Oh, no." Harry shook his head, smiling. "Don't go putting your weird professor's strangeness on me."

"I'm just telling you." She shrugged.

"Well, people change. Maybe he's had an epiphany or something." Harry

said, taking Mandy's hand and spinning her, making her laugh.

The song ended and when the next one began, Dumbledore urged the rest of the students to take to the floor. The song was much faster, and apparently one of the Weird Sisters bigger hits. Girls shrieked and pulled their dates onto the floor, and Harry and Mandy joined the crowd in dancing.

At one point, Harry had to pull Mandy out of the path of Fred Weasley and Alicia Spinnet, who were dancing so wildly, they were frightening everyone. Harry remarked to Mandy that he wouldn't have been surprised if Fred and Alicia ended up in the Hospital wing having thrown their backs out.

Harry and Mandy danced together for another three songs before Hermione and Viktor came up next to them.

"Would you mind terribly if I dance with Harry?" Hermione smiled. "I'll lend you Viktor."

Mandy snickered and nodded her approval. Viktor smiled and bowed, offering his hand to Mandy who gave him the cutest curtsy and took his proffered hand. Harry couldn't help but grin as Viktor twirled Mandy into the crowd.

"Having a good time?" Hermione asked as they began dancing.

"I really am." Harry nodded. "How about you?"

"This is so much fun." Hermione's smile was so bright, Harry almost had to shield his eyes. "Viktor knew I wanted to dance with you, so he suggested that I do it now, so he could have my undivided attention the rest of the night."

"You like him, don't you?" It wasn't really a question, and Harry smiled when he saw her eyes get a dreamy sort of look. "He's a good guy."

"That he is." Hermione agreed. "What about you and Mandy?"

"We're having fun. Today was the first day we've actually had where no one bothered us."

"How do you feel about her?" Hermione queried.

"I don't know yet." Harry answered honestly.

"Well, when you figure it out, don't fight it. Alright?"

Harry nodded, and the song ended. Harry and Hermione turned to look for their dates, but before they could take a step, Hannah tapped on Harry's shoulder.

"Neville had to use the bathroom, and I told him I was going to get my dance with you." She smiled.

"Oh go on, I'll let Mandy know you'll come and find her when you're done." Hermione assured him. Harry smiled his thanks, and took Hannah's hand. Hermione had unwittingly started the trend. It seemed every girl whom he'd promised dances to came to collect. Even girls that Harry hadn't ever spoken to had asked him to dance.

Hannah was followed by Ginny, who was followed by Katie Bell. Marietta Edgecombe, Cho, Gabrielle, Megan Jones, Su Li, Sally Anne, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, Parvati Patil, Padma Patil, Lisa Turpin, Morag MacDougal, Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis, A third year girl with very curly blonde hair, A couple of fifth year girls who both claimed to belong to Slytherin House.

Finally, when Harry finished his very slow dance with Lavender brown that involved her rubbing her very impressive body against his, which left Harry rather breathless, he decided he needed to get back to Mandy. He should have done it a while ago, but hadn't wanted to appear rude. Still, he felt very bad now. He'd asked Mandy to the dance, and he knew he should have spent much more time with her.

Harry looked everywhere for Mandy. Near the refreshments, at every

table, the Entrance Hall, even the grotto that had been set up for students to get a bit of fresh air. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Idiot." Harry cursed himself. He imagined that Mandy likely got sick of waiting on him. He hoped that she was just dancing with one of her friends or something, but she didn't appear to be in the Great Hall at all.

Harry then got a bright idea. He ran to his room to fetch the Marauder's map. That would make it very easy to find Mandy, so he could beg forgiveness, and he could somehow salvage the evening, spending the rest of the ball making her feel like she was the center of the universe.

But when he got the map, and activated it, she wasn't in the Great Hall or any of the nearby bathroom. In fact, she was in Ravenclaw tower, in her room.

Harry's heart fell. He had screwed up big time.

"IDIOT!" Harry shouted as he slumped on his sofa. He banged his hands on his forehead repeating over and over, "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

Harry sighed heavily. He thought for just a moment of donning his new invisibility cloak and sneaking into Ravenclaw tower, until he realized that he had no idea what the password might be. So, the only thing he could do was wait until tomorrow and fall on his knees and beg her forgiveness.

Harry was ashamed of himself. He had gotten so caught up in his popularity, and the fact that nearly every pretty girl wanted to dance with him, that he'd lost his head entirely. There was no excuse for it. He just hoped that Mandy would allow him to make up for his mistake.

Rising from the sofa, Harry removed his tie. There was no sense in returning to the Ball now. Without his date, he didn't see the point, and he didn't want to give the impression that he didn't care about Mandy.

Harry bent over to pick up the map and put it away when something

caught his eye. There, apparently dancing with Professor McGonagall was Bartemius Crouch. He stared at the little spinning couple oddly.

Harry remembered that pompous git, Percy Weasley saying that Barty Crouch had been at home, sick. Yet, there he was in the Great Hall.

Forgetting that he had planned to go to bed, Harry, map in hand, headed back to the Great Hall. He stopped at the great oak doors and stared into the crowds, looking for someone he hadn't seen before. Glancing again at the map in his hands, he spotted the Crouch's name again, this time over near the refreshment tables.

Harry turned at once to look, but he only saw Professor Moody talking with two sixth year boys, who were laughing.

"Potter?"

Harry turned to see Professor Snape standing behind him.

"Why are you not dancing?"

"That's a long story, but suffice to say I owe my date a huge apology. I kind of let my popularity get the best of me." Harry admitted sadly, turning back to the map, and looking back up towards Moody.

"Seems rather out of character for you." Snape said, and Harry noted the lack of a condescending tone.

"Maybe." Harry shrugged.

"What has your interest?" Snape asked, looking at Harry with interest.

"I'm not sure. Either Professor Moody, or Bartemius Crouch." Harry said with confusion.

"Excuse me?" Snape asked, looking over Harry's shoulder. Harry pointed to the name on the map and then looked up at Moody who was now speaking to Hagrid.

"What is this?" Snape asked, pulling the map out of Harry's hands.

"It's a map of the school. My godfather gave it to me." Harry said, not

even realizing what he was saying. He was so confused by what was going on that he could only stare at Moody.

"Stay right here, Potter. I mean it." Snape said firmly, slipping into the Great Hall with Harry's map. Harry just nodded, watching Snape go, and turning back to watch Moody.

"Harry, what are you doing out here?" Susan Bones said, coming down the stairs. He guessed she was coming back from the bathroom.

"I'm not sure." Harry said, not even looking at her. She sidled up next to him and looked into the Great Hall.

"Where's Mandy?" Susan asked noticing he was alone.

"In her dorm." Harry said simply, still not looking at Susan.

"You screwed up, didn't you."

Harry turned now, looking at Susan who was looking at him with sympathy. He could only nod.

"Yeah." Was all he said.

Before he could say anything more, there came a chorus of screams.

Harry and Susan turned to see that the music had stopped and Moody was holding a seventh year girl close to him, his wand at her neck.

"Try anything, and I swear she'll be dead before she hits the floor, and I'll make sure it hurts." Moody snarled. "I don't know how you figured it out, but I will not be caught by the likes of you, Dumbledore."

"You have no hope of escape." Dumbledore said calmly, though Harry heard that the old headmaster's tone was laced with venom.

"The only way you'll take me is through this stunning beauty." Moody snapped. He then gave a long sniff of his whimpering hostage. "Her fear is intoxicating. Will you be responsible for her death, Dumbledore? Will you sacrifice her young life in order to get your hands on me?"

Moody was slowly backing out of the Great Hall, getting closer to Harry

and Susan. Harry began to slip his wand out of his holster, while slowly guiding Susan out of the way of the Defense professor. Harry began to raise his wand, thinking he might be able to stop the teacher, but Harry had forgotten about Moody's magical eye.

"Don't even think about it Potter. No one gets in my way and this pretty little flower lives to see Boxing Day." Moody shouted as he dragged the now sobbing girl along with him. He held her tightly by the throat, his wand pressed deeply into her flesh. "I mean it!"

Harry saw the man dig the tip of his wand a bit deeper into the girls neck, making her cry out. Moody was now passing by Harry and Susan, who was shaking next to Harry, hands covering her mouth in horror and her eyes shining with tears. Moody turned to look at Harry and gave him a predatory smile. Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, and he fought against a chill.

Harry saw all the teachers of Hogwarts, wands raised at Moody who was grinning evilly now. Snape gave Harry a pointed look that Harry knew meant that he should stay right where he was. Harry didn't feel the need to argue. He was terribly confused but he knew he wouldn't stand a chance against a former Auror like Moody.

Slowly Moody slipped out of the castle, the teachers following him at a distance, as every time they got too close for his liking, he would remind them of his hostage's frailty in some way. Keeping their distance, many of the students followed behind, curiosity winning out over common sense.

Harry spotted Neville who was clutching hands with Hannah. Harry took hold of Susan's hand and dragged her behind him over towards Neville

"What happened?" Harry asked. Neville shook his head.

"Don't know. Hannah and I were dancing and then there was this scream and the music stopped and we all saw Moody grab that girl and start

shouting."

"We saw Professor Snape talking to Professor Dumbledore." Hermione said coming up behind Harry, Neville and the girls. Viktor was right behind her, holding her hand. "He looked upset and was showing Dumbledore a piece of parchment. They then went to talk to Moody and Moody just grabbed that girl, and..." Hermione left the rest unspoken. Harry began following the rest of the students out of the castle, with his friends behind him, hoping to see what might happen next.

Unfortunately, they were too far away. All they saw was a bright red blast, several screams and then, nothing until a very angry looking Professor Dumbledore and the rest of the teachers came back up to the courtyard, and told all the students that the Ball was over and they were all to return to their dormitories. Harry saw that the girl was safe, wrapped in Professor McGonagall's arms, who was whispering to the girl, likely assuring her that she was indeed safe now.

Harry saw Snape looking at him, and Harry gave him a questioning look, but Snape gave the smallest shake of his head. Harry made a mental note to seek out the potions master the next day as he turned to do as the Headmaster had ordered.

It was a long time before Harry could even think of falling asleep. He was desperately confused. What exactly had happened. Who had that person been? Was it Professor Moody, or Bartemius Crouch. Why had he taken a hostage?

Harry was now convinced of one thing. Whoever it had been, Harry was sure that they were part of the conspiracy that had led to Harry being at Hogwarts now.

The fire was low, and the man was knelt before a high backed chair, his head bowed so low that none of his face was exposed to the soft light. A second

person stood in shadows, head bowed as well.

"I thought it only a matter of time until your charade was exposed." A cruel voice spoke from the chair. "Though I had hoped that you would be able to maintain it until the end of the tournament."

"Forgive me my lord." the kneeling man begged. "I know not how the old fool learned of my disguise. I knew I had to escape or they would force me to take Veritaserum, and I had no desire to bend to their will and betray you."

"Very wise." It would be most unfortunate if I had to kill you. As it stands, right now you are the only one I can count on."

The man in the corner shifted, but remained silent.

"We will have to shift our plans. I will not be denied my return." The voice said softly, nearly gasping in exasperation. "Still, I am quite disappointed. You passed right by Potter. You could have grabbed him and brought him here before me. You should have taken him. For that, you must be punished.

Crucio!"

Harry fell out of his bed, landing heavily on the floor. His scar felt as if there were a thousand white hot knives being stabbed into it. Harry scrambled into the bathroom where he promptly vomited up his dinner, and he was sure, most of his breakfast.

Gasping for breath, Harry rolled onto his back when he'd emptied his stomach and stared up at the ceiling of his bathroom. His heart was pounding and his skin felt as frozen as the grounds outside the castle.

When his breathing was normal once again, and his heart rate steadied, Harry picked himself up off the floor. Sirius and Remus had been adamant in their instructions to him should something like this happen again. They stressed that this sort of thing could be of great importance.

So Harry didn't even pause to put on a dressing robe or shoes. He strode out of his room and headed straight for the Headmaster's office to tell

Dumbledore all that he had just dreamed.

16. Chapter 16

Harry awoke the morning after the Yule Ball feeling far more exhausted than before he'd gone to sleep the second time the previous night.

He had gone to see Dumbledore around midnight after awaking from such a horrible dream. Harry had been surprised that the Hogwarts Headmaster had been awake at such a late hour. Dumbledore, though clearly still upset over the events of the evening, had invited Harry in to the office.

Harry was then introduced to Fawkes the phoenix, who, having sensed Harry's fear and worry, alighted upon the boy's shoulder, trilling in Harry's ear, calming him at once. Fawkes stayed on the boy's shoulder as he told the Headmaster all about the dream of what he now knew to be Lord Voldemort and his two followers, whom he'd had been unable to identify.

When Harry had finished, Dumbledore thanked him, and assured Harry that everything was now in hand, and also thanked him for helping discover the imposter. The boy wasn't sure why, but for some reason, he didn't believe Dumbledore's assurances.

Harry had a lot of trouble getting back to sleep when he returned to his room. His mind simply would not shut down. Between the dream, the "Moody" imposter, and his royal screw up with Mandy, Harry felt completely lost.

Dragging himself out of bed, Harry decided to get in a run before Breakfast. He and the other boys had agreed to take a bit of time off, but right now, Harry couldn't think of anything better to do, and he usually did his best thinking while running.

The sky was a bright steel gray, and there was a strong wind blowing

from the north. Harry felt himself begin to shiver as he stepped out of the castle and down to the pitch.

He had only one thing he needed an answer to. How to apologize to Mandy. She hadn't said it, but the Ball had been important to her, and they'd been having a really good time. Harry remembered how softly she'd smiled at him when they had met in the Entrance Hall. She had looked like some beautiful princess out of a Muggle movie, and Harry remembered how his heart had fluttered when he'd kissed her.

And then, he'd mucked it all up. Harry hated to imagine how she must have looked when she left the Great Hall. He felt a pain in his chest as he pictured her crying as she ran all the way back to Ravenclaw Tower. At the very least, he should have alternated dances with those girls and Mandy. She might have been understanding. If he were really honest with himself, he should have just said no to those girls and spent his evening with Mandy.

Harry ran until he could barely stand, and finally allowed himself to crumple onto a set of stairs leading up into the Quidditch stands, gasping for breath. He had never been so angry with himself. He was usually more conscientious of other people's feelings. Then again, he'd never been this popular before. Once again, Harry wished he were back at Salem, with Mark and Stacy. Then again, he might have screwed up with Stacy already and he'd still be miserable. His faith in himself as a person was taking a real beating today.

Harry checked his watch and, with a sigh, pulled himself up and headed back into the castle to shower, change, and throw himself on Mandy's mercy. His deepest hope was that she would allow him to speak to her. When Harry got to the Great Hall, he went right to the Ravenclaw table to look for the shy brunette, only to see she was not there. He did find

Mandy's friends, though. He was actually surprised to see them glaring at him as he approached.

"Do you know where Mandy is?" He asked. Su Li answered before any of the others could. She stared at him as if he were something atrocious and Harry noticed the other girls giving him similar looks of disgust.

"Probably still crying her poor eyes out." The Asian girl snapped. "How could you ignore her like that?"

"I didn't mean to ignore her." Harry replied, a bit irritated. "I just got caught up in everything, and... Look, I screwed up and I want to make it up to her."

"You don't deserve her, Potter." Lisa Turpin snarled. "She's an incredibly sweet girl and you're a pompous jerk."

"It's not cool to play with people's hearts like that, Potter." Padma Patil chastised.

"HEY!" Harry snapped, losing his temper and glaring at all the Ravenclaw girls now. "I seem to recall that each of you asked me to dance. Don't try and put it all on me. I screwed up, yes. But I'm not entirely to blame."

"Just go away, and leave Mandy alone." Morag shouted, causing quite a few people to turn and stare.

Harry went to the Hufflepuff table and sat down in a huff. Susan looked up and gave him a sympathetic smile.

"I'm sorry, Harry." She said patting his shoulder.

"For what? You didn't do anything wrong." Harry said sulkily.

"Maybe, maybe not. Whose to say. But I still feel bad for my part." She said softly, pouring him a glass of orange juice. She'd noticed he preferred that to pumpkin juice in the morning. Harry took the goblet and gave her a half nod of thanks. Susan just smiled and returned to her muffin and fruit.

"They found the real Moody!" Justin and Ernie all but shouted as they joined Harry and Susan at the table.

"We saw him in the Hospital Wing, and we overheard Flitwick telling Sinestra they found him in a trunk in the Defense office." Justin explained.

"What were you two doing in the Hospital Wing?" Susan asked.

"Let's just say that we aren't ready to shave just yet." Justin smiled, his cheeks coloring slightly.

"Forget that." Ernie said quickly before anymore questions could be asked. "What do you suppose Moody was doing locked in his own trunk, and who was that last night?"

"If he was being kept alive, that means the imposter was likely using Polyjuice potion. So that means it was Barty Crouch, but I'm still confused." Harry said mostly to himself.

"How do you know it was Barty Crouch?" Susan asked, her own curiosity piqued.

"I have this map that... The map!" Harry sat up suddenly. He looked up at the Head Table, and then got up from his seat. "I'll see you guys later." He said and dashed out of the Great Hall, leaving a very confused group of Hufflepuffs behind him.

He nearly sprinted into the dungeons to Snape's office, where he stopped to catch his breath before knocking on the door.

"Come." Came the response. Harry opened the door and Snape raised his head from whatever he'd been doing.

"Ahh, Potter, I've been expecting you. You no doubt wish to have your map returned to you."

"If I could, sir." Harry said hopefully.

"I am afraid I can not do that. The Headmaster now has it in his

possession. He's very interested in it, and I think your godfather will have more than a few questions to answer when next they meet. Sit down, Potter."

Harry took a seat in front of Snape's desk, feeling more depressed now that he'd learned that his map had been taken. It was one of a very few things he owned that had been his father's.

"You didn't look happy when we spoke last night. You mentioned that you had messed things up with your date. Would you like to speak about this?"

Harry's mouth fell open in shock. He could only stare at the professor for a long moment before his brain began to reengage.

"Not that I'm not thankful for your concern, sir, but I was under the impression that you strongly disliked me." Harry said.

Snape now looked slightly ashamed and sat back in his own seat, folding his arms, and avoiding Harry's eye. Harry thought that Snape might get defensive or angry, but instead, the Potions master simply sighed before speaking.

"It was never you I disliked, Harry." He said, startling the boy with the use of his first name. "It's more what you represent. And to be honest with you, it's more my perception of that. I've spent my entire life blaming others for my mistakes. It has only been recently that I have become a bit more, shall we say, introspective. In fact, I think if it were not for your arrival here, I may have continued on my path, and I am sure it would have been my end. I am taking your advice and trying to be the man my friend Lily Evans would have been proud to know."

"Good for you, sir." Harry smiled. "I think that just the fact that you're trying would make her happy."

"Thank you, but I think that's enough about me. Tell me what happened."

Harry went into the tale about how the Ball had been going great, and how Hermione had asked him for a dance. Harry stressed that Hermione was only a friend and that Mandy had danced with Viktor Krum during the song. But then, when the song was over, a seemingly never ending stream of girls were all but lined up for a turn around the dance floor with him. He ashamedly told Snape how his ego, and likely his hormones, had overruled his mind, and he danced with every girl who asked him.

"I didn't really forget about Mandy, I just lost track of everything. I've never had so many girls interested in me before. I mean, back home, I'm just James, a decent student who plays Quidditch and races. I'm no one special. But here, I'm worshiped. I've tried not to let it get the best of me, but last night..."

"It was too much." Snape offered and Harry nodded guiltily.

"All I want to do right now is find Mandy and try and make this right. You know, beg for forgiveness or something. I knew better, and I screwed up. I can't even imagine how angry she must be." Harry said sadly.

"May I suggest something?" Snape asked, leaning forward once again.

Harry looked up and nodded.

"This worked for me once, with your mother, in fact. Go up to Ravenclaw Tower and stand in front of the door. Do not move, and let everyone know who passes you that you intend to stay there as long as it takes until she speaks to you. While I admit to not having ever managed to understand the mind of the female of our species, I do know that she will come out to speak to you, if only to make you go away. You can tell her what you need to tell her, but after that, you must abide her wishes, do you understand?"

"If she doesn't want to be my friend anymore, I have to leave her alone."

Harry said glumly.

"Indeed. You're smarter than your father, at least."

Harry gave a hint of a glare at the Potions master, who ignored it.

Clearly, Snape would never get past what Harry's father had put him through as a child, but he was very obviously trying to be a better man himself. They fell into silence for a few moments before Harry spoke up again.

"Sir, why didn't any of you Stun that imposter last night?"

Snape scowled and sat back in his seat once again.

"Were it up to me, I would have." He said sharply. "I would have Stunned the girl, taking away his shield and then Stunned him, and we might actually have some answers. But the Headmaster feels very differently. Though, I am sure he is second guessing his actions. He is very wise, Dumbledore, but he sometimes misses the details when he looks at the big picture. "

"I'm in much more danger than I've been led to believe, aren't I?" Harry asked, and Snape could only look at him. Harry swore he saw the twinge of regret on the sallow face of the man before him.

"We are all doing what we can to protect you." Snape finally said. "But, you are not helpless. Continue training, focus on the Tournament. If you need help, while I can't officially assist you... I can at least point you in the right direction."

"Thank you, sir." Harry smiled, and Snape waved towards the door. "Go and fix your mistake, Potter."

Harry decided that Snape's advice had merit and decided to try it. He desperately wanted to talk to Mandy, so he would have tried anything.

Without the Map, though, Harry had trouble remembering where Ravenclaw Tower was, or even if Mandy was still there.

Eventually, he decided to follow a few Ravenclaw first years back up to Ravenclaw Tower, and told them to let Mandy know he was outside waiting to speak to her. Harry had expected to wait for hours for her to emerge, and was shocked therefore when she appeared only a few seconds later.

She looked truly miserable, hair matted and unbrushed, eyes red and puffy as if she'd been crying a lot. She looked at him with something that looked between total disdain and longing. Harry's heart sank further, and his throat constricted tightly.

"I have to say, I'm a bit surprised you remember my name." She said coldly. Harry flinched at her cool tone, and he took a deep breath trying to get his mouth to work properly.

"I'm really sorry." He said after a few moments. "I have no excuse, and even if I did, it wouldn't be good enough to forgive what I did. I should have spent the night with you, or at the very least come to dance with you between... No, I should have just refused them, and spent my time with you. You were the one I asked to the Ball. I'm really sorry."

"Honestly, I never had any illusions about what might happen." Mandy said, her voice dropping in volume as she spoke, her eyes glistening with tears. "I knew I would have to share you. Every girl in this school wanted to be your date, even if they said they didn't. But you asked me, and for the life of me, I don't know why you did it."

"I asked you because you were the only girl who didn't bring it up whenever we talked. I asked you because I think you're sweet and fun and I thought we would have had a good time. And we were, until I let my ego get the better of me."

"My friends kept coming up to me and asking me why we weren't dancing together, you know?" Mandy looked up, wiping at her eyes.

"Then, the hypocrites would dance with you. It was like I was fate's punching bag last night. I felt so stupid..."

"I came looking for you." Harry tried. "I was too late, but I did. I never meant to treat you so bad. I had every intention of making the night something special for you. For both of us. I just... I just want to make it up to you somehow. I want to show you that you are special..."

"I don't think you can do that, Harry." Mandy said, starting to shake now, her voice getting thick as she fought against her tears. "I got it in my head that you liked me. That you thought I was special. That Harry Potter preferred the quiet, shy wallflower over the vapid, airhead girls with the huge boobs. My friends didn't help, either. They kept telling me that it was meant to be, and I let myself fall for it all. But then you just forgot about me like I was nothing. You broke my heart last night."

Harry felt like he was going to be sick. He knew that he must have hurt her, he'd never had any doubt of that. But seeing her now, listening to her, he knew that he'd truly underestimated his foul up.

"I'm so sorry." He said weakly.

"I want you to go away, Harry." She said softly, tears streaming from her eyes now. "I want you to go away and leave me alone. You blew it."

With that, she went back into the Ravenclaw Common Room, leaving a very dejected and heartbroken Harry to slouch against the wall.

"She doesn't mean it, you know." Luna Lovegood said, coming close and sitting next to Harry, her dreamy smile soft and a little sad. "She's just upset."

"I hurt her, Luna." Harry sighed, his hands rubbing his stinging eyes.

"Even if I could make things right between us, I would never deserve someone like Mandy."

"Perhaps." Luna said. "The truth is, a relationship with you and Mandy

would have ended far worse. You are far too different to ever be compatible. While I can understand your attraction to her, and I'm sure the beginning of your relationship would have been filled with all sorts of debauchorous and exciting trysts, eventually, when your hormones had gotten enough, I don't think the two of you would have had much common ground."

"How can you know that?" Harry asked and Luna smiled.

"I see things. I hear things." She said conspiratorially. "I know that Mandy hates Quidditch. She only goes to matches because she hates being alone. She is an only child, and she had no friends before Hogwarts, because she's so shy. Her friends have tried to get her out of her shell, but she's most comfortable when she's not being noticed. You would come to resent her for not wanting to stand out with you."

"I don't think..." Harry began but Luna ignored him and carried on.

"You need someone who is confident in themselves. Someone who will support you in everything you attempt and cheer you on the whole way. Even if it's something stupid. A girl who can stand on her own without your support, but desires it just the same. A woman who is strong in mind and body, but loves being feminine."

"Are you talking about yourself here, Luna?" Harry asked, with a slight smile.

Luna gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. "Perhaps, but I've already told you where my heart is. No, I was thinking someone like Hermione Granger, or Hannah Abbott. Pansy Parkinson might make a good choice if she weren't so bitter. Daphne Greengrass would make a very interesting match, but I think you would have a difficult time courting her. There is also Katie Bell. I've noticed that French girl who keeps talking to you has a very interesting aura about her. Most boys look as if they've been

smacked with a whooping fish whenever she passes by. It's worse with her older sister, but you always seem unaffected by it."

Harry laughed at the mental picture of Gabrielle smacking boys in the face with a large fish.

"Su Li would also be a good choice for you."

"But Su's Mandy's friend, and I just..."

"Of course I didn't mean right this second." Luna smiled. "You need time to reflect on how things with Mandy went wrong so you don't repeat your mistake with the right girl."

"You're really amazing, Luna." Harry said. Luna gave him her signature far away smile, and he bent forward and kissed her cheek. "I am truly honored to call you my friend."

"I know." Luna grinned, getting to her feet. She waved at Harry and left him. Harry got to his feet and headed back to his own room, where he spent the rest of the day reflecting on all that had happened.

His guilt and heartache over the pain he'd cause Mandy didn't go away, even three weeks later. Every time he saw her in class or the Great Hall, his heart felt as if it were being stabbed. Luna's words rang in his head constantly, telling him it wouldn't have worked anyway, but Harry felt that they should have been allowed to figure it out on their own.

Sirius managed to help him break through his growing depression when they visited next.

"It's good that you feel guilty, and that you want to make amends, and maybe one day you will, but for now, you need to forgive yourself, and move on. Take away the lesson you've learned from this and move forward."

"I'm trying." Harry sighed. "I just can't. I just want to keep apologizing."

"Harry, you're young, and you're going to mess up from time to time. It's

how you become a better person. You learn from your mistakes, and you use that knowledge in the future. This is no different. I'm sure Mandy is a very nice girl, but she's right. You did blow it." Sirius said, clapping a hand to Harry's shoulder. "But, she's not the only one. The next girl you fancy, you won't make the mistake of ignoring, or forgetting. But don't go to the other extreme."

"I just wish I could forget it all. Do you think I could get a time turner and do it all over?" Harry asked and Sirius barked with laughter.

"Then you might have a whole new set of problems." Sirius chuckled.

"Give yourself time. Hang out with your friends. Train for the next Task.

In time, it will get better. I promise."

Harry had faith in his Godfather, and if Sirius said it would get better, than who was he to argue.

Harry took Sirius' advice. He worked very hard in the month leading up to the Second Task. As promised, Harry got three doses of Gillyweed. He tested the first early on a Saturday morning. He went out to the Black lake, and as per the instructions, ate the rubbery plant as he headed into the water.

Harry then spent a glorious, wondrous hour exploring the depths of the Black lake. It was the strangest sensation breathing water like a fish, but he really enjoyed that his eyes adjusted to the deep, and he was able to see quite clearly, although everything was tinted a eerie green.

He discovered that the lake was teeming with grindylows. Harry spent ten minutes fighting off the little water demons. As they were everywhere, Harry knew he'd have no hope in avoiding them in the Task.

That didn't matter to Harry, though, as he was able to send boiling streams of water at the creatures which made them run away.

The lake was so vast that Harry was unable to figure out where the

mermaid village was on his first try. He also failed on his second attempt to pinpoint its location. However, he knew that it must lie in the last third of the lake that he hadn't managed to get to, and as he only had one dose left of Gillyweed, Harry knew he was already a step up above the others. At least, he thought so.

Harry had seen Krum emerging from the lake several times in the last two weeks before the Task, each time they would smile and wave at each other. Harry guessed that Krum was practicing whatever method he'd chosen, and was also trying to become more familiar with the lake.

The three male champions hardly spoke of the upcoming Task while they ran each morning, or when they practiced spell work every other evening after Dinner. While they had all figured out what they were supposed to do for the Second Task, they were still confused by the bit about looking for something they would miss.

Harry sometimes wondered how Fleur was preparing for the Second Task, as he never saw her near the lake. He asked Gabrielle two weeks before the event about her sister's progress.

"She is training hard, but I have been sworn not to tell anyone," the young French girl rolled her eyes. "She is determined to be first. She is very jealous that you and the other two boys are around each other all the time. She thinks you are conspiring against her."

Harry began to protest but Gabrielle simply held up her finger to his lips, smiling at her contact.

"My sister is very stubborn and self-centered. I have already told her that I thought she would be welcome to join you, but she is adamant that you three are against her."

Gabrielle laughed, and Harry joined her. Harry's friends did a good job of taking his mind off the debacle of the Yule Ball, as did the real Professor

Moody, who the entire school was buzzing about. The real Alastor Moody was a much stricter teacher than the imposter had been, and nearly everyone felt exhausted after one of his practical lessons. The ex-Auror seemed determined to undo the "damage" done by the imposter. Harry had never enjoyed a class more thoroughly than he did Moody's. With the Imposter, Harry had found himself being the guinea pig whenever the fake professor wanted to show some new curse, but the Real Moody didn't play favorites, and there was always a betting pool before class to figure out who the next victim would be.

Before anyone had realized it, the Second Task was upon them.

Harry awoke the morning of the Second Task from a dream wherein he was sitting on the shore of the Lake with Susan Bone, Hannah Abbott and Neville. Harry smiled when he thought of the redhead. She'd been a near constant companion over the last month. Occasionally they were joined in the Library by Neville and Hannah. The two weren't dating as of yet, but Harry was sure it was only a matter of time.

Harry rolled out of bed and donned the swimming clothes that had been delivered the night before, and stuffed the bag of gillyweed into his pocket, placed his wand holster on his wrist, and finally, grabbed a cloak to keep him warm until he had to jump into the lake.

Harry headed up to the Great Hall for Breakfast, and noticed that Professor Dumbledore was not present. While unusual, it was not unheard of. Harry figured he was taking care of some last minute details before the Task.

Harry passed Cedric, who was eating breakfast, and looking rather puzzled. He waved good morning as he passed, and took a seat next to Susan, who smiled up at him. Harry then took a quick glance over at the Ravenclaw table to look for Mandy. Even after all this time, he still felt a

pang of sorrow at the mere thought of the shy girl. She wasn't present yet, and Harry turned to his Hufflepuff friends.

"Good morning, Harry." Neville said cheerily. The round faced Gryffindor was sitting next to Hannah and buttering a piece of toast. Susan poured his morning goblet of orange juice, as had become her custom. Harry thanked her as he sat down.

"Ready for the Task?" Hannah asked as Harry took some toast for himself.

"Surprisingly, I think I am."

"You should be." Susan commented. "You've studied hard, and I heard Cedric say that you have begun beating him more and more in your duels."

"He's exaggerating." Harry rolled his eyes. "He's still wiping the floor with me."

"Cedric looks really nervous." Hannah said, looking down the table at the sixth year. Harry also took a gander, but shrugged.

"He might just be second guessing himself." Harry suggested.

"That's odd." Susan said, also looking at the Hufflepuff Champion. "Cho usually eats breakfast with him. I wonder why she's not there."

"Maybe he asked her not to," Neville offered. Both Hannah and Susan looked at him as if he were a simpleton. Neville looked between them curiously.

"What?"

"Oh, Neville, sweetie. There's so much you don't understand about girls." Hannah sighed, patting his cheek. Neville simply nodded and turned back to his cereal. Hannah looked over to Susan, apparently about to say something else when something caught her eye. Before anyone had the chance to wonder about it, someone spoke.

"So this is where you've been hiding your sorry ass, Black!" Came a

venomous voice from behind Harry. Everyone turned, and Harry launched out of his seat when he saw the four people standing behind him with huge smiles on their faces.

"MARK!" Harry shouted as he hugged his best friend. Harry and the other boy were laughing so hard, it became rather contagious, and Neville, Susan and Hannah, along with the three teens who accompanied Mark, all smiled brightly.

Mark was Harry's height with a very similar build. His hair was a soft chestnut color and very short and wiry. Like Harry, his brown eyes were alight with secret mischief. He, along with the other three teens all wore the uniforms that Harry wore, khaki pants for the boys with blue button down shirts. The girls wore skirts. All four teens had heavy black cloaks and scarves as well.

"What are you doing here? When did you get here?" Harry asked excitedly.

"About ten minutes ago, and we're here to cheer on our Salem Champion!" Mark said, stepping aside so Harry could see who had accompanied him. Harry's eyes nearly popped out of his head when he caught sight of the first girl who was with his best friend. Harry felt as if all the air in his lungs had simply vanished.

"Hi, James."

The girl was a few inches shorter than Harry with dark blonde hair past her shoulders. She had a petite, athletic frame and soft brown eyes. She was giving him a soft warm smile and looking a bit shyly at him. Harry stumbled forward, closing the gap and embraced her.

Susan turned to Hannah who looked as gob smacked as she felt as they beheld the reunion.

"Oh, I've missed you so much." Stacy said softly as he held her.

"I've missed you, too." Harry confessed

"Ok, you two. I'm actually starting to feel like I should be jealous or something." the second boy said, though there was no hint of malice, or even irritation.

Harry turned and hugged the shortest of the four. A dark haired boy with broad shoulders and a thin nose.

"How are you, Duncan?" Harry smiled.

"Good. Things have really sucked since you've been gone, though."

Duncan smiled.

"He isn't lying." Stacy said, standing close to Harry.

"Umm, Harry?" Hannah said, trying to sound politely. "Care to introduce us?"

"Sorry." Harry said, the laughter still clear in his voice. "Hannah, Susan, Neville," Harry said pointing to each person. "This is Mark, Stacy, Duncan and Jennifer, who until today, I don't think I've ever talked to." Harry grinned and Jennifer, the tall brunette who was now on Mark's arm simply smiled.

"I was intimidated by you, too." She grinned and Harry laughed.

"Come on, sit down, grab something to eat." Harry said, motioning for his old friends to join his new friends. "No one told me you guys were coming." Harry said.

"We weren't told until last night. Or this morning." Mark said, looking confused. "Time change is a real bitch, you know that?"

"Anyway." Stacy said, interrupting. "Madam Blaylock gathered us up and said that we were coming to Hogwarts to cheer you on, if we wanted.

Like any of us were going to say no."

"I can't believe you're all here. This is so great." Harry exclaimed, looking at Stacy, who had now linked hands with Duncan. Harry knew they were

dating, and had been fine with it until now. Perhaps it was the fact that they had been so far away. But now that it was right in front of him, he felt a stab of jealousy.

"Yeah," Mark agreed. "I just wish we would be able to stay longer. We're only here for the day."

"But you're here, and that's all that matters." Harry grinned.

A few more of Harry's friends came by to meet the new arrivals. Harry actually fell out of his seat from laughing so hard when he introduced Duncan and Mark to Tracey Davis. Harry remembered how Mark had written that Tracey had a growing fan club back at Salem, and given the looks of surprised recognition and incoherent speech from his two male friends, Harry wondered if they'd forgotten that Tracey went to Hogwarts. Both Jennifer and Stacy looked very unimpressed by their boyfriend's behavior, but treated Tracey nicely, even apologizing for the boys.

Tracey didn't appear offended at all. In fact, she took a seat across from Mark, and began to question him about Harry at length. Mark was all too eager to share stories about his best friend, though Harry interrupted often, preventing many stories from being finished before they even reached the "juicy parts."

The Hogwarts students were very entertained to simply watch and listen to Harry and his friends, all mesmerized by the scene. A few of the Hufflepuffs tried to interject into the conversation, and while the Salem students were welcoming, and nice, Harry's new friends felt a bit left out. At half past eight, Professor McGonagall came to notify Harry that he was due at the Champion's tent. Harry got up with his Salem and Hogwarts friends and headed down to the Lake. Along the way, the Salem students marveled at the grounds of the great castle, and even at the castle itself.

It was still quite cold, but most all of the winter's snow was gone. Harry and his entourage were met by another two familiar faces.

"Sirius!" Harry shouted as he hugged his godfather.

"How are ya feeling, pup?" Sirius smiled.

"Right now, I think I could face a basilisk blindfolded." Harry said turning back to his friends.

"Well, that's probably the only way to do it." Mark laughed. "If you weren't blindfolded it would kill you with its stare, dork."

The other teens laughed and Harry nodded and made "I knew that" face.

"Good, you all made it." Sirius said. "Dumbledore let us know last night that you'd all be arriving today."

"Why don't you all join us in the stands." Remus offered, motioning to the walkway leading to the spectator's seating.

"Good luck." Mark said. "Hurry it up so we can do something fun."

"Don't listen to him." Stacy smiled at Harry. He hadn't seen her since October, and she still made him slightly weak in the knees. She grabbed his shoulders and kissed his cheek. "Be careful, ok?"

"Good luck, bro." Duncan said, giving Harry a firm handshake. Even Jennifer gave him a hug before leaving Sirius and Harry to enter the tent.

"I'm very proud of you, and I'm sure you're parents would be, too. I know it wasn't your choice to be here, but you've proven beyond any doubt that you should be here."

"I just wish I hadn't had to in the first place." Harry smirked, and Sirius hugged him again.

"Do what you have to do, and finish. Don't take any unnecessary risks down there."

"Hey! Who do you think you're talking to?" Harry looked offended, but his eyes were still dancing merrily.

Sirius laughed and gave Harry a confident pat on the shoulder, leaving him to finish preparing.

The tent was similar to the one he'd waited in before the First Task.

There were four separate rooms, each with a cot. Harry saw Viktor sitting on his cot, looking very grim. Cedric also looked similarly upset. But Fleur looked livid. She was pacing angrily, having already stripped down to her form fitting bathing suit, which left very little to wonder about her figure. Harry was enthralled by her long slender, very smooth looking legs. He had to tear his eyes away from the French Champion when she looked sharply at him. Harry scurried away to his own cot, shrugging out of his cloak.

They weren't there very long before Professor McGonagall entered and asked them all to come outside. Harry followed Cedric, who didn't even look at him. Harry just figured he was concentrating.

The four Champions walked down a long wooden sort of walkway onto a platform hovering a few feet above the dark, glassy surface of the lake. They lined up at the edge, all staring at the mirror like surface, awaiting the go ahead to dive in.

"Ladies and Gentlemen." Ludo Bagman's voice could be heard. "Last night, something was taken from each of our Champions and hidden under the lake. They will have exactly sixty minutes to retrieve it and make it back to the surface. Champions, at the sound of the cannon, you may jump in." Harry took out his gillyweed and stuffed it into his mouth, beginning to chew it slowly, grimacing at its texture.

A moment later, there was a thunder clap, and all four of the Champions dove artfully into the cold, dark water. Harry thought that the cannon blast hadn't come soon enough. He was already feeling the changes taking effect when it had sounded. But it was all alright now as the plant

altered him for his mission. Harry smiled to himself as he kicked out with his now webbed feet, heading towards the part of the lake he had yet to explore.

Sirius watched his godson leap into the water, and he let out a sigh of worry.

So far as he knew, Harry still had no idea what he had to retrieve, and until the previous evening, neither did Sirius.

Sirius and Remus had been away a lot since Christmas, on Dumbledore's request. They had been tasked with reaching out to former member's of the Order of the Phoenix, a group that had opposed Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters in the last war. Sirius and Remus had only joined the group in the last two years of the war, along with James, Lily, and their former friend, Peter Pettigrew.

They had already convinced the Tonks family to join with Dumbledore, should his worst fears prove real. They had visited other prominent families as well. None of them were willing to believe that the most feared dark wizard of all time could possibly rise from the dead.

However, whenever Sirius pointed out that the boy who defeated the Dark Lord was alive, and competing in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, most all of the people they visited relented.

They had kept in constant contact with Dumbledore, keeping him up to date with their progress. Every couple of weeks they would return so they could visit with Harry who, except for the incident with the Yule Ball, which was still troubling him even up to their last visit a week ago, was doing well and working harder than ever.

On their first visit back to Hogwarts, Dumbledore had asked them both a myriad of questions regarding the Maruader's Map, which the Headmaster informed them had, with Harry's help, uncovered the truth

about the person posing as Professor Moody. Dumbledore desperately wished to replicate it to prevent future incidents. Of course, the Marauder's offered their assistance, both rather sad that there would likely be less trouble making. That is, until Dumbledore assured them that he only wished to use it to catch anyone who wished the students or teachers real harm. He didn't consider a few students sneaking out of bed to sneak into the kitchens of any real importance.

Sirius and Remus had also been keeping their eyes and ears open for any indication of where their former friend was hiding out. So far, there hadn't been a single whisper.

But last night, they had been asked to come to Dumbledore's office rather urgently. When they arrived, they found a very bewildered Headmaster.

"The Second Task is set for tomorrow morning, and we have encountered a rather big problem." He had said after offering them both a drink. "Each Champion will have to swim to the mer-village and retrieve something very important to each individual. Specifically, a person who means quite a lot to them. They will be placed in an enchanted sleep that will break once their head breaks the surface of the lake once again. The problem we have is that Harry does not seem to favor any one person over anyone else. It was my hope that he might have mentioned to you if he has a crush, or a close friend."

"Here at Hogwarts?" Sirius asked, and then shook his head. "To be honest with you, there are a few. The thing about Harry is he likes everyone equally. It takes a while for him to develop deep bonds, and he just hasn't been here that long. I would suggest using one of his friends from Salem, but..."

"Unfortunately, they will not arrive in time." Dumbledore sighed.

"Wait, they're coming?" Sirius looked surprised.

"Harry asked me right before the First Task if his friends could come and watch. However, it was quite short notice. Headmistress Blaylock and I have been preparing to have four of Harry's friends come for this next one, and they will be arriving about an hour before the start of tomorrow's event. I will personally be going to London to escort them here to the castle. There is no time to make the preparations. It needs to be someone here at Hogwarts."

"My suggestion would be Sirius." Remus said.

"We've all agreed it must be another student. This was agreed upon before the Tournament began. I'm afraid there would be serious ramifications if Sirius were used. Headmaster Karkaroff is constantly accusing me of cheating. I do not need anything else to fuel that. Can you think of no one?" Dumbledore asked wearily.

"What about Hermione?" Remus asked. "He's always talking about her. He thinks very highly of her."

"Unfortunately, Miss Granger has already been selected for another of the Champions." Dumbledore shook his head.

"What about Mandy?" Sirius asked.

"It is my understanding that Harry and Miss Brocklehurst were not speaking." Dumbledore sat up a little bit.

"That's true, but I know that Harry misses her a lot. He feels that because of his big-headedness, he was cheated out of a chance to see if there was anything between them. Maybe this would help them patch things up enough to resume their friendship. She's refused to speak to him, and it's torn Harry up quite badly."

"It could." Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Each of the hostages, for lack of a better word, has been told exactly what will happen to them. Perhaps, if Miss Brocklehurst was informed that she would be the thing

that Harry would miss the most, she might be willing to at least hear him out."

"That's a good idea." Remus smiled. "Are you sure they will all be alright?"

Dumbledore actually gave the former Defense teacher a wry smile. "My student's safety is my first concern. All the hostages shall be perfectly safe, or I will eat my hat. However, I can not say as much for the Champions."

"Harry's going to be ready." Sirius said confidently.

Yet, watching his godson leap into the lake, Sirius didn't feel as confident now as he had been the previous evening. He glanced over to the four Salem teens, who were each leaning forward in their seats.

"So, we're just supposed to sit here and watch the lake for the next hour?"

Mark said rather dejectedly. "How are we supposed to know what's happening down there?"

Sirius was wondering the very same thing.

Harry and the other Champions had split up upon entering the water.

Harry was amused to see Viktor turn his head into that of a shark. Harry couldn't help but wonder if it would have been much more effective to give himself a tail as well. He could propel himself better.

Both Cedric and Fleur had used bubble head charms, though Cedric had donned goggles, that Harry guessed were charmed to make it easier to see.

Harry immediately headed towards the part of the lake he had yet to visit, keeping close to the surface to avoid grindylows hidden in the high weeds. When he felt he had swam far enough, he began to dive deeper into the dark depths.

It was so eerily quiet, and at the same time, oddly peaceful. Harry

clutched his wand tightly in his webbed right hand, kicking easily as he kept his eyes open for any sign of the Mervillage. He had thankfully not encountered any grindylows, or any other obstacles. However, he was beginning to get annoyed that he'd yet to find anything. He went to check his watch, when he realized he'd left it in his room.

He decided to dive a little lower when he heard it. A faint melodic voice. Harry turned on the spot, looking everywhere, but he saw nothing. But the sound persisted. Harry swam towards where he thought the sound was coming from. He felt he was getting closer as the sound became stronger, and in moments, found himself swimming under a stone archway.

It was truly a sight to behold. There were around twenty Mer-people, more or less, hovering in what had to be the equivalent to a village square, each one singing in the most melodic tones Harry could remember hearing in all his life.

They were strange looking creatures with large, round green eyes and long torsos. They all had long hair that best resembled spaghetti. Their arms looked strong despite their thinness. Harry passed several formations of rock that Harry thought must have been houses as he approached the group of mer-people. They all watched him as he approached and Harry clutched his wand tighter in his hand.

Then, he saw it. Four people suspended in the water, each with and length of what appeared to be seaweed tied to their ankles, all with their eyes closed. Harry wondered if he and the others were too late, and those four had been killed. Panic struck his heart and he shot forward, grabbing for the first of the victims, which he now saw to be Gabrielle.

He glanced at the others and saw that Cho was next to Gabrielle. He now understood why Cedric had looked so panicked that morning, or why he

hadn't even seen Hermione, as she was next to Cho. And finally, Mandy. Harry's heart leapt to his throat as he swam over to Mandy. He touched her cheek gently, and his heart burned with anger that she was down here. He had to get her to the surface. He had to get them all to the surface. This was wrong, none of them deserved to have died down there for some stupid contest. Harry aimed his wand and tried to calm himself enough to focus.

"Diffindo." He said, though only a mass of bubbles erupted from his mouth. However, the spell had worked. The seaweed was cut and Mandy floated up a little bit. He then aimed his wand at the slimy green rope attached to Hermione's leg. Suddenly, three of the mer-people shot forward, thrusting spears into Harry's neck, though not hard enough to pierce his skin.

"You take only your own friend." one of them hissed, and Harry was struck by how different the mermaids sounded when they spoke as opposed to sang.

"They're all my friends." Harry tried to say, though all that came out were more bubbles. "Back off."

There was a shriek of excitement and Harry turned to look where the other mer-people were now pointing. Cedric had arrived, looking harried. He approached the group and immediately went for Cho, tugging at the strand of seaweed holding her down. Harry broke free of three guards and swam forward, using his wand to cut Cho free. Cedric gave him a very thankful look, and then tapped his wrist before carrying Cho to the surface. Harry went to free Hermione once again. This time, the apparently angered the mer-people, who rushed forward again, telling him to take only his own hostage. Harry was getting angry now, but before he could do anything, Krum arrived.

Harry was never happier to see anyone in his life. Viktor went to Hermione and tried to free her using his teeth. As before, Harry broke free of the guard and tapped Viktor on the shoulder, pulling him back so he could get a clear shot. Once Hermione was free, Viktor clutched Harry's shoulder, and pointed his snout up towards the surface. Harry nodded and watched as Hermione and Krum disappeared into the murky water above.

Harry turned and noticed that the mer-people had now formed a circle around Gabrielle, shielding her from him. Harry turned on the spot hoping to see any sign of the last Champion. He was beginning to run out of time. He could feel that the water was getting colder and darker. The gillyweed was wearing off, and he didn't have another dose. He wasn't sure that a bubblehead charm would work if it were cast underwater. He'd never tried it before, and he didn't feel now was the time to try. He made up his mind, and raised his wand at the closest guard, and motioned for him to move aside. The guard refused, and Harry held up three fingers. One by one, he lowered a finger until none were left, he then sent a boiling jet of water at the guard who shouted in pain. The others backed away, and Harry freed Gabrielle. Taking her and Mandy by the arm, he began swimming straight up now. It was slow going now that he had both girls to carry, and what was worse, the gillyweed was wearing off much quicker now. Harry's heart was gripped in panic now as he could feel the water in his mouth.

There was light ahead, and Harry knew he was close to the surface. He was going to make it. He was nearly there.

And then, it happened. The gillyweed's effects ended and Harry took a great gulp of water. He tried to cough but more water entered, and he began to drown. Thinking quickly, he pushed the two girls towards the

surface. He grabbed at his throat, and fought for the surface, but he was blacking out. He was going to die. His last conscious thought was the hope that Mandy and Gabrielle's bodies broke the surface as the blackness enveloped him in its sweet embrace.

There was a pressure on his chest, and he coughed up a whole lot of water. He was rolled over on his side, and more water came up from his lungs. They burned as fresh oxygen filled them.

"Easy there, Harry." A voice said. "Relax, let it come out on it's own.

Harry coughed and spluttered until no more water was in his chest and he was breathing again, though in great gasps. He was lying on the platform he'd dove off of at the beginning of the Task, surrounded by onlookers. He began to sit up when his coughing subsided, and felt someone grab him by the shoulder.

"Always so dramatic."

Harry looked to see Sirius looking at him with a soft smile.

"Guess I didn't have enough Gillyweed." Harry gasped.

"Is he ok?" Someone asked in panicked fright. Sirius smiled wider and stepped back. Harry was suddenly knocked back as a pleasant weight settled on top of him. Two slender, very wet arms wrapped around his neck, threatening to choke him and a mass of sodden hair pressed against his face.

"I'm so sorry." Mandy cried as she held him tightly. "I'm so very sorry. I've been so stupid."

"You're alright?" Harry asked in shock when he recognized Mandy's voice.

He looked up and saw that Cedric and Viktor were standing above him, both looking very relieved. Not only that, they were standing with Hermione and Cho who were quite clearly alive and well, if not very cold from having been in the lake. He'd been sure that all the girls had been

dead when he'd found them.

"They were only asleep," Sirius said, as Mandy helped him to his feet.

Madam Pomfrey rushed forward now and wrapped a thick blanket around him, and forced a steaming spoonful of some strange liquid into his mouth. It burned his now raw throat on its way down.

"You risked your life for me, and for the others." Mandy said hugging him tightly again. "The Merfolk brought you up and we all thought you were dead. You really are incredible, and I'm so sorry I've been ignoring you. I've been so stupid."

"No." Harry said, his throat hurting as he spoke. "I deserved it."

"No." Mandy shook her head. "No, I overreacted. Luna told me that you'd been upset over everything, and I blew her off. I didn't want to get hurt anymore."

"Where is he?" Someone else shouted, and the small crowd parted and Mandy pulled away from him as Fleur Delacour rush forward and embraced Harry tightly.

"You saved her, even though she was not your to save. She has been right about you all along, and I am a complete fool." Fleur said in a rush. She kept on speaking, but now in French. Occasionally, she would pull away, holding his face as she spoke, before hugging him tightly again.

When she finally was pulled off by Gabrielle, who came forward to embrace him, Harry was finally able to ask what had happened.

"I thought I was dead." He said looking to Sirius who was now shaking his head.

"A few more minutes, and you might well have been." Professor Dumbledore said now entering the group. "It was lucky that the mer-people followed you to the surface. And while the chieftain is still a little upset that you gave him a rather nasty burn, he is very impressed with

your desire to see all the hostages to the surface."

"They weren't dead?" Harry asked as Mandy came closer to him, smiling at him, and reaching up to brush some wet hair off his forehead.

"Oh no, my boy. Simply in an enchanted sleep that broke the moment they broke the surface."

"My gods, do you have any idea what I was thinking? I thought they were dead. I thought we had all failed, and they had died because of this stupid Tournament. They didn't enter, they didn't choose to be a part of this. How could you put them in danger like that?" Harry motioned to the four hostages.

"Calm down, Harry." Sirius tried, but Harry gave him a dangerous look.

"I am sorry that you thought that the four ladies were in any danger, Harry. It was not our intention to make any of you believe that your friends would be hurt. Only to impress upon you the importance of getting through the task within the set time limit."

"I understand your anger, Harry." Sirius said, stepping forward and clutching Harry's shoulder firmly. "But it won't make anything better. You have to let it go, alright?"

Harry nodded reluctantly, though he was still immensely irritated and Sirius patted his shoulder again. They all began to move off of the platform. Cedric and Viktor both congratulated Harry and thanked him for his help under the lake. Hermione and Cho both hugged him tightly, both beaming at him with pride.

Harry got his points and was excited, despite his anger over the whole damned thing, that he had once again pulled second place, as Karkaroff had scored him quite low. Harry guessed nearly dying had really counted against him.

When Harry made it onto dry ground, he was greeted by a large group,

led by Mark and Stacy, both of whom looked deeply pale and pleased that he was up and walking around.

"You don't ever do anything by half, do you?" Mark said grabbing Harry by the shoulders. "Victory or death, right?"

"Do you have any idea how scary it was to see those girls come out of the lake and not know what happened to you?" Stacy said angrily, punching Harry's arm. "And then the Mer-people bring your body out of the water. I swear to gods James... Harry...Whatever your name is, if you ever do anything so stupid again, I'll kill you myself and save everyone a whole mess of time!"

"There's still one more task, you know?" Harry smiled. Stacy shrieked in indignation and punched his arm again.

Harry couldn't help it, and he began to laugh along with Mark, who wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulder and led him and the others all back up to the castle.

17. Chapter 17

Harry was escorted to the Hospital Wing, along with the other Champions, and given an examination and a few potions before he was allowed to enjoy the rest of the day with his friends. After a quick change of clothes, Harry and his friends gathered in the Great Hall.

Mandy accompanied them all, feeling that she and Harry needed to have a very long talk, but as his friends were only here for the one day, wisely decided to wait until tomorrow. It wasn't as though she would have his complete attention anyhow.

Harry and his Salem friends found seats at the Hufflepuff table for Lunch, and were immediately surrounded by many others, all desperate to hear about what had happened in the lake. Cedric told his tale first, explaining how he'd been set upon by a pack of grindylows, which he dispatched

with several Blasting hexes.

"Finding the place was a real pain." Cedric said, keeping his fingers laced with Cho's, as if he were afraid she would disappear. "But then I started hearing singing, and I followed that."

"As did I." Viktor said. Hermione smiled up at him. "I followed the sound and found Harry being held off by four of their guards."

"I thought we had all failed, and they were dead. I just wanted to get them all back up to the surface." Harry said, shaking his head. "The Merfolk wouldn't let me get to anyone other than Mandy. In the end, I had to hit the leader with a stream of flash boiled water to get him to move. It was a stupid Task."

Both Viktor and Cedric nodded.

"When I got to the surface, Fleur was already there, looking petrified." Cedric said, looking at Harry. "She thought she had lost her sister. She was frantic. I guess she got overwhelmed by Grindylows. Stumbled on a nest or something. There were four people holding her from diving back into the water. I thought she might pass out when Mandy and that other girl surfaced."

"We thought for sure that you'd bit it down there." Mark said, examining his goblet of pumpkin juice. "We couldn't see anything, and we just sat there staring at the water for any sign of you guys. Really boring."

"What's it like down there?" Duncan asked.

"Dark." Harry shrugged.

"And cold." Cedric added, making everyone laugh.

"Did you guys really fight Dragons?" Jennifer asked, looking at the three male Champions. "I heard some girls behind us talking about it."

"Not so much fought," Cedric began. "More like distracted."

"No, I'm pretty sure Harry fought his." Susan remarked.

"It's true." Neville said, nodding enthusiastically. "Conjured chains and tried to wrestle it to the ground."

"Did you really?" Mark asked, his eyes going wide. "Oh, they are going to lose their minds over this back home. James Black, the dragon wrestler."

"What kind was it?" Duncan asked, clearly excited by the tale.

"Does it matter?" Stacy asked her boyfriend. "It's stupid and dangerous."

What is wrong with these people, coming up with a contest like that?

What's next? Gladiatorial combat?"

"I kind of think that's what we did with the dragons." Harry smirked, earning a glare from Stacy. Harry grinned. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed making her glare like that. She wasn't really angry, and there was the barest hint of a smile on her lips.

"It's ok." Susan grinned, nudging Harry playfully. "No matter what they throw at him, Harry can handle it."

"Um, if my memory is clear, I nearly just died, and I exhausted myself magically against the Dragon." Harry said pointedly.

"Can't you just half ass it once, Black... Potter... you know who you are."

Mark said waving his hands in exasperation., making people laugh with his antics.

"Why do you keep calling him Black?" Viktor asked.

"The boy you all know as Harry Potter is James Black to us." Stacy said with a smile, pointing to Harry, who smiling now. "We all just found out a little while ago."

"I was registered under a different name for my protection." Harry explained.

"We're just not used to his real name, so we just keep calling him James."

Mark shrugged.

"It doesn't matter what his name is." Came a smooth drawling voice.

Everyone turned to find Draco Malfoy standing with his arms folded defiantly, his two gorilla like goons flanking him. "He's a piss poor excuse for a wizard. There's no doubt about that."

"Like you could have done what he did today, Malfoy." Mandy said vehemently, surprising those who knew her. She blushed under the sudden scrutiny, but did not lower her evil stare from Malfoy.

"Drown?" Malfoy raised an eyebrow and sneered. "Any fool could do that. Perhaps I could help you understand that by dunking your head in a cauldron, Brocklehurst."

"Who are you, and why did you come over here?" Jennifer asked with disdain.

"Draco Malfoy." The pale blonde boy said with a low bow, taking Jennifer's hand and kissing it. "I wondered if I might entice you to join me at the Slytherin table, where the most powerful and influential wizards are."

Mark began to laugh, chuckling at first until it was a full blown laugh, earning a glare from the Malfoy scion.

"Dude, if that crap worked on her, she would not be sitting here right now. I know, I tried that." He grinned, making Harry and the other's crack up.

"I'd forgotten that month you tried to perfect a French accent because you thought it would impress her." Harry gasped.

"You did not." Jennifer laughed, shoving Mark, who was nodding as he laughed.

"It got pretty good, but I was too embarrassed to try it on you." Mark admitted. "Then I saw that ass, Robert Higgins, try to impress you with his new broom and all that talk about his family's money. After that, I figured I had no chance at all."

"Lucky for you I had my eye on you already then, huh." Jennifer smile, tugging Mark closer and kissing him softly.

Mark then turned to Malfoy. "Look, dude, I don't know you, but I can already tell that you're a douche, and we kind of have a standing policy on douches."

"Mark!" Stacy grimaced. "That's a terrible word."

"But fitting." Susan and Hannah said at the same time, making Malfoy glare at them in turn.

"Do you have a better word to use?" Mark asked.

"Dingleberry?" Duncan suggested.

"Ok, stop it. We're supposed to behave ourselves." Jennifer said quickly.

"Thank for the invitation, but frankly, you're too... too... too feminine for me."

The laughter that rang out echoed loudly in the Great Hall as Malfoy looked ready to burst, his face gone purple with rage.

"How dare you insult me." Malfoy hissed, starting to draw his wand.

Before he could pull it free from within his robes, at least ten were pointed at him.

"Walk away, Malfoy." Cedric said threateningly. "Walk away, and keep your pride intact."

Malfoy huffed, shoved his wand back in his robes and walked away.

"Tell me there aren't more of him here." Mark said turning back to face Harry.

"Just the one." Hermione answered. "But that's too much."

"You said you had a standing policy on douches?" Viktor asked.

"Viktor!" Hermione shrieked, her face coloring. He had the good sense to look apologetic, but still interested.

"Treat them as they treat others." Harry and Mark recited together,

smiling brightly the entire time.

"It was you two who gave Connor Hoskins boils on his butt." Stacy said excitedly, pointing to Harry and Mark, who gave away their guilt with the sly smiles.

After Lunch, Harry's Hogwarts friends allowed him to spend time alone with his Salem friends. He showed them as much of the castle as he could, and told them all about life there and how it differed from Salem. They met a few of Harry's teachers, including Hagrid, Professor Flitwick, and Professor McGonagall, who came to fetch them before Dinner.

"It is indeed a pleasure to meet you all," she said, "but I'm afraid I have come to take you to the Headmaster's office. It is time for your departure."

Harry walked with his friends up to the Headmaster's office to say his goodbyes. Each of them promised to write and keep him up to date on the goings on at Salem. Stacy gave him a very long hug, and wished him luck before stepping into the Floo, destined for the Ministry.

"Don't worry, we're coming back for the last one. Madam Blaylock's already arranged it all." Mark smiled hugging his best friend. "Take care of yourself, and get a girlfriend already. I mean, this place is crawling with superb examples of womanhood. That redhead looked as if she might like to get cozier with you."

"Susan?" Harry looked puzzled. "She's just a friend."

"I'm no expert here, but I don't think friends look at friends the way she looked at you, and she clearly doesn't like that brunette from the lake."

"I don't know. I don't have time to explain it all now, but I feel like I owe Mandy."

"Alright." Mark shrugged. "I'll write as soon as I get back, and I want to hear about all that you're getting up to. I can't wait to tell Craig Henderson I met the Tracey Davis. He's going to wet himself."

"Next time, we'll get a picture of you two together." Harry laughed, and they hugged once again. Mark gave one last wave as he entered the fireplace and vanished in a swirl of green flames.

Harry's heart sank a bit once all his friends were gone, and he left the Headmaster's office.

He wasn't quite sure where he wanted to go. Dinner was being served now, but for some reason, he didn't feel like eating. So, Harry went to his room. Almost as soon as he entered, he was overcome with exhaustion. It had been an immensely trying day, and now that his friends were gone, and the adrenaline had finally worn off, Harry could barely keep his eyes open.

Shedding his clothes, Harry flopped onto his bed, and was asleep in seconds.

Hannah had gone for another long walk with Neville after Dinner. She was certain, especially after the Yule Ball, that she wanted to be Neville's girlfriend, but she wasn't going to push things with the boy.

Hannah prided herself on being able to figure people out fairly quickly. Despite his terrible lack of confidence, which, Hannah smiled to herself, was growing by leaps and bounds, Neville had a lot of pride. If they were ever going to get together, she had to wait for him to ask.

He finally had. Right before he had said good night to her, he asked her how she would feel being with him, as his girlfriend. She answered by kissing him long and hard. Of course, Neville had to be cheeky about it, and when she finally broke the kiss, he asked what her answer was.

Clearly Potter, Cedric and Krum were rubbing off on her new boyfriend.

Hannah felt as if she were walking on air as she entered the fourth year girl's dormitory, and then her heart sank when she heard the quiet sobs.

She had seen Sally Anne in the Common Room with Justin, and she knew

Megan was still in the Library. The brunette would likely slip into the Common Room with mere seconds to spare before curfew, as usual. This left only one possibility.

"Sue?" Hannah asked. She hear a strangled sort of noise, and opened the curtain around her best friend's bed to find the redhead curled up into a ball, eyes shining with tears.

"Oh, gods, what happened?" Hannah asked.

"I think I'm falling in love." Susan sobbed. Hannah quickly pulled Susan up and hugged her tightly. "I'm falling in love and I can't tell him."

"Who?" Hannah asked, pulling away a bit to look at Susan, who could only stare at the floor.

"Harry." She said very quietly, as if the boy could hear her.

"I knew it!" Hannah said triumphantly. Susan looked up in wonderment.

"You knew?"

"Kind of hard not to. You spend all your time with him." Hannah smiled.

"That's cause you're always with Neville." susan argued.

"Yeah, but you could easily hang out with a hundred other people, but you choose to go spend time with Harry. My new boyfriend's best friend here at Hogwarts. Then, there's all the little nudges and the fact that you always pour him orange juice every morning. He may not see it, most everyone else might be ignorant of it, but I knew." Hannah grinned, grabbing a handkerchief from the bedside table and offering it to her best friend.

"So, what am I supposed to do?" Susan asked. "My gods, you saw that girl Stacy. She's gorgeous. And she'll be waiting for him when he gets back there."

"Yeah, she was attractive, but she's in a whole other country. Plus, you're no slouch. My gods, do you ever look at yourself in the mirror at all?

Lavender Brown would kill for your figure. I'd cut off my right arm for half you boobs. And let's not even get started on you legs or your butt. And, to top it off, you're kind of brilliant. So what if she's waiting for him. You're here now. Plus, I think she was dating that short guy."

"And what about Mandy?" Susan asked. "Or that Gabrielle? He's been pining over Mandy since the Yule Ball, and Gabrielle is like his own personal stalker."

"Oh, ye of little faith." Hannah rolled her eyes. "He's not going to pick Mandy over you. She's way to wishy-washy. You're incredibly confident... Well, normally. Sure, Harry and Mandy might go out for a while, but we both know it won't last. He feels like he owes her something. He doesn't like her, like her. He's trying to make up for his blunder at the Yule Ball. And because of that, it's going to end badly."

"I wouldn't even know how to tell him." Susan shook her head. "And besides, what's the point, he'll be gone in just a few months."

"Well, with that attitude, maybe you should just forget about him all together." Hannah groaned, getting up off the bed and going to her trunk to get her bed things.

"What do you mean?" Susan asked, not getting upset for a different reason.

"Look, Sue," Hannah turned to face her best friend. "Yes, he's going to be gone in a few months, but can you imagine a more blissful way to spend those months than being held by him? Taking walks around the Lake, or finding a broom cupboard and snogging him until neither of you can see straight? Heck, you might even take a risk and let him feel you up."

Susan got a rather far away look in her eyes and blushed, as Hannah went on.

"Look at his track record so far. He needs someone who's going to

understand when he screws up. Someone with patience, brains, and big boobs."

"Why do you always bring those up?" Susan rolled her puffy eyes.

"I don't know why you don't flaunt them more. You'd have every guy in the castle following you like a lost puppy. The point here is, Harry is different from most of the guys we're used to. He's clearly more mature than most. The only time I've ever noticed him becoming unsure of himself is when it comes to girls. Come on, even you noticed how he kept running away from anything with breasts before he had his date for the Yule Ball. And, sure, he gets a little juvenile when he's around that Mark bloke."

"I thought he was rather endearing. I thought he was pretty relaxed around us, but today I saw him really let his guard down. I liked what I saw in him."

"We all did, but we're getting off track. Look, you've got a more solid base for a relationship with him than anyone else in this school. But you're also going to have to deal with a lot. He is Harry Potter, savior of England's wizarding society." Hannah rolled her eyes as she said this.

"You know how many girls are fawning over him. Do you think you can handle all of that, even for a few months? If so, then come clean, and tell him. Don't waste anymore time than you have already."

Susan sighed and Hannah collected her things and went into the bathroom to ready herself for bed.

Susan sat down on her bed and thought about what Hannah had said to her. She hadn't considered all of it before. Harry was an icon to the wizarding populace, and as such, there would be many opinions on who the right match for him should be. As such, he could be under immense pressure about whom he should date.

But, then again, if that really were the case, would he even bother with people like Hermione Granger or Luna Lovegood? Would he be the type to go after a girl because that was who he was supposed to be with, or would he be with someone because that's who he wanted to be with? And if that was the case, what was going to happen between him and Mandy? Even more puzzling to the redheaded Hufflepuff was the question of whether or not she was truly worthy of Harry. Did she possess the patience and strength of mind to be Harry's love? Did anyone in the castle?

Susan would have to think about these things over the next few days before she made any decision regarding what to do about her feelings for the ebony-haired boy. Perhaps she could wait to see what came of the situation with Brocklehurst. Maybe Hannah was right and Harry and Mandy wouldn't last long at all. Then, maybe, she would have a chance with the green eyed boy who made her smile so easily.

Something clicked in her mind and she suddenly sat bolt upright, calling towards the bathroom. "Did you say you had a boyfriend?"

"Hi, Harry." Mandy smiled as the boy approached the Great Hall for Breakfast. "Could we talk?"

"Uh, yeah. I suppose..."

"In private, please."

Harry noticed that she looked very nervous, and allowed her to lead him to wherever she wished to talk to him. It was Sunday, and Breakfast would be available for a few more hours yet.

Mandy slipped into a classroom, with Harry behind her. She cast several privacy charms before she turned to look at Harry.

"I want to apologize to you for being such a... a ..." Her voice lowered to a whisper, her cheeks going a soft pink. "Bitch."

Harry smiled and shook his head. "I told you yesterday that I deserved it."

"Maybe, but maybe not. The truth is, you're the first boy to ever have asked me out, and when things went the way they did, I was crushed. But, I've done a lot of thinking since we last spoke. I mean A LOT of thinking. I need to ask you something, and I need you to be completely honest. I've seen how you've looked at me these past weeks, and I keep wondering if it's because you feel guilty, or if it's because of something else. Something deeper."

Harry ran his hands through his perpetually messy hair and took a seat on top of one of the unused desks. He looked at her impassive face and wondered exactly what he was supposed to say here. In truth, he wasn't sure what he felt for Mandy at all. He knew that he liked her, and had missed her company, but was there more to it than a friendship?

"I don't know." Harry finally said. "I like you, and I've definitely missed you, but I don't know if there's anything more."

"I thought so." Mandy said, though she didn't appear upset.

"I feel like I robbed us of something." Harry began but Mandy cut him off.

"No, you didn't." She said flatly. "There was nothing there to rob. To be perfectly honest with you, Harry, I'm not even sure how I felt about you before all of this mess. I liked you as a friend, to be sure, and yeah, the thought of dating you was nice, but I didn't know if I liked you that way."

"Then, why did you go to the Ball with me?" Harry asked confused now.

"Because you asked me." Mandy said as if it were obvious. "You asked me, and I wanted to go to the Ball. Harry, I don't know if you know this or not, but you are one of the most sought after boys in this school. Most girls won't talk to you because they're intimidated. We grew up with this legend of this super powerful baby who supposedly died, and boom, here you are alive and extremely cute."

Harry blushed, but Mandy ignored it and continued.

"To make it better, you go out of your way to make friends with people who most people see as a waste. Hermione, Luna, Neville, me... you've shown how truly great you are by standing up for people who couldn't do it for themselves. And let's not forget what you've done in the Tournament, Harry. You're like the real life embodiment of some romantic figure."

"But I don't want to be seen that way." Harry argued and Mandy stepped towards him.

"I know that. But I know that because I've spent time with you, Harry. And it's also because I've spent time with you that I don't know if you and I would be a good thing. You're an amazing guy, and maybe in a few years, when you've mellowed out some, or I've figured out who I am..." Mandy shrugged as she looked into his green eyes. "I just don't think this is the time for us. I can't give you what you need."

"You sound like Luna." Harry sighed. "She seemed to think you and I wouldn't be a good match."

"Did she say who you'd be good with?" Mandy asked coming to his side and sitting next to him. Harry nodded as he watched her sit down.

"He thought me and Su would be good."

"Su Li? No, trust me, Harry. She's my friend and I love her, but Su's going to end up with someone based solely on their worth. She's brilliant and all, but she's also pretty shallow. She wants to be a trophy wife."

"Well, then, I guess she's out." Harry chuckled. "I am really sorry about everything, you know." He said, looking at her. She nudged him and smiled her sweet soft smile.

"I am, too. But now we can have a friendship for the ages. And Harry, I know in my heart that whoever you choose to be with will love you more

than any girl has ever loved a boy, whether she's here at Hogwarts, at your own school, or you haven't even met her yet."

"Thanks, Mandy." Harry smiled. A few moments later, they headed off to the Great Hall for Breakfast.

"You know, I have the option of staying here after the Tournament." He said idly. Mandy stopped short and stared at him with shock.

"Are you kidding me?" She asked, her eyes bulging.

"Yeah." Harry shrugged. "I haven't told anyone, and I'd like it if you kept it to yourself."

"Why haven't you told anyone?" Mandy asked, hooking her arm through Harry's and beginning to walk again.

"I don't want anyone to try and influence my decision. I like it here, for the most part, but I'm torn."

"You'd miss your friends too much." Mandy sighed, and Harry nodded.

"If you chose to remain, I know your friends would support you. You know that, too."

Again, Harry nodded.

"Can I ask how you're feeling about it right now?" She asked curiously.

Harry shrugged.

"For like the first month I was hardcore, you know, I wanted to stay. But then the whole thing with Tracey happened, and it kind of soured everything. Then we were ok, and again, I was back on the I-want-to-stay-at-Hogwarts train. Then, all this stuff with you and me, and once again, I wanted just to go back to Salem and forget everyone and everything about this place. Now..." Harry shrugged again, looking all around at the stone corridor. "I just don't know. Seeing my friends again really made me realize just how much I would miss them, but also that they've been getting along fine without me. Better in fact."

"Harry, no matter where you are, life moves forward. You're not there with them, but they all still care about you, they still love you. It's the same with all the people who call themselves your friend here. If you chose to return to Salem, we'd all miss you, but we wouldn't stop caring for you." She nudged him, poking his ribs, making him squirm and laugh. "You have to weigh the good and the bad and make the decision that is going to make YOU happy."

Harry nodded and thanked her for her advice and her promise of secrecy. She gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek and when they reached the Great Hall, she left him to join her own friends, though she promised they'd still meet to study later that night.

Susan, Mandy and Hermione joined Harry in the Library to finish up the latest Transfiguration homework. Harry was truly happy to spend time with Hermione, who kept blushing whenever Harry expressed how good it was to see her.

"Ok, stop it. I get it!" Hermione rolled her eyes. "I spend too much time with Viktor. I'm sorry."

"Gods, Harry, it's not like you've been alone all this time." Susan said.

"I know. Susan, you have been my lifeline, and I will never be able to truly express my thankfulness." Harry said dramatically. "But, Hermione and I have a special connection." He said, clutching up her hand making Hermione laugh at his antics.

"Enough." She laughed, swatting his hand. "I'd really like to get this done tonight, if you don't mind."

"He thinks he's so funny." Mandy grinned.

"Monsieur Potter?"

Harry and the girls turned to see Fleur Delacour stand rigidly behind Harry.

"Uh, hi." Harry said, looking at Fleur strangely.

"May I speak with you, in private?"

Harry shrugged and got up, looking to his three friends giving them each a bewildered look. He followed the slender blonde out of the Library and into the hall, where she turned to speak to him.

"I wish very much to apologize for how I have treated you. I have been very rude and conceited, and you have proven to me zat you are the greater wizard. I wish you to know that I have no intention of trying to win zis Tournament."

"I thought we couldn't get out of it." Harry asked puzzled. "I thought we'd lose our magic."

"Zat is true, but there is nothing in the rules about simply not trying. I have every intention of not even trying to finish ze final Task. Some zings are far more important zan eternal glory." Fleur smiled softly.

"Why would you do that?" Harry asked truly confused. "You could win it just as easily as any of us."

"As I said, some zings are more important. I thought I had lost mi sister. Of course, it wasn't until it was all over that I learned that she was not in danger. I agree with you. Three of us entered of our own free will. You did not, and with each Task, you out perform the rest of us. If you were of age, I have no doubt that you would have been leaving us behind you."

"I can't let you just sit it out." Harry said, shaking his head. "Listen, why don't you join me and the others tomorrow morning. We take a jog around the pitch every morning. Train with us. I mean, this whole thing is supposed to be about making friends, right?" Harry smiled and Fleur nodded after a moments thought.

"I will join you, but I do not think I will change my mind, Harry Potter."

"Maybe you will after we talk tomorrow." Harry smiled.

"Look, I know it's last minute, Neville, but can you sit this one out today?" Harry asked Neville who showed up right on time for their morning jog.

"Sure." Neville shrugged. "Can I ask why, though?"

Harry felt a pang of guilt as he saw the hint of disappointment in Neville's eyes.

"I'm really sorry, you can join us tomorrow, but I need to talk to the Champions alone, and I don't want anyone to hear what I'm planning. I swear I'll make it up to you."

"No, don't worry about it." Neville said. Despite Harry's poor explanation, Neville realized he wasn't being blown off. "I'll see you in Herbology."

"You'll see me at Breakfast. And by the way, congratulations. Susan told me you asked out Hannah."

Neville got a really funny looking grin on his face and he thanked Harry as Cedric came round the corner.

"Where's he going?" Cedric asked as Neville headed back up the stairs.

"I asked him to sit out today. I've got something I want to propose to you, Viktor and Fleur."

"What?" Cedric asked, astonished at hearing the French Champion's name.

They headed onto the grounds where they met Viktor, who was standing with a very nervous looking blonde in powder blue sweat pants and sweatshirt.

"Good morning." Harry smiled.

"I do not know why she has come." Viktor said softly, looking pointedly at Fleur.

"I asked her to come." Harry smiled. "Let's get to it, before I get too cold." They made the first circuit easily before Harry began.

"I've thought about this a lot, but I never thought it would even be possible." He started. They all listened, huffing at his side.

"Through whatever circumstances, we've all become friends, and I for one, don't like the thought of having to go up against my friends to win some stupid contest. I don't care about going down in the history books."

"You're already in the history books." Cedric chuckled.

"Whatever. The point is, I think we have the chance here to do something that has never ever been done before. We could work together and win this whole damn thing. Together." Harry said. Silence, with the exception of their heavy breathing, fell on them.

"How do you propose we do this?" Viktor asked. "We do not yet know what the last Task will be."

"We can figure that out once we learn what the last Task will be. In the meantime, we train together, just like we have been. We find new spells, learn them together. We keep on as we have been, but all four of us."

"It would be a first in the history of the Tri-Wizard Tournament." Cedric said thoughtfully. "We could easily split the thousand galleons."

"All four schools get the glory because we work together." Harry said.

"And, it's better than just sitting it out and not even trying." Harry gave Fleur a pointed look. She was clearly contemplating what he said. Harry noticed that she was chewing on her lip the same way Hermione did when she was working on something vexing.

"I think it is a very good idea." She said finally. "I will do it." Fleur smiled softly.

"Harry, you have been a great friend to me, and because of you, I have met Hermione, and Cedric, and now Fleur. You have shown great strength, immense power, and a good heart," Viktor said firmly. "I will join you as well in lifting the cup. Not for Durmstrang, but for our

friendship."

"Oh, hell, who am I to stand in the way of history." Cedric grinned.

"Count me in, as well."

Harry stopped running and they all stopped as well to look at his wide grin.

"Seriously?" He asked, looking at each of them in turn. "Cause, I stayed up half the night working out this whole spiel about unity and the power of friendship and a bunch of other crap."

Both Viktor and Cedric laughed, while Fleur simply smiled nervously. As far as she was concerned, she was still an outsider, even though the other three Champions had accepted her without question. She was going to have to apologize to Gabrielle later, and that irked her quite a bit.

"Harry, we all agreed. We're in." Cedric said, clapping a hand on the younger boy's shoulder. "I'm already altering the story so that it was my idea."

Harry cocked his head and rolled his eyes at Cedric's joke.

"Cedric, it was my idea." Viktor remarked, giving a grin. "Don't go taking all the credit."

"Alright." Harry threw his hands up. "But, let's keep this between us until we finish this thing, alright?"

"Agreed." Fleur nodded as did Cedric and Viktor.

They finished out their run, the boys joking and rambling about unimportant topics. Fleur lost herself in her thoughts about Harry Potter. She could honestly say that she had never in her life even have hoped to meet a more noble and upstanding man, and to make things more perplexing, he was only fourteen.

Fleur actually frowned at that thought. Were Harry a few years older, she would court him. A man like that was almost unheard of. Yet, one

thought plagued her. Would he be able to resist her allure. What she wanted most was a man who was immune to her veela charms. From what Gabrielle had said of Harry, he had been able to resist her attempts to ensnare him. But Gabrielle was still young. Fleur was much more skilled at using her natural veela wiles to get what she desired of men. Which is why she felt most men were beneath her. She wanted someone strong- not only physical and magically speaking, but mentally, as well. But, Harry was simply not old enough for her. Perhaps in a few years, after he had matured more... if that were possible given his seemingly high level of maturity now.

She heard one of the boys make a rather crude joke apparently forgetting there was a lady present, and Harry laughed the loudest. Ok, so there was room for improvement, after all.

Still, if she did not find someone suitable in the future, perhaps she would think of arranging to visit Harry.

At the same time, Fleur began assessing the other two Champions.

Clearly, they were both strong, and Viktor was quite famous already. Not that she cared much about his fame, only about his strength of will. She knew he was currently seeing that young girl with the very bushy hair. But that could not be serious.

Cedric was much more attractive to Fleur than Viktor, with his boyish smile and his soft brown hair. And, just like the other two, very powerful, magically speaking. But, Cedric just didn't quite do anything for her.

She tore her thoughts away from dating any of these three boys. Right now, they were allies. Friends. Once the Tournament was over, and she finished school, there would be plenty of time for worrying about finding a man to love her. She had waited this long, she could hold out a little longer for the same happiness her mother and father shared, couldn't

she?

Yes, she could. She was strong, and now she would prove it. She would not be the weakest link in this alliance. She would endure, and she would emerge a true Champion, standing shoulder to shoulder with her new friends. Friends who had accepted her without question, without agendas. They simply wished to be a friend. She would not let them down.

18. Chapter 18

It was very late, and the low firelight made the shadows dance as he sat in his high backed chair, staring into the crackling flames. He always thought of himself as a patient man, but as his plans were coming close to fruition, his anticipation grew with each passing day.

His most loyal servant had been found out, and had barely escaped with his life. Now, he had no one he felt he could trust at the school with whom to get a report on the boy's progress. There was Snape, but he was unsure if the man was still loyal to him. His servant had reported that Snape was nothing more than Dumbledore's mindless stooge, but He knew the slippery black haired man better than most. Snape had been under Dumbledore's thumb for far too many years it was true, but he had always been one of his best and most faithful. Soon, he would know.

Soon, he would know exactly who had remained loyal to him.

The most distressing problem he had now was how to get the boy to him.

The boy was essential to his plans, for a number of reasons. Most importantly, his blood, and the powerful protections embedded in each precious drop.

He had had nearly fourteen years to contemplate what had gone wrong that night. Fourteen years of suffering in which he could analyze all that he had not taken into account when he'd tried to kill the one foretold to

be his end. And the boy very nearly had been. He shivered slightly as he remembered the pain he had endured those many long years.

But soon, there would be no doubt of his greatness. He was so very close to rising once again. He could already feel his power building in his rudimentary veins. He curled his tiny fingers, and saw the power radiating from them. Once he completed the ritual, he would have his body back, and then, he would lay waste to all who stood against him—starting with the boy, and then, that old muggle-loving moron, Dumbledore.

He sighed heavily as he felt the prickle in the back of his mind. The boy was feeling confused. He had discovered the connection to the boy many years ago, though it was weak at the time. At first, he thought he had been losing his mind. Strange flashes of distant places, or feelings of joy that would sicken him.

As time went on, he would get flashes from the boy when he was at his most vulnerable, and those flashes always sickened him. Especially when the boy began his education. The disgusting highs the boy had over insignificant victories. Racing on a broom, or running through some corridor, evading capture after some prank. But it was the people that made these flashes nearly unbearable. People whom the boy cared for deeply. He had every intention of punishing these people for the crime of caring for the boy. He vowed to see each and every one of them dead at his feet.

This was how he knew that Dumbledore had lied to the world. He knew that Harry Potter lived. He knew the boy was being hidden from the public. And it was this knowledge that always emboldened him to find a way to resurrect himself. To exact his revenge.

The first, real step had come at last when that waste of flesh had found

him in the dark forests of Albania. As incompetent as Wormtail was, he was able to follow basic instruction and conjured the rudimentary body he needed. Wormtail had also managed to kill a unicorn and drain the blood for the sustenance he would need until he could perform the ritual that would return him to a body.

Wormtail had also provided him information. He now knew exactly what had become of his followers, and the unexpected gift of the ministry witch that led him to his second follower and the idea which could provide him with the one thing he desired above all else. Both of his servants expressed disbelief when he had revealed his plan, but they never questioned him, and did their tasks faithfully. Crouch much better than Wormtail, of course.

Everything had fallen into place, the boy had needed surprisingly little help, which bolstered his confidence in choosing to use the boy. Crouch had reported that the boy had shown amazing power in the First Task. The papers had reported the boy's resourcefulness. Though, there had been a close call, as the boy had nearly drown in the effort.

But, there was still one last Task for the boy to get through, and now that Crouch had been discovered, there was cause for concern. He needed to make a portkey to bring the boy to him. He needed to make sure the boy retrieved the Cup first. He could not go himself. He wished to keep his resurrection secret until he was ready to begin his new campaign. That left one person. One who had the gift for concealment, and who could sneak onto the grounds and see to it that the boy made it through the last Task.

Yes, Wormtail would most likely be caught, but Wormtail was nothing if not bloodthirsty and loyal. As incompetent as he was, Wormtail had a vicious streak in him that sometimes rivaled that of his fair Bellatrix. The

Ministry would get nothing from him were he to be caught, which he almost assuredly would be. But a simple Imperio and Wormtail would kill himself before being taken into custody.

"Wormtail!" he called out in his raspy cold voice. "I have need of you."

He heard the heavy footfalls of the heavy man as he raced up the stairs.

In a moment, Wormtail was on his knees, prostrating himself before his master.

"How may I serve you, milord?"

As he stared at the balding crown of the inferior wizard, he smiled a sinister, maniacal grin as he sat himself up a little more. He had much to plan, and little time to make sure it was perfect.

Sirius opened the door of his house and was taken aback to find Dumbledore and Snape standing there, waiting to be allowed into the house.

"Albus?"

"Good evening, Sirius. I am deeply sorry that I didn't give you warning that we would be visiting, but I'm afraid we can no longer put it off. May we come in?" Dumbledore smiled benignly.

"Of course, please." Sirius said, taking a step back to allow entrance.

Dumbledore gave a genial nod as he passed, but Snape kept his black eyes straight ahead. Sirius shut the door and led them into the sitting room, where Remus was sitting, pouring over several scraps of parchments.

"Albus?" He said looking up at the newcomers. "Severus?"

"Good evening, Remus. I'm very glad that you are here. I would very much appreciate your input on what we must discuss."

"Of course. Is Harry alright?" The werewolf asked.

"So far as I know, he is perfectly fine. Likely enjoying the company of

Miss Bones, Miss Granger and Miss Brocklehurst. They have been near constant companions of his since the Second Task."

"Can I get tea for anyone?" Sirius asked.

"No need." Dumbledore said, pulling a large bottle of mead from his robes. "Please, sit."

Dumbledore conjured four glasses, and poured generous amounts of the amber liquid into them. Each man took their glass and tried to get more comfortable in their seats.

"With the Tournament ending in two weeks, I confess myself curious as to if Harry has expressed anything regarding the possibility of matriculating to Hogwarts after this year is complete?" Dumbledore asked. Remus looked to Sirius, who gave a slight shrug.

"We talked to him yesterday when he visited, but it wasn't mentioned."

Sirius said flatly. "He's been on the fence about it most of the year. When things are going well, he's pretty gung ho about being here. But when he's hit speed bumps, and especially after seeing his old friends..."

"That is pretty much as I expected." Dumbledore said. "I would very much like it if he chose to remain here when the year was out. It would make things much easier. As it stands, I believe it would be dangerous for him to return to Salem Academy. Now that our world knows he is alive, and where he's been all this time, he is vulnerable once again."

"You want to keep him here for his protection, then?" Sirius asked, but Dumbledore held up a hand.

"That is merely part of the reason." The old Headmaster replied. "Harry had unfortunately been handed a very integral role to play in coming events. And now that people know he's alive, it will be very difficult to hide him once again. Especially if things move forward as I predict they might."

"This has to do with the reason Voldemort went after him, doesn't it?"

Sirius asked, sitting forward. Snape grimaced, and shifted in his seat.

Remus and Sirius turned to look at the man who'd been their enemy when they had all been in school.

"It does." Dumbledore confirmed. "Shortly before Harry was born, I was interviewing a candidate for the post of Divination. I met with a young woman, who had done little to impress me. That is, until the conclusion of our interview, when she actually made a prophecy. A real prophecy."

Remus and Sirius stared at Dumbledore, hanging on every word. The old wizard took a great breath before continuing.

"Before I had the chance to question the seer, there was a commotion just outside the room. When I opened the door, I found my brother in a brawl with a young man, whom I recognized at once."

Dumbledore turned to Snape. Sirius and Remus turned to Snape. Snape felt his face heating up, but he looked to each man in turn before speaking.

"I was trying to better my standing in the Dark Lord's circle." He said bitterly. "Aberforth found me before I heard the total of the prophecy. When I managed to escape, I went straight to him and reported all I had heard. He was desperate to learn what Dumbledore was doing to stop him, and this troubled him. He gathered us, and set us to find this threat. After a time, he narrowed it down to two families. The Longbottoms..."

"And the Potters." Sirius hissed, his eyes darkening. "It was you? You're the one responsible for all of this?"

Sirius began to rise from his seat, his anger burning in his veins. Remus clutched his arm and tugged him back onto the sofa

"Let's hear everything before we start hexing one another," he said quickly.

"You both know that Lily was my friend when we were in school. Even though we had grown apart, I still cared about her. When I found out of the Dark Lord's intentions, I went to Dumbledore and begged him to hide James and Lily. It was then that I pledged myself to stop him. I was beginning to realize then how wrong I had been in choosing to serve him."

"As you both know, we had a spy in our midst, though we didn't know who it was. It was that spy who eventually became Secret Keeper for James and Lily."

"Wormtail." Remus and Sirius spoke the name as if it left a foul taste on the tongues.

"Wormtail vanished after that night, taking refuge in his animagus form until you nearly tracked him down, Remus. It is my belief that he immediately sought out his master. Having donned the role of pet to one of the students, he would have heard the stories that would have told him that his master was alive. And, that leads us to where we stand now."

Sirius and Remus watch Dumbledore as he took a long sip of his mead.

"Voldemort is on the verge of rising to power again. I do not know how, but I am confident he has found a way in which to return himself to his full power."

"You told us that already." Sirius pointed out. "In case you've forgotten, we've been contacting people who might help us against him."

"No, I have not forgotten." Dumbledore smiled. "My memory is as good as it ever was. Lord Voldemort will rise very soon, and I believe he will have two goals. The first will be to get a hold of the actual prophecy. He did not know the full contents of the prophecy. If he had, I believe he would have taken a different course of action."

"And his second?" Remus asked.

"To finish what he began that night nearly fourteen years ago."

"Kill Harry." Sirius said softly.

"So, what does this prophecy say?" Remus wondered.

"I think it best that we wait until Harry is present to discuss that further.

In fact, it is my intention to take Harry to the Hall of Prophecies, where he may collect it for himself. Suffice to say that I believe that this war will only end after Harry faces Lord Voldemort."

"Whoa!" Sirius stood up now, dropping his glass, allowing it to shatter on the floor. "Harry can't face him, he'd be slaughtered. Yes, Harry's powerful, there's no doubt in my mind about that. There's no doubt in anyone's mind after his display in the First Task. But facing that monster?"

"Calm down, Sirius." Remus tried, but Sirius turned to stare coldly at his best friend.

"Calm down? He's talking about having Harry square off against the most diabolical dark wizard in ages, and you're asking me to be calm? I swore I would protect Harry with everything I possessed. I'll die before I allow that monster near Harry."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Snape said. Sirius turned to the sallow skinned man with something akin to incredulity.

"What?" Sirius asked looking truly puzzled.

"The Dark Lord will let nothing stand in his way this time." Snape said quickly. "He's had fourteen years in which to plan. Fourteen years in which he has had to reflect on his previous mistakes, and begin to think of better methods in which to move forward in his campaign of domination. This war will be very different than the last, and it will cost us much more."

"I believe Harry is the key to victory." Dumbledore jumped in. "Lord

Voldemort delved quite deeply into the Dark Arts. More deeply than any before him. I have only just begun to learn of the enchantments he pursued to protect himself."

"You think Harry can undo these enchantments?" Remus asked quizzically.

Dumbledore simply shrugged. "I am unsure, but I do know that Lord Voldemort fears Harry, and what he will represent. He will carry with him the hopes and the prayers of our world. When the Tournament concludes, I promised to tell him everything about why his parents were sentenced to death, and my theories on how he survived. I will then ask him to stay here at Hogwarts, where I plan to teach him all I can so that when the day comes, and do not have any illusions, it will, Harry will be able to fight Lord Voldemort."

"Unfortunately, I don't think you have much to worry about." Sirius groaned as he sat down again. "Harry's got this damned noble streak in him. He's had it all his life. It's like he seeks out the weaker and smaller and befriends them, just so he can defend them against bigger, tougher kids, or what have you. If you ask him to fight, he will."

"I disagree." Remus spoke up. "I don't know Harry as well as you do, Sirius, but I think if you lay this all on him, he's going to freak out. He's going to want to run. This is just way too much for him. You're putting the weight of the world on a kid's shoulders. My gods, we'll be lucky if he doesn't crack up."

"Have faith in him." Snape said softly. Everyone turned to look at him once again. He looked up at them and took a great breath. "I think that the boy will be overwhelmed, and yes, he may even choose to run. But it won't last. He's made a great many friends here. People he cares for. In time, I think he would want to come back to do all he could to protect

them, just as Sirius said."

"Anytime away is time we lose. Potential lives that can be extinguished."

Dumbledore said heavily. "I need your help in convincing him to stay"

"We will. But, what if he chooses to leave?" Sirius asked pointedly. "What if he decides he wants nothing to do with any of this?"

"Then, we will not force him. We will do all we can to protect him for as long as we can. I will not take away his choice." Dumbledore said adamantly.

"If he does stay," Remus began. "It won't be safe for us to remain here in Hogsmeade."

"I have already thought about that." Dumbledore smiled. "As I believe the Order of the Phoenix will be active once again, we shall need a place in which to meet and plan. A place that is already heavily warded, but that we can add more protective charms to. And most importantly, a place where Harry will be able to visit with friends, and be visited by them in turn. Someplace connected to the Floo. It is my hope that you would be agreeable to return to your family home, Sirius."

"Oh, damn it." Sirius's head fell. "Albus, you don't know what you're asking. That place is like a damned tomb. I can't make Harry stay there. Isn't there someplace else we can go? Some place else that's just as warded?"

"I am afraid the only other place as well protected as your parents' house that I can think of would be Lucius Malfoy's home." Dumbledore gave another mischievous smile.

"Damn you, Albus." Sirius said in defeat. "Fine, but I want to be able to take Harry on vacation."

"Of course." Dumbledore nodded. "As I said, I wish for Harry to have every freedom we can allow him."

"Fine." Sirius sighed heavily. "Remus and I can go there tomorrow and begin preparing it for habitation."

"Very good." Dumbledore rose. "Harry's friends from Salem will be arriving for the Final Task at eight a.m. on the twenty-fourth. There will be a reception for the Champions at ten, which you two are welcome to attend, as you are Harry's family."

"We'll be there." Remus nodded.

"I had no doubt. Shall we, Severus?" Dumbledore turned to his Potions master.

Snape looked up to the Headmaster and shook his head. "If it's all the same to you, I would like to speak to Remus and Sirius alone."

Dumbledore hid a smile and nodded. "I expected as much. Very well. I bid you all a very good night."

Dumbledore let himself out and the three who remained stared at one another for a few moments. Finally, Snape cleared his throat.

"I never would have believed it if I had not experienced it myself." He started. "You should be proud, Black. Harry is truly a remarkable young man."

Sirius felt as if Snape had just reached out and slapped him. Never in a thousand lifetimes would he ever have expected Severus Snape to pay him any sort of compliment.

"Excuse me?" Sirius stuttered

"Did he ever tell you of our conversation?" Snape asked, leaning forward in his seat and clasping his hands together.

"Dumbledore told us that you two had a conversation a few days after that incident." Remus remarked.

"The one where you assaulted him." Sirius said, his tone becoming cold.

"Not my finest hour," Snape nodded. Sirius noticed the faint hint of

sadness in Snape's eyes. "When he first arrived, I could not see past the near mirror image of James Potter, and all my hatred boiled to the surface. It was Harry who truly made me see how pathetic I have been. How I've wasted my life."

"He did?" Remus looked surprised. "What did he say to you?"

"He told me that Lily would've been ashamed of me," Snape said simply.

"You really did love her, didn't you?" Sirius said softly. "We used to razz James about you being his biggest competition. We weren't that far off the mark, were we?"

Snape said nothing, but gave the slightest of nods. Sirius dropped his head and sat back in his seat. Remus gave a sympathetic look to the man whose life he'd played a part in making miserable while at school.

"I'm sorry." Sirius spoke quite softly, nearly being lost in the crackle of the fire. "For all I did to you, Severus. I was young, and immature, and just... stupid. I'm not going to ask for forgiveness, but just know I'm sorry."

Snape rose from his seat now and looked at Sirius for a long moment.

"I knew you were sorry for everything after I observed Harry for a while. No child turns out that well adjusted and upstanding without someone to emulate and attempt to make proud. I only hope that, one day, you will be able to forgive me, though I have much more to ask forgiveness for."

"Severus," Sirius stood up, and offered his hand in friendship. "If you do everything in your power to protect Harry, then there will be nothing to forgive."

Snape nodded and without another word, left to return to the castle.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione asked as she sat down with Hannah, Susan, Mandy and Neville in the Library. End of term exams were fast approaching, and the new group of friends were gathering to study.

"He and Cedric went to train." Neville said, not looking up from his Transfiguration book.

"The Final Task is coming up, and they're working harder and harder."

Susan looked up as Hermione and Ginny, who'd tagged along, took seats.

"I just hope they don't exhaust themselves before they even get to the Task."

"Maybe you could help relax Harry," Hannah smirked, making the redhead's face match her fiery hair.

"Shut up," Susan snapped.

"You like Harry?" Mandy asked, looking up with surprise.

"Oh, come on." Ginny rolled her eyes. "Who doesn't like Harry? Just about every girl in this school wants to shag him rotten. I overheard Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet talking about doing things to Harry that I'd never even heard of."

"Yeah, but no one has spent as much time with that boy than our dear Susan here," Hannah smirked, giving her best friend a playful shove.

"They've been nearly inseparable."

"It's not like I have anyone else to hang out with. My best friend is always out with her boyfriend now." Susan said, giving Hannah a dirty look who simply stuck out her tongue.

"I've noticed that you always sit next to him at meals, and you always have a glass of orange juice for him at breakfast." Neville said, looking up from his book with interest. He considered Harry his closest male friend, and if the girls were talking about him, he wanted to be apart of it, in case Harry needed defending.

"Maybe I'm just being a good friend," Susan tried but Hannah wasn't having any of it.

"Yes, because friends stare longingly at their friends when they walk

away. Or run their finger through said friend's hair to get it out of their eyes or 'accidentally' brush up against them, or find any reason they can to touch their friend..."

"Alright!" Susan finally said, glaring at Hannah who was now giggling.

"If you like him, why don't you say something?" Hermione wondered, but Susan shrugged.

"Just scared," Susan admitted. "It's not like a relationship with him could last."

"You never know." Mandy said. She, of course, was the only one who knew that Harry had the option for staying at Hogwarts if he chose.

Mandy really wanted Harry to stay because he'd proven to be the greatest friend she'd ever had. She also knew that Neville and Hermione shared the same feeling, though neither of them knew his secret. "Harry's so full of surprises that he might figure a way for a relationship to last with someone he really likes, and I think he might like you."

"What makes you say that?" Susan looked to the shy Ravenclaw, who shrugged.

"He doesn't shy away from you when you are near him. In fact, he flirts back."

"She's right," Ginny said. "He can't even look at Lavender anymore without blushing. I think she really scared him."

"Do any of you know what she said to him the last time they had one of their battle of wills?" Neville looked around excitedly. "He blushes like a little girl whenever Cedric brings it up."

"I do, but I ain't repeating it." Ginny grinned maniacally.

"It was really lurid." Hermione chuckled softly. Ginny began to chuckle as well, both girls turning pink as they remembered Harry and Lavender's last battle of wills. Hermione thought they were more exercises in

luridness, especially after Lavender's very indecent proposal to Harry which left the boy a stammering mess for days.

"So, you're saying I'm safe for him?" Susan looked as if she might be offended.

"I think what we're all saying is that you're not going to freak him out, and your relationship will progress at a natural speed that is comfortable for the both of you." Hannah smirked. "So, the question remains, why don't you do something about it?"

"Look, this is all pointless, alright?" Susan groaned. "He's leaving in a few weeks, and that's that. I mean, what about you, Hermione? What's going to happen with you and Viktor?"

"Good luck getting her to tell you anything about what they get up to." Ginny rolled her eyes.

Hermione gave Ginny a glare, then turned to Susan and shrugged. "We've talked about it a lot, and we both know that it's never going to be serious."

"What are you talking about?" Mandy asked. "Why not?"

"Our lives are on very different paths." Hermione smiled. "We both care for each other, but we don't have any illusions about what this is between us. When the year is over, and he goes back to Bulgaria, then we're done."

"You're just done?" Ginny looked aghast.

"What?" Hermione looked to her best friend with puzzlement. "I told you we've talked about it. Neither of us is broken up over it. Yes, it won't be great when it's over, but he's got his career, and he'll be finished with school. I still have three years to go and I still have no idea what I want to do with my life. By the time I'm out of school, who knows where his life will have taken him, and I will not let him miss an opportunity

because he doesn't want to leave me behind. We've promised to keep in touch, but for now, it's just impractical for us to try and maintain a relationship."

"Wow," Mandy said glumly. "I definitely don't have your practicality. If it were me, I'd never let him get away."

"I'm still young, and to be honest, I don't see myself ending up with him and starting a family. I think I'd like someone a bit more down to earth." Hermione shrugged.

"That's so depressing." Susan said sadly.

"What?" Hermione looked shocked. "I don't know about any of you, but I don't expect to meet my future husband while I'm fifteen."

"But you don't know if you will or not," Hannah argued.

"Well, of course not. He might be in this very room. But, I'm still a long way away from being ready for marriage. Viktor's my first boyfriend at all, and I'm certainly not going to run off with him."

"I might," Ginny smirked, and Hermione elbowed her friend.

"I say, tell Harry how you feel, enjoy your time together, and then remember it fondly," Hermione smiled.

"Which is what I've been telling you," Hannah said proudly. Susan grimaced and then shut her books, packing everything up. She then looked at them all angrily. "You guys just don't understand."

With that, she left the Library. Hannah sighed and looked at the rest of the group.

"She's afraid that he'll reject her. She had a thing for Zacharias Smith. She asked him out, and he was a real jerk to her," Hannah groaned. "Then, of course, her boobs started coming in, and Zach immediately regretted his choice of words. I think she's afraid the same thing would happen with Harry."

"Not to mention the fact that she obviously doesn't want to start something destined to end," Neville remarked.

Mandy sighed. She decided then and there to approach Harry and see how he felt about the Hufflepuff redhead. Perhaps if she could get Susan and Harry together, her friend would decide to stay at Hogwarts. She felt a twinge of guilt, because she knew he didn't want anyone to influence his decision. But the wise Ravenclaw knew there was no way Harry could not have people influencing him, unless he isolated himself. He'd gotten plenty of negative persuasion, it was time for some positive.

Harry lay down in his bed after another session of practice with the three other Champions. As the Task was now just under a week away, this was to be the last session. The four Champions decided to spend the rest of the time resting and spending time with their friends.

Harry liked that idea. He felt as if he hadn't spent anytime with any of his friends for months. He'd really been missing the different interactions. Especially with Susan.

When he thought about the redhead, Harry was overwhelmed by a flurry of mixed emotions. Susan was gorgeous, Harry never denied it. She was smart and fun and just amazing. She had been one of his best friends at Hogwarts, next to Cedric and Neville. Hermione had the potential to be a really great friend, but as she spent most of her time with Krum, they had drifted apart a bit. She always talked to him in classes and in the halls, but with Viktor taking up much of her time, Harry and Hermione had hardly spent significant amounts of time together since before the Yule Ball. Still, Harry counted her as one of his closest friends at Hogwarts. Susan, though, had something special, though Harry was hard pressed to put it into words, even to himself. He had never felt truly uncomfortable around her like he had with Tracey, or Mandy, or even Luna.

He'd been fighting his feelings over Susan since before Christmas. He had believed he was doing a good job, too. That is, until Luna caught up with him a few weeks earlier.

It had been after dinner on the last Hogsmeade weekend. Luna had caught up with him outside of the Great Hall, her patented dreamy smile on her face, her large blue eyes staring deep into his green ones.

"Hello, Harry." She said as she took his arm and began leading him down the hall. "I have been wanting to speak to you alone."

"You have?" Harry asked. "Why didn't you just come ask to talk to me?"

"I didn't wish to take you away from Susan's company. You see, she's the reason I wanted to talk to you."

"What about Susan?" Harry asked a little skeptically.

"Do you recall the last talk we had?" Luna asked, looking up meaningfully at Harry who shrugged.

"Yeah, you were telling me about those things, the crimped born zoracks?"

"Crumple Horned Snorkacks. Yes, but that isn't the talk I was referring to.

It was when you and Mandy were having difficulties after Yule ball. Do you remember now? When I told you that you and Mandy would be a bad match for you?"

"Right." Harry said, nodding in remembrance. "Yes, I remember. Do you think Susan and I would be a bad match, as well?" Harry tried, but he'd been unable to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

"Actually, I can think of no one better suited for you, and I am curious why you have not yet declared your feelings for her." Luna cocked her head questioningly. "She's a very down to earth person,, and is very kind to everyone she encounters. Plus, having an aunt as the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would benefit you greatly. So

Why haven't you acted?"

"Who says I have feelings for her?" Harry asked, a bit troubled that he could be that transparent.

"It is quite clear to anyone with eyes. The way you look at her, or how you try to touch her hand when she hands you something. How close you walk next to her, or brush strands of hair behind her ear."

"Were you following us today?" Harry asked irritably. He, Susan, Neville and Hannah had spent the day in Hogsmeade together. He had indeed done all of those things while they had been wandering the streets, going from shop to shop.

"No." Luna shook her head. "You did all of those things while in Honeydukes. I happened to be there restocking my supply of licorice wands. I'm quite fond of them, you know. But, that's not important. What is important is you and Susan. She's a fine woman, and I understand why any boy would be attracted to her. She's very buxom, and I've noticed that most boys are fixated on the size of a girl's boobs. Susan also possesses a supple rear end, and her hips suggest that she would be perfect for childbearing."

"Luna!" Harry took a step back, his face turning a deep crimson.

"Are you not curious about how she would look without her clothing?"

Luna asked, a bit astonished by Harry's reaction.

"I.. I... That is... I can't tell you that!" Harry stammered and stuttered.

"Why not? Are we not friends? Isn't this what friends talk about? Should I have told you about how I dream of covering Ron's naked body in chocolate pudding and..."

"Luna!" Harry shrieked, grabbing handfuls of his hair and stepping away from the blonde. "We are friends, but I don't EVER want to hear about your Ron fantasies."

"So, can we discuss you and Susan, then?"

"Yes, but let's leave the.. the... let's just not talk about her parts, ok?"

Harry sighed, staring wide eyed at the blonde, who merely shrugged and took Harry's arm again.

"Why have you not begun courting her?"

"Luna, the year's almost over. I've got the last task ahead, and I need to focus. Then, I don't know. I'm supposed to go back to Salem. I may never see her again."

"What do you think will happen when you return to your school? Will you try and date that girl you talk about so much?" Luna asked seriously.

"I don't know," Harry said honestly. Harry hadn't really thought much about Stacy since he'd seen her at the Second Task. He'd written to her, but not nearly as often as he'd written to Mark. He still cared for Stacy, there was no doubt in his mind about that, but he just didn't feel as strongly for her as he once did. Harry wasn't sure if it was because they'd been apart for so long, or if it was his growing feelings for Susan, or if there was something else at work here.

"No matter what, I can't start dating Susan now, and then turn around and have to leave at the end of the year." Harry shrugged. "It would be completely unfair to her. To us both, really."

"But you don't have to leave. I know that you have the option to remain at Hogwarts if you choose to," Luna said, making Harry stop dead and stare at the nearly ethereal blonde in wonder.

"How do you know about that?" Harry wondered if Mandy, the only person he'd revealed that information to, had been unable to keep her silence.

"Professor Remus and your godfather were discussing it when I came to check on you in the Hospital Wing after the First Task. I overheard them"

Luna admitted. "I think I understand why you've not spoken of it to anyone. People would be falling all over themselves trying to impress you or trying to influence your decision. But, it's been happening. Your friends have been influencing your decision and they aren't even aware they're doing it."

"I suppose so," Harry admitted.

"Everyone deserves to be happy. I'm not saying that you and Susan will grow up to be married and live happily ever after, but you could. To use your own words, do you really want to go through life wondering what could have been?"

Harry smiled at Luna and hugged her.

"I'll think about it, alright?" He smiled.

"See that you do. It's quite exhausting pointing out the obvious to you."

Luna smiled, and kissed his cheek before she skipped away. Harry could only watch her go. If he was thankful for anything at Hogwarts, it was Luna Lovegood. She had given him his first "real" kiss, and had been there every time he really needed good advice. She was something special. Harry would miss her the most if he chose to return to Salem.

Harry sighed when he thought back to that conversation. He had a lot to think about. With the end of the year fast approaching, Harry knew that Dumbledore and his godfather would be wanting to hear if he wished to stay at Hogwarts. It was true that he'd been enamored by the school.

How could he not have been, growing up and hearing stories about what his godfather, father and their friends got up to in their days as students here?

Yet, his own experience had been very different than the stories. Never had he heard about his father having to fight a dragon, or having to jump into the Lake to save a bunch of people. In fact, Harry thought with grim

disappointment, he'd only gotten to prank one person while he'd been here.

However, the thought of Pansy's expanded posterior made him smile. It had been a really good prank. But, there were so many other's that were begging to get pranked, Malfoy and Weasley at the top of his list. Malfoy just because he was an obnoxious pain, and Weasley because someone needed to give Weasley a nudge to make him worthy of Luna's affections. Harry's mind drifted to his old friends. Staying at Hogwarts would, of course, saying goodbye to Mark, Duncan and Stacy.

Harry wondered why he'd barely thought of his former crush in the last two months. He was afraid now that he no longer felt strongly for her because he'd been away for so long. Plus, he now had feelings for Susan. Harry pushed all thoughts of girls out of his mind as one big question that had haunted Harry ever since he'd learned his parents were killed by some psychotic wizard.

Why?

He had asked Dumbledore when he'd first arrived at Hogwarts. The old Headmaster had promised to tell him everything if he survived the Tournament. Harry had every intention of doing that. He'd allied the three other Champions, and they were going to walk out of that maze shoulder to shoulder, carrying the Tri-Wizard Cup as equals, as true Champions. And then, Harry would ask Dumbledore again why his parents had died, and why the Dark Lord known as Voldemort had wished to kill him.

Then, he would figure out what he wanted to do about staying at Hogwarts, or returning to his old life.

19. Chapter 19

A/N: Ok, I think it's very clear now just who Harry will end up with.

I did want to point out to Trent, who was kind enough to review, that all of his questions would be answered in the coming chapters, but as I don't think he will continue, I'll just say it will be easier for Harry to return to Salem and forget everything. That doesn't make it right. now, On with the story!

The end of year exams coincided with the Final Task, and the excitement of the two events had reached a fevered pitch inside Hogwarts Castle. As Tri-Wizard Champions, Harry, Cedric, Fleur and Viktor were exempt from exams, and Harry awoke on the morning of the Final Task filled with anticipation, not for the Task, but for the arrival of his four friends from his school. Forgoing his workout, Harry showered, dressed, and headed out to the Great Hall.

He was greeted at the door to the Great Hall by Hermione and Ginny, who had arrived at the same time. Both girls looked a bit tired, but excited just the same.

"I've got two exams left," Hermione told him when he asked how she was.

"Arithmancy and History of Magic. I'm terribly worried that I messed up in my Runes exam yesterday. But I think I did really well on my Transfiguration exam. I know I did dreadful in Charms, though. I wanted to ask Professor Flitwick to allow me to retake it, but he was very firmly against it. He said he was sure I did wonderfully, but I know he was just saying that so I would go away."

"She's like this every year," Ginny said out the corner of her mouth, and Harry smiled. "Completely mental."

"I'm sure you did just fine," Harry grinned, patting Hermione on the back. They all took seats at their usual spot at the Hufflepuff Table where Susan, Hannah, Megan Jones, Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley were all discussing their coming History of Magic exam.

"Good morning," Harry smiled as he sat down with the two Gryffindors.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Susan asked, handing him a goblet of orange juice as she usually did. Hannah gave a meaningful look at Hermione and Ginny, who rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Anxious, I guess," Harry answered honestly.

"I don't see why," Justin shrugged. "You don't have any exams."

"No," Hannah said with heavy sarcasm. "No, he's just got to face whatever the Ministry is throwing at him tonight in front of everyone."

"Yeah, it's not like he's been doing things this year that none of us could even dream about accomplishing," Susan pointed out.

"I'd like to see your solution for getting past a dragon," Ginny smirked.

"Alright, I get it. I'm an idiot," Justin said, holding up his hands in surrender.

"At last," Sally Anne grinned as she took a seat next to her boyfriend.

"You've finally realized it!"

Justin shook his head in defeat and smiled when the pretty blonde kissed him and patted him placatingly. Harry and the others laughed at Justin's predicament and then carried on talking about the coming exams.

"Where's Viktor?" Ernie asked Hermione who shrugged.

"Still sleeping, maybe." Hermione said. "He's been having to get ready to return to his team when the school year is over, and he's been out flying over the Forbidden Forest at night. I don't think he's looking forward to leaving."

"Couldn't be because he'll have to say goodbye to her, could it?" Hannah whispered and Ginny laughed. Harry looked up, but had missed what Hannah had said, and decided it must not have been too important.

"There you two are. Why didn't you wait for me?" Neville asked as he joined the group. He kissed Hannah who gave him a warm smile and

pulled the platter of sausage closer.

"My dear brother was in one of his moods, and was giving Hermione all kinds of grief for her choice in male companions again." Ginny rolled her eyes.

"He's just jealous." Neville sighed. "He really wants Viktor's autograph. He's asked me loads of times to get it for him."

Susan asked what Harry planned to do for the day, to which the Champion shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't know when my friends from Salem are getting here, or when Sirius and Remus are going to show up."

"You could always go read in the Library," Hermione suggested.

"That's what you do to relax," Ginny remarked. "I don't think Harry finds that as stimulating as you do."

"I don't think anyone does," Hannah smiled, and Hermione blushed.

"Excuse me for trying to better myself," Hermione said with mock indignation.

"Mister Potter?" Professor McGonagall said, coming up to the group. "The Champions will be gathering in the Trophy Room, just there," she pointed to a side door on the left hand side of the Head Table. "Right after Breakfast."

"Ok," Harry nodded. "Thank you, Professor. I guess now I know what I'm doing," he said, turning back to his friends.

All of Harry's friends finished eating and rose up to head off to their exams. Each of them said goodbye to Harry as they turned to go, with Susan lingering a bit.

"Harry, I wonder if you and I could talk about something this afternoon," she said, sounding a bit nervous. "If you have time, of course."

"I don't see why not," Harry shrugged.

"Great," she said, though she didn't look relieved, in fact, she actually looked more anxious now. "I'll see you later, then." Harry simply stared at her as she walked away. He thought for the briefest of moments that she was swaying her hips a bit more, but those damnable Hogwarts robes made it hard to tell for sure.

"Good luck on your test," Harry called after her as he rose from his seat.

"Hey, Harry," Cedric smiled, as he got up from his seat, saying goodbye to Cho, who gave Harry a little wave and smile as she passed.

"What do you think's going on?" Harry asked looking towards the room they were supposed to be going into.

Before Cedric could answer, Viktor called out to them, running to catch up.

"Slept late," he said as he joined them. "Without having to get up to go running with you, I keep missing breakfast."

Viktor was smiling, and Cedric grinned as he pulled a couple of pieces of toast wrapped in a napkin out of his pocket.

"I've noticed," he grinned as Viktor laughed, thanking Cedric for the toast and scarfing it down.

"Oh, there you are," Fleur shouted in her thick French accent. She was standing in the doorway the three boys were supposed to go through dressed in her usual powder blue warm up suit that she wore when jogging, her sleek blond hair tied into a high ponytail. "Are you going to keep everyone waiting much longer?"

The boys looked at one another in confusion, and then followed Fleur through the door where they were greeted by family members, and in Harry's case, his four friends from Salem Academy as well as his Headmistress, Madam Blaylock.

"It is very good to see you again, Mister Black. Or is it now Potter?"

Madam Blaylock smiled proudly at her student. She was a very thin woman, with thick black hair and sharp gray eyes. Similar to Professor McGonagall in many ways, though much easier with her smile.

"Potter, Madam," Harry smiled in return, shaking her hand.

"The entire school is most proud of your accomplishments this year. You have shown great strength and resourcefulness. And most importantly, your marks are as good as ever, and Professor Quilden has informed me that you have actually shown improvement in your coursework. He was afraid that self study might be put you at a disadvantage, but you have proven him wrong." The Salem Headmistress smiled. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I am to meet with Professor Dumbledore, and I daresay your friends are most anxious to see how you are. Good luck to you this evening."

Harry thanked his Headmistress and then hugged each of his friends, as well as Remus and Sirius, who were waiting to greet him.

Harry hadn't seen Mark, Stacy, Duncan or Jennifer since Christmas, and he was not surprised to notice a few differences. Jennifer and Stacy had both cut their hair. Stacy's long blond locks were now just above her shoulders, while Jennifer's was a bit longer, but still shorter than on their last visit.

However, the most noticeable change was the distance between Duncan and Stacy. Not only that, but they were even avoiding looking at each other. When Harry greet Duncan, he noticed his other male friend barely acknowledged him. Stacy on the other hand hugged him very tightly, and commented on how good he looked.

Mark was pretty much the same, though he had grown a few inches, and was now taller than Harry. He had also gotten a haircut, as his hair was quite short and spiky.

"I'm trying to get the James Black messy-hair look, but I just can't seem to get it exactly right," he joked when Harry mentioned it.

"How can you expect to imitate the original?" Harry joked.

"What can I say?" Mark shrugged. "You're my idol."

"It's because you're so much cooler than he ever hopes to be." Jennifer grinned as she playfully smacked the back of her boyfriend's head.

Harry then got hugs from his godfather and Remus, who both exclaimed how very proud that he had come so far that year. Harry simply smiled at each of them, and after a few minutes, Sirius cleared his throat, getting all of Harry's friends attentions.

"What's say we all take a tour of the grounds, eh?" Sirius suggested. "Me and Remus can tell you some interesting stories."

Harry could not remember laughing as much as he did that morning.

Sirius and Remus played tour guides to Harry and his friends, stopping at seemingly innocuous points around the castle where they would share some amusing story or anecdote, Remus sharing much more about Sirius than Harry had ever heard. Harry hoped that the pain in his ribs would be gone by the time he entered the Maze later that night.

An hour before Lunch, the group was interrupted by a strange, glowing silver cat who informed them they were needed once again in the Trophy Room.

"What the hell was that?" Harry asked when the silver cat evaporated.

"A Patronus," Remus smiled. Harry and Mark looked at each other, both with rapt excitement.

"We never got ours to look like that," Mark said, looking back to Sirius.

"You never told me you could do a Patronus," Sirius looked excited at Harry.

"I can't." Harry protested. "We found the charm in our second year, and it

sounded really cool. We kept trying and trying, but all we ever got was wisps of mist. We ended up giving up."

"Maybe this summer I can help you try again. It's a very useful spell to know," Remus offered and Harry smiled brightly in agreement.

The group was met at the entrance to the grand Trophy Room by Professors Dumbledore and Blaylock.

"The press is here for interviews with each Champion," Dumbledore explained. "Mister Krum is just finishing up, and he will be followed by Miss Delacour and Madame Maxime. Then, you and Madam Blaylock, Harry."

"Then you and Cedric, right?" Harry smiled.

"Indeed. I think your friends will be more comfortable in the Great Hall." Dumbledore smiled, looking to Harry's friends, who all smiled to the old Headmaster.

"Come on, you lot." Sirius smiled, waving to Harry's friend. "I'll tell you about the time we found Remus blindfolded and kissing Eleanor Grigsby when he believed he was kissing Bethany Watson."

"You wouldn't dare," Remus said dangerously, and Sirius only grinned as he led the Salem students out into the Great Hall.

"Harry's father and I..."

Harry didn't hear anymore as there was applause coming from the Trophy Room. A moment later, Viktor came out with his Headmaster, scowling behind him. Viktor gave Harry a sort of chagrined look and shrugged. Harry saw Fleur and Madame Maxime enter, and he heard Ludo Bagman's voice, introducing them.

"So, Harry," Dumbledore smiled. "How have you enjoyed your Hogwarts experience?"

"Well, other than a few major problems, it's been pretty enjoyable."

"Problems?" Dumbledore arched an eyebrow in question.

"You know," Harry shrugged. "Having to fight a dragon, being forced to swim to the bottom of the Lake..."

Dumbledore began to laugh merrily, as did Madam Blaylock.

"Yes, those were very problematic, but you did manage to overcome those difficulties astoundingly well, if memory serves," Dumbledore complimented.

"I suppose, though I nearly killed myself in the process," Harry smirked.

"Well, Mister Potter, that which does not kill us..." Madam Blaylock smiled.

"Makes us stronger," Harry nodded. "Professor, I was wondering if you remembered the promise you made to me."

"About telling you all that I knew regarding your parents?" Dumbledore smiled, though the twinkle in his eye had faded. "Yes, and I intend to carry through. I would caution you to focus on tonight's event. Then tomorrow, we shall talk."

There was another round of applause, and Harry straightened up. Fleur and Madam Maxime walked out and Fleur gave Harry a brilliant smile, which he returned. Madam Blaylock made a motion with her hand, and Harry led her through the door just as Ludo Bagman introduced them. Just as at the Wand Weighing Ceremony, the room was now filled with reporters.

"As before, you will have ten minutes." Ludo smiled jovially.

"Madam Blaylock. Jean Verity, Warlock Worldly. Even though America was not approached to compete, how do you feel your student has performed?"

"Harry Potter is one of Salem Academy's finer students. Our teachers and students couldn't be any prouder of him. I have not been able to attend

up until now, so I am most anxious to watch Harry perform for myself."

"Ivan Worlivic, Regal Register. What was your reaction when you learned that your student was none other than Harry Potter, the child savior of Britain? And how did you feel when you learned his name had emerged from the Goblet of Fire?"

"Of course, I could hardly believe it. His story is known throughout the world. As for his name coming out of the Goblet, my first concern was his safety. After speaking with Professor Dumbledore, though, I was happy that he'd been chosen for such a prestigious tournament. Though, I am still puzzled by how his name got in there in the first place. However, I am confident that Britain's Ministry of Magic will discover the truth."

"As would we all," Ludo chuckled from his spot on the side of the room.

"Madam Blaylock, Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet. How do you feel about possibly losing Harry to Hogwarts when the year is over with?"

There was a buzz of whispered conversation, and Harry's smile fell a bit. How did this woman know so much? So far as he knew, reporters weren't allowed on the grounds of Hogwarts.

"If that is his wish, I can do little to stop him, now can I?" Madam Blaylock smiled, patting Harry's shoulder. "We will, of course, miss him deeply, but wish him the very best in his future."

"Mister Potter, Julianne Green, Witch Weekly. You've been at Hogwarts a year now, how do the girls of Hogwarts compare to the girls at your own school, and have you found someone special?"

Harry blushed a bit and a few of the reporters laughed a little at his discomfort.

"Um, I think girls are universally perplexing. I don't think it matters where you go," Harry smirked.

More laughter and the Witch Weekly reporter smiled and said, "Good

answer."

"As far as someone special, I think that's a bit personal. Suffice to say, I've made some very good friends here. There are people I hope to be friends with for the rest of my life, and I'm happy that I was able to come here and spend time at Hogwarts."

"Jacob Sullivan, Griffin Gazette. Mister Potter, do you have a plan for the Final Task?"

Harry smiled and nodded, "Not get killed."

Again there was laughter, and Ludo began applauding. "Thank you, Mister Potter and Madam Blaylock, we, of course, wish you the best of luck."

Harry thanked them and headed out of the Trophy Room with his Headmistress following him.

"You did very well in there, Harry, and I am very proud of you. If I may ask, are you thinking of transferring here to Hogwarts?"

Harry felt his shoulders slump slightly. "Professor Dumbledore told me I could if I wanted, and I think my godfather would like it if I did. I know he misses being here with his friends and family. But, to be honest, I don't know how I really feel about it. I've been thinking about it a lot, and I still can't figure out where I'd be happiest."

"Very good, Harry, if I may call you Harry."

"Of course, Madam," Harry smiled.

"While I applaud your thinking of your godfather, I am impressed that you are considering your own feelings in the matter. Sometimes, other people's happiness is not worth sacrificing our own, no matter how much we care for those people. Remember that."

"I will. Thank you," Harry said, and his Headmistress nodded and guided him into the Great Hall, which was now filling with students for Lunch.

Madam Blaylock remained with the other School Heads and engage in idle conversation, getting to know her peers, while Harry joined his godfather and friends.

"How'd it go, superstar?" Stacy asked. She was smiling at him, but he noticed it wasn't reaching her eyes. Harry sat across from her in between Mark and Sirius.

"Fine. They mostly asked Headmistress Blaylock questions," Harry shrugged.

"Already losing your shine," Duncan said, a hint of bitterness in his voice. Harry looked up, but Duncan was studying his sandwich carefully. Harry turned to look at Mark, who quickly shook his head.

"Excuse me," A voice said sweetly. "May I squeeze in here?" Susan smiled, looking at Mark, who gave Harry a knowing wink and scooted over a bit.

"Nice to see you all again," she smiled.

"Ok, let me see if I remember..." Mark grinned. "Not Hermione, not Tracey... Uh, Hannah?"

Susan laughed and shook her head. "Susan."

"Oh, that was my second guess," Mark grimaced.

"It's nice to see you again too, Susan. How have you been?" Jennifer asked.

"Alright," Susan shrugged. "Happy that my exams are over with."

"How'd you do?" Harry asked.

"Ok, I guess. Though, I think I mixed up some important dates." Susan shrugged. "I guess it's good I have no interest in becoming a historian," she smiled and Harry laughed. "What have you lot been up to?"

"Oh, Sirius was telling us some interesting stories about your former Defense teacher," Mark chuckled, and Remus looked up.

"Now, now, there's no reason we need to repeat those lies," Remus

blanched.

"Lies?" Sirius barked, a huge grin on his face. "I would be willing to make a magical oath that none of my stories today have been embellished one bit!"

"Oh, now I really want to hear this," Susan smiled, perking up excitedly.

"If you open your mouth one more time, Sirius, I will neuter you right here in front of these children," Remus eyes narrowed and his wand was in his hand. Sirius threw his head back in laughter, and the teens who'd heard the stories joined in. Harry whispered that he'd tell Susan later.

As there were no more classes for the rest of the day, Harry and his Salem friends were joined by many of his Hogwarts friends, and they headed out onto the grounds where they sat together near the Lake, swapping stories and telling jokes, none of which were more entertaining than those shared by Remus and Sirius, who were fighting a battle, seeing who could embarrass the other more.

As the sun began descending behind the distant mountains, Harry led his large group of friends into the Great Hall for Dinner. Harry, having watched Stacy and Duncan most of the day, decided to hold Stacy back and find out what was happening.

"We broke up," she said. Harry was actually surprised that he didn't have to wheedle it out of her. "We were never a good match, to be honest, but I liked him, and he liked me. But, after our first visit, we started arguing. Not seriously, or anything, but as we went on, it got worse. Finally, he accused me of dating him because I couldn't have you."

Harry's eyes bugged at this, but Stacy was on a roll and didn't stop.

"It's not true, of course. If I was that hung up on you I wouldn't have dated anyone. And, not to hurt your feelings or anything, but after you were gone, and I didn't see you all the time, I just... I don't know, lost

those feelings for you. When we came to visit and I saw you and that redhead together, I figured you were dating her, and I was really happy for you. But, I guess Duncan just couldn't get over his jealousy of you, and he took it out on me. I'm glad we broke up, but it still hurt, you know?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said, unable to think of anything else to say.

"Thank you, but it isn't your fault. It's Duncan's and mine. Look, you don't need this right now. You have to keep your head clear for tonight."

"I'm fine," Harry shrugged. "Besides, I've got a really good plan, so, no worries." He smiled, throwing a hand around her shoulders, and leading her into the Great Hall.

"So, are you and Susan together?" Stacy asked. Harry looked at her with a curious expression and she smiled. "What, you're my friend, and I think you two look adorable together. Besides, did you not see the way she made Mark scoot his big butt over so she could sit next to you?"

"No, we're not together," Harry shook his head.

"But you like her," Stacy nudged her friend.

"Yes. I like her."

It was the first time he'd admitted to anyone, including himself, that he liked Susan. He felt like a lead weight had been lifted off his shoulders at the moment, only to be replaced by a breaking heart.

"I just don't think anything's going to happen. I mean, I haven't even decided if I want to stay here or go back to Salem."

"Wait, you're thinking about not coming back?" Stacy stopped him just short of the Great Hall. "You're really thinking about it?"

"Dumbledore told me when I first came here that if I wanted, I would be able to transfer to Hogwarts for the next year. My parents went here, and Sirius and Remus, and I have a lot of friends here. But, I have friends at

Salem."

"And you don't know what you should do," Stacy confirmed, Harry nodding at her observation.

"I wish I had some advice for you. Really, I do. But know that if you decided to stay here, as much as I would miss you, I would support you with all my heart. I know Mark would tell you the same thing."

"Don't tell him, alright?" Harry asked, looking pleadingly. "He's my best friend, and I want to talk to him about it when the Task is done."

"Cross my heart," Stacy smiled, making a show of crossing her heart with her pinky, kissing it and holding it up in a sort of salute. Harry smiled and they went into the Great Hall together.

Harry enjoyed his dinner, despite Sirius' jokes about it being his final meal. At half past eight, Dumbledore stood up and called the Great Hall to silence. He then informed everyone that in a few moments they would all be heading down to the Quidditch pitch where the Final Task would be taking place. He then asked for the four Champions to follow Professor McGonagall, who would take them down to the pitch where they would be receiving their final instructions.

Harry rose to applause from his friends and waved as he joined Cedric, Fleur and Viktor, who began following the Transfiguration teacher down to the Champion's Tent, where several other Professors stood awaiting them.

Ludo Bagman was there with, to everyone's great surprise, Barty Crouch, who'd not been seen since the Wand Weighing Ceremony. Harry had learned that the Barty Crouch he'd helped uncover as the fake Professor Moody was in fact the son of the head of the Department for Magical Cooperation, who stood before him, looking very tired and surly.

"Well, this is it," Ludo smiled, clapping his hands together. "Tonight is for

all the marbles. Whomever reaches the Tri-Wizard Cup in the middle of the maze will be named Tri-Wizard Champion, and rewarded one thousand galleons."

Harry glanced at Cedric, who was smiling at him, as was Fleur and Viktor.

"Now, as I told you back in March, there are obstacles in your way throughout the maze. Creatures and spells, and the like. On the first whistle, Mister Diggory, who is leading in points, will be allowed to enter the Maze, followed by Mister Potter two minutes later. Then Mister Krum, and finally Miss Delacour. Now, if you get into trouble, or decide you can't go on, simply fire red sparks into the air, and one of these fine educators, who will be patrolling around the edge of maze, will come in and bring you out safely. Are there any questions?"

None of the Champions had anything, and Ludo then motioned them to their own private rooms, where their uniforms for the night awaited them.

Harry went into his room and saw that it was basically the same outfit that he wore in the first Task, and quickly changed clothes. When he emerged, Fleur was pacing nervously, her wand in her hands. She looked up at Harry and shook her head.

"I know that I agreed to do this with you three, but I feel as if I do not deserve to raise the Cup together with you. I have done quite poorly up until now..." She was starting to say, but Harry cut her off.

"We're doing it together," Harry said firmly. "We've worked hard together, and we've helped each other. We all deserve to be here."

"I agree," Viktor said, having come out of his own room. "If we do not finish together, than I want no part of it any longer."

"Me, either," Cedric said, finally joining the group. "You've all become

like family to me, and I want to walk out of that maze with each of you at my side."

"We've agreed on a plan, let's stick with it, and let's show the world that we're stronger together than we are on our own," Harry smiled.

Fleur smiled, her eyes shining with tears, and she gathered all three boys together for a group hug.

When they broke apart, Fleur wiped her eyes and kissed each boy on the cheek, thanking them for befriending her. It wasn't long before the real Professor Moody entered the tent and informed them it was time.

One by one, the Champions emerged from the tent to thunderous cheers and applause. Harry looked up to see Sirius and Remus surrounded by all of Harry's friends, all standing and whooping for him. Harry smiled and waved up at his cheering section before taking his place right behind Cedric, who was waving to his parent and Cho, who looked very proud of her boyfriend.

Harry saw Hermione looking between him and Viktor, who waved to her, and then to his parents, who were sitting near the front, just behind the reporters.

Ludo Bagman stepped up in front of the Champions, and with his magically amplified voice informed the crowd how the points stood. And finally, after a few more minutes, he gave a loud blast on his whistle.

Cedric turned and walked into the maze. Harry saw him wander in a ways, and then take a right. Just as planned, Harry knew that he would stay there until they were all together.

The whistle sounded again, and Harry stepped into the maze. He noticed at once that as soon as he crossed the threshold, the sound of the crowds, which had been extremely loud a moment ago, were barely a whisper now.

It was also very dark within the maze. Hand slipped his wand out, actually feeling stupid that he had waited this long, and made the first right he came to, finding Cedric waiting for him with a huge smile on his face.

"Finally," he said. "It's really kind of spooky in here."

"Four more minutes and we can get this thing over with. What do you think we'll find in here?" Harry asked.

Cedric shrugged. "No clue, but I don't think it'll be anything we can't handle."

They heard a whistle sound, and they both remarked on how very far away it sounded, even though they knew they were less than twenty feet away from the entrance. A few second later, Viktor rounded the corner.

"It's so quiet," he remarked.

"I think it must be charmed so we don't get distracted by the crowd noise or something," Harry said.

"Probably also so we can't hear anything that we might want to avoid," Cedric nodded.

They heard the last whistle and in a few moments, Fleur rounded the corner, a bright smile on her face.

"They're wondering why you weren't moving, I think. That man with the blue eye can see us in here."

"So, let's find this thing," Harry smiled, opening his hand flat and placing his wand on it. They had found this spell during their research. It was supposed to work like a compass and tell them where to go.

"Point me to the Tri-Wizard Cup," Harry said. The wand twitched and then spun in Harry's hand so that it was now pointed due west.

"Let's go," Cedric grinned and led the group down the hedgerow and at the first right turn they came to, turned and moved towards the direction

Harry's wand had pointed to.

It wasn't long before they met their first obstacle. A bright creature ten feet in length set low to the ground on eight spindly legs and a long tail raised up much like a scorpion. There were no eyes so far as Harry could tell, but he had no idea what the thing was, and then Cedric groaned in exasperation.

"Blast ended skrewt," he said looking to the others. "One of Hagrid's little pets. I don't know how we stop it."

There was a stuttering popping sound and the skrewt took off like a rocket straight for them. Harry was pressed against the hedgerow by Viktor, while Cedric got hold of Fleur, pulling her out of the way of the lobster-like monster. It stopped and turned, its tail darting forward. Viktor pulled Harry suddenly and the creature's tail snapped into the thick hedges, missing Harry by inches.

"Thanks for that," Harry said quickly, raising his wand. He shouted "Reducto!" and blasted a large section of earth under the skrewt and sending the creature into the air. Viktor and Cedric both sent Blasting hexes at the creature, opening its soft belly. When the skrewt landed, it was dead, and the four Champions breathed a little sigh of relief.

"I really hope there are no more of those," Fleur gasped.

"Try not to get your hopes too high," Cedric grinned.

Harry did the Four Point spell once again, and they headed off once again.

They took a mess of wrong turns and got turned around until they ended up at the corpse of the blast ended skrewt. After a few seconds of nervous laughter, the four Champions headed off again, this time taking a few different turns, and using the Four Point spell at nearly every turn. They ran into a patch of Devil's Snare, which Fleur dealt with handily.

They traveled on for fifteen minutes, running into another series of dead ends. Harry was getting frustrated, and suggested several times that they just blast through the hedges to save time.

Harry's suggestion began to look more and more appealing as they ran into a large mountain troll, which the four Champions tied up and stunned, and then got surprised by a strange mist that turned the world upside down, keeping the four trapped until Harry discovered that by taking a step forward released them.

"What the hell was that?" Harry asked the older Champions, who all looked confused.

"I have no idea," Viktor muttered. "I think we should take a moment to rest."

They all agreed. They'd been running for nearly half an hour, and they were all out of breath. Harry slumped next to the wall of bushes and sighed, his heart racing in his chest. He looked at the others, who all looked as tired as he felt now.

"Do any of the rest of you get the feeling that we've only done the easy stuff so far?" Cedric asked. "Like the closer we actually get to the Cup, the harder stuff is going to be?"

Harry nodded, as did Fleur. Viktor grunted his agreement. They all stood up together in an unspoken agreement to get moving again. Cedric did the Four Point spell this time, and they started off again. Harry suggested again that they simply blast through the hedges, and this time, Fleur agreed.

Cedric, who was leading the group, stopped and shrugged. They all turned and, with a count of three, all four blasted a hole into the mess of bushes that formed the wall. With the combined force of their spells, the wall blasted open, and they all grinned happily at their success.

"That'll make things easier," Cedric smiled. His smile faltered when he and the others heard the clicking sound. Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end as the first long, hairy leg slipped through the hole.

"Oh, shit," Harry groaned, stepping back, his wand raised to defend himself.

Five incredibly large spiders rushed through the hole and started to attack the Champions. Harry ran back, putting some distance between himself and the spider who tailed him. Harry tripped over a root and tumbled hard onto the ground. He rolled hard to his left just as the spider's leg came down where he'd fallen.

"Incendio!" Harry said, aiming his wand at the spider's mouth. The spider reeled as the hair near its mouth ignited. It gave a loud screech and Harry took advantage of its confusion and sent three Cutting hexes at the closest of the spider's legs. Harry saw that he had nearly severed the spider's legs, and the beast fell over, still trying to extinguish the fire now spreading along its underbelly.

Harry scrambled to his feet and ran back to where the others were still fighting the five remaining spiders. Fleur was on the ground, being held down by one of the extremely large spiders, though it was unable to focus on her, as Viktor was distracting it, while fending off two other beasts. Harry was very impressed by Viktor's swiftness in casting, though he knew now was not the time to enjoy the show.

Harry used a Reducto on the closest spider, tearing its bulbous posterior apart and making the spider jump and turn towards him. However, the damage was far too much for the spider, and after it took a few steps, fell over in a heap of hair and blood.

Harry's dispatching of one of the beasts had made things a bit easier for

Viktor, who was able to use a Conjunctivitis curse on the spider who held Fleur down. It retreated a bit, giving Fleur a chance to get to her feet again, snatching up her fallen wand, and along with Viktor, dispatched the third spider, accidentally spraying Harry with spider blood and guts. "Sorry." Viktor gave a wry look as Fleur stepped forward and, with a few swishes of her wand, cleaned him off.

"Where's Cedric?" Harry asked.

Before anyone could answer, though, Fleur screamed in pain as the spider they'd blinded rushed at them. It knocked her to the ground with a sickening thud. Harry felt himself lifted into the air and fell on top of the spider's back, which enraged the beast more than it was already. Harry stabbed his wand hard against the spider's back and shouted "STUPEFY!" The spider collapsed and skidded along until it ran into another dead spider, and Harry hurriedly jumped off and ran back to where Viktor was helping a wincing Fleur to her feet again. Cedric suddenly appeared from through the hole they'd blasted, which had started the whole mess. He had a long cut down his left cheek, and a mess of dirt and twigs in his hair.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked in relief.

"I ducked under the spiders when they came through, but the last one smelled me, or something. I got to think I killed it though." Cedric gasped.

"Thank you for getting me to start running, Harry. If it wasn't for you, I don't think I could have outrun those things. How's Fleur?"

"Fleur is fine," Fleur said indignantly, holding her ribs and looking pale.

"But I would very much like to get out of here."

"I think blowing holes in the hedgerows was smart, but we need to be a bit more prepared for things like that happening again," Cedric said.

Viktor stepped through the hole and Cedric and Harry helped Fleur, who

thanked them, but told them not to worry too much.

Once again, Cedric did the Four Point spell again, and when the wand stopped, pointing the way, Viktor stepped up and he and Cedric blasted another large hole into the hedges. Stepping back, the four waited a few moments to see if anything came through.

"You don't suppose this is cheating do you?" Cedric smirked.

"I don't remember hearing anyone mention that we shouldn't take the direct route," Harry laughed, and Viktor grinned as well.

"I don't know why we just didn't summon brooms and fly over the top."

Viktor chuckled and Fleur laughed as well.

"Oh, now you think of that," Harry rolled his eyes, and they all laughed harder.

"Ok, it's really starting to hurt when I laugh," Fleur said, wiping at her blue eyes and holding her ribs. "Can we get moving now?"

The three boys all smiled, and as one they blasted another huge hole in the maze wall, and took up defensive positions. When nothing came through, Harry did the Four Point spell to see that they were still heading in the right direction.

Luck was clearly on their sides, as they took the more direct route. It was clear that no one had thought to reinforce the walls to prevent them from simply cutting their way through the maze. The only other thing they ran into after the spiders was bit of smoke that kept changing forms into strange things. It took them a few moments to understand what they were seeing until Fleur recognized it.

"It's a boggart, and it's confused." She said quickly. Viktor stepped forward so the boggart would focus on him. Harry saw the thing change into a large hooded figure and heard it begin to snarl at his Bulgarian friend. Viktor didn't pause but raised his wand and shouted "riddikulus".

The hooded figure changed again, but this time when it finished, Harry was looking at Headmaster Karkaroff in what would have been a very sexy bit of lingerie on someone like Fleur or Susan.

Fleur was the first to react, shrieking in delight, followed by Cedric, who gave Viktor a look of astonishment as he fell to his knees as he roared with laughter. Harry could not contain his own humor and fell against the hedge, pointing and laughing. Viktor also joined in, and the boggart vanished in a flash of light.

"You're..." Cedric gasped. "You're sick."

Viktor smiled at his friends, who were all trying hard to get hold of themselves. "Many of us believe he dresses like that when no one is around. If you went to Durmstrang you'd understand."

"I'm...Never...going...to...be...able to...look at him...again." Fleur howled, clutching her sides, and crying from pain and laughter.

It took a little while for them to settle down, but finally they were all on their feet once again and in a few moments, they had blasted through the last barrier and found themselves in a large clearing where a shining silver and glass cup stood upon a simply pedestal.

Laughing and hugging one another, the four friends approached the Cup as one, surrounding it and beaming at one another.

"On the count of three, then?" Viktor asked, looking to each of his fellows, each of who nodded. They all raised their hands, holding them over the cup preparing to end the Tournament as friends and allies.

"One." Cedric said, looking to Fleur, then Viktor and finally Harry.

"Two." Fleur said, her eyes lowering to the cup.

Something caught Harry's eyes and he turned just as Viktor opened his mouth to say three. Someone knocked the Bulgarian onto the ground stabbing at the Cup and saying "Portus" at the same time that he, Cedric

and Fleur said three and grasped the cup.

Harry felt something tugging him from behind his navel, and the maze disappeared in a swirl of dark greens.

Peter Pettigrew had spent two weeks traveling to Hogwarts from where his master had chosen to hide. As he was still wanted by the Ministry for his part in crimes against humanity, he chose to travel almost exclusively in his rat form. It was safer, but it took much more time.

When he finally arrived in Hogsmeade, he used the old secret passage in the Shrieking Shack and spent the morning working his way into the center of the maze. Where he then spent the rest of the day waiting.

Waiting for the moment when the Champions would enter the Maze.

In the afternoon, someone had placed the Cup on the pedestal, and tapped it with their wand. Peter knew that it had been turned into a portkey, likely to take the Champion out of the maze when they clutched it. As Peter didn't know how to cancel out the port key's destination, he would simply tap it with his own wand, and override the original destination, thus making it a two way portkey. Peter wasn't too worried, he had every confidence that the boy would not be returning.

His orders were explicit. To kill anyone who tried to get the cup before Potter and avoid detection. And so, Peter had waited in his rat form under the closest hedgerow, expecting to have to kill and hide each of the Champions before Potter finally found his way into the center of the maze.

That wasn't what had happened, though. Peter had been shocked when a large section of the maze wall was blasted apart and all four Champions stepped into the clearing. It was only then that he'd forgotten that he had yet to make the cup a portkey. Slithering out of his hiding place, Peter transformed into himself as the Champions surrounded the Cup.

He had planned to grab the boy and use the portkey to take himself and Potter to his master. However, with all four of the champions there, He knew that he would never get to the boy. He had no other recourse.

He used all of his weight to knock the biggest boy, who was closest, off his feet, stretching out his arm and touching the cup with his wand, accomplishing his mission. He was thankful that it had worked. Still, he had one champion to deal with.

Unfortunately for Peter, years of hiding out as a rat had slowed his reflexes. Viktor was on his feet in no time and had fired red sparks into the air, before bringing his wand to bear on the stout, balding man before him.

"Who are you?" Viktor asked, his face stern.

"No one who matters to you, boy," Peter laughed, aiming his wand.

"Avada Kedavra."

Viktor danced out of the way and the nasty green spell exploded into the hedges behind him. Peter sent two stunning spells at the tall Bulgarian, who conjured a shield faster than Peter could blink. The boy was good, there was no doubt, but he was an obstacle. Peter lost his patience and set fire to the hedgerows, trying to box Viktor in so he could get a clear shot at the boy.

Before he had the chance to finish off Krum, three professors suddenly appeared. Professors McGonagall, Snape, and Moody all came around a corner and entered the clearing and stared with shock at the sight of the short balding man, who turned to look in horror at being seen.

"Peter Pettigrew?" McGonagall hissed in awe.

Peter turned, and started to transform into his rat form, but Professor Moody, displaying quickness that would not be believed unless witnessed, blasted Pettigrew off his feet. Peter's head smashed into the

pedestal that had held the Tri-Wizard cup. He fell heavily onto the ground and felt the warm stickiness of blood dripping into his face. Peter rolled back onto his feet and stared at the three approaching professors, and knew then there was no escape. Snarling with anger at his predicament, he felt the pull on his mind. He knew his master had placed him under the Imperious curse. He knew the reason for it, but it didn't make him feel any better about what he was now doing. He tried to fight, but his master's subliminal suggestion was far too strong for him, and he felt his own wand tip being shoved up under his own chin. The three professors began rushing forward in an attempt to stop him, but they only took a couple of steps before he snarled.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The flash was blinding and when it was over, Peter Pettigrew lay dead, his final maniacal grimace still upon his face. Moody went over and knelt beside the man and picked up his wand, tapping it with his own and checking what spells had been used.

"He made a portkey," the ex auror said in his gravelly baritone.

McGonagall nodded and with a swish of her wand sent a brilliant shining silver cat to get help.

A very disconcerted Professor Snape rushed to Viktor and clutched him by the arms, staring hard into the Bulgarian's eyes, and shaking him to get him to focus on the here and now.

"Tell me everything that happened right now."

20. Chapter 20

A/N: To trent, who, once again, is too cowardly to actually register so that i can reply to him and keep from ruining everyone else's reading experience... Once again you prove your idiocy. First, I'm a guy. And if you dared register so we could have a polite and

insightful conversation, I could explain the true reason why Harry might choose to stay, which isn't even close to the reason you think it would be. It has nothing to do with a girl, or his parents. Why do you assume that America's magical culture would be any better than Britain's? no where in this story did I mention what salem Academy is like. you just assume it's in the northeast of the country. Just because it's named Salem, doesn't mean it's actually in Salem. You made all these assumptions about this story and me personally, and ended up making yourself look stupid. Thank you for being so entertaining.

To the rest of you, i apologize for the rant. Also, to those who are disappointed by the pairing, realize this isn't going to be my last ever story. You've given me good ideas for future fics, so thanks. you guys are the wind in my trees... or something equally poignant. Enjoy!

Sirius and Remus both saw the red sparks fly up into the dark sky as did the rest of the waiting crowds. It had been strangely quiet as everyone watch for their favorite champion to emerge holding the Tri-wizard cup aloft. Unfortunately, the walls of the maze were so high as to prevent the crowds from getting any kind of decent view inside. They did see the occasional giant spider climb over a wall into another pathway, or the flash of a spell.

For a while, there seemed to be a steady stream of red going in a straight line. Both Remus and Sirius joked that Harry had probably lost patience and decided to simply blast straight to the center of the maze.

"That's my boy." Sirius joked, and Remus chuckled along.

Harry's friends all sat together in front of the two men, chattering away about what might be happening in the maze and what the champions

might be facing. They had been really excited when the Task began.

Standing on their seats to cheer for Harry when he and the others came out of the Champion's tent and even louder when he entered the maze.

Then things got quiet for a bit. And then, at last, the red sparks. Sirius heard several of Harry's friends, all female, verbally express concern over Harry's well being. Sirius himself felt that something was wrong. He couldn't explain it. He simply looked gravely at Remus, who, with a nod to his best friend, signaled that they should get out of the stands and down to where the judges and teachers were waiting.

As they descended the steps, Sirius wondered if it had been Harry who had sent up the sparks and what condition they would find him in. Then Sirius began to laugh and shared his musing with his best friend.

"What are the odds that he simply got lost and kept going in circles and just got tired?" He asked which made Remus chuckle. Unfortunately, it wasn't even close to that simple.

When Sirius and Remus made it onto the pitch they saw confusion and concern

The judges were all on their feet as Professor McGonagall, followed by Viktor Krum, who looked just fine, save for a small bruise on his cheek, and a lot of dirt on his clothes. Behind him came a very worried looking Snape, who was clutching his left arm and wincing. Then, Sirius and Remus got the biggest shock of the night.

Guided by a limping Mad-Eye Moody, lying on an enchanted stretcher, quite dead, was Peter "Wormtail" Pettigrew. The tournament judges, along with special guest spectator, Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, surrounded the floating form in astonishment.

"He was here? But how?" Fudge was saying, looking very confusedly between Dumbledore and the dead man on the stretcher. Dumbledore

looked quite angry now as he gazed upon the body of his former student.

"Albus?" Sirius called, making the ancient Headmaster turn, and upon seeing Harry's godfather, waved them over. Both Remus and Sirius came over in time to here Mad-Eye begin to explain.

"Don't know what happened before we got there." He grumbled. "He was setting fire to the hedgerows when we showed up. The bastard tried to transform, but I blasted him while Snape set up a barrier to keep him from getting to far away. He realized he was trapped and killed himself. He looked to be trying to fight himself, so I'm guessing he was under the Imperious curse, at least at the end."

"A fail safe?" Dumbledore asked and Moody nodded.

"Someone doesn't want us to know what he did. Thankfully, Krum managed to stay alive and Snape got the full story." Moody nodded to the sallow skinned man who looked almost as if he was going to be ill.

"I'm sorry." Snape said softly. "But there was no time. I used Legilimency on him, and I'm afraid that Potter, Diggory and Delacour are no longer on the grounds. Pettigrew turned the cup into a portkey. The only reason Krum was left behind is because Pettigrew knocked him away. I think that Delacour and Diggory weren't meant to go either."

"They arrived at the cup together?" Karkaroff asked impatiently.

"Yes." Krum spoke up now, looking angry. "We were going to take it together. A four way tie between four friends. But it does not matter. I want to find my friends. I want to know they are safe!"

"Calm down Viktor." Dumbledore said trying to soothe the irritable young man. "We will do everything in our power to find them and bring them back.

"Any idea where they might be?" Sirius asked Snape.

Snape shook his head, but he gave a pointed look to Dumbledore. Sirius

didn't miss it.

"What happened, Severus. This isn't the time for secrets." He said quickly, his eyes narrowing. Dumbledore gave a grave nod and Severus rolled up his sleeve. There was a great collective gasp as everyone stared at the black tattoo upon his pale skin. It almost looked to be alive and writhing. "He's called us to him." Snape whispered, and they all looked up into his dark eyes. "The Dark Lord is alive."

"Impossible." Fudge said, reeling away from the group. "Impossible. He can't be... It's just not possible. Not after all this time."

"Minerva, I think it prudent to dismiss the students back to their common rooms. See that our guests are given rooms, then meet the rest of us back here. Minister, I think you should use the floo, and get Aurors here immediately, No, Igor..."

Dumbledore turned to stop Karkaroff from guiding Krum, who was clearly unwilling to move, back to the Durmstrang ship.

"I would like it if you and Mister Krum remain here." Dumbledore said.

"Surely you don't need us getting in the way." Karkaroff stammered.

Dumbledore didn't respond, but turned to Hagrid.

"Would you be so kind as to remove all of the creatures back to the forest so that we may eliminate the maze?"

Hagrid nodded and dove into the hedgerows. He was followed by Flitwick and Moody who would remove all the charms and enchantments.

McGonagall had begun getting the students back up to the castle and the night was filled with voices and footsteps. Dumbledore watched the parade of muttering students and noticed a few faces look at him with questioning concern. Friends of both Harry and Cedric. He guessed that students of Beauxbaton were just as bothered by their missing classmate.

At that moment he shared their worry. Three students had been abducted right under his long crooked nose. One of them, though he was unaware of it yet, carried the hope for the future on his shoulders.

"Mister Krum, If you would be agreeable, I would like to see what happened for myself." Dumbledore asked, turning to a very livid looking Bulgarian.

Harry landed hard on cold wet ground, and someone landed hard on top of him, knocking the air out of his lungs.

"That sucked." Cedric grumbled as he lifted himself up off of Harry and looked around. "Where's Fleur and Viktor?"

Harry sat up, still gasping. It was very dark, but he could clearly see tombstones all around them eerily lit by the soft summer moon. They had landed in front of a large monumental grave with the name RIDDLE carved in the marble. Harry saw a large house on a nearby hill, though there were no lights, and even from this distance he could see that it must be abandoned.

Cedric helped Harry to his feet and the two gazed about for any sign of their compatriots.

"Where the hell are we?" Cedric wondered.

"No clue." Harry said, pulling out his wand. He had no idea why, but the scar on his forehead was prickling. Whatever the reason, Harry didn't like it and he wanted to get as far away from this place as he could. "But I think we need to find Fleur and get out of here. I don't think this is part of the Task."

"What about Viktor?" Cedric asked.

"I don't think he came with us. I swear I saw someone knock him down."

"So it wasn't just me then." Cedric said, his voice dropping to a whisper.

Harry understood why as his ears caught the sound of footsteps. Both

boys turned, hoping to see their French friend.

Someone was indeed approaching, and fast. But before Harry even had the breath of a chance to wonder who it could be he found himself upon his knees. His head felt as if it were splitting apart by the blinding white hot pain that emanated from his scar. Harry clawed at his forehead, as if he could reach into his skull and ease the pain by rubbing it or something. He felt Cedric grab his shoulder with concern. Then, the world went crazy.

"Harry?"

"Kill the spare!"

"NO!"

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

There was a brilliant flash of poisonous green light and Harry heard something heavy fall on the ground next to him. Harry's stomach lurched as he turned to look and see for himself what his mind was telling him had happened. Harry didn't want to believe it. How could it be true? But it was. There was no doubt. Tears stung Harry's eyes when he saw his friend. The man who'd stood by Harry since he'd come to Hogwarts. Who'd trained with him, and helped him every step of the way whether he knew it or not.

Cedric Diggory was dead, a look of shocked concern still etched on his young handsome face.

"You son of a bitch!" Harry roared, and despite the crippling pain in his head, he managed to raise his wand. "Reducto!"

The figure seemed to be expecting retaliation, and ducked under Harry's spell, raising his own wand and taking aim at the boy, who was scrambling to get to his feet and fight.

"Stupefy!" the cloaked and hooded figure shouted, and Harry was

knocked cold.

Slowly the darkness ebbed away and Harry came to. He found himself tied against the Riddle memorial stone, a very smelly and dirty rag shoved into his mouth. The hooded figure that had stunned him was levitating a giant black stone basin over a fire. Harry took a few calming breaths and took stock of everything. He saw Cedric's body, still lying where he'd fallen. There was a strange bundle of what looked to be black cloth lying near Cedric's head. It was undulating, as if whatever was hidden under it was not happy. As he gazed upon it, he felt his scar come to life with pain once again, and he hissed.

"Hurry!" A voice called, and Harry swore it came from the bundle on the ground.

Sweating and with his heart pounding in his ears, Harry looked again at the bundle, and this time, saw his wand right next to Cedric's elbow.

Harry wondered if he could summon the power of the Jedi and call his wand to his hand. He'd once heard about wizards being able to do magic without wands, but Harry had never seen it for himself. Still, he had to try.

"All is ready, Milord." The hooded figure said, pulling his hood off. He was a rather young looking man with tangled sandy blonde hair. His features were drawn and his eyes sunken with heavy dark circles under them. He smiled up at Harry with malice as he approached the squirming bundle, lifting it reverently and carrying it over to the stone basin which was filled with a white opaque boiling viscous liquid.

"Put me in, Crouch, put me in." The voice cried. "Hurry. HURRY!"

The man, now identified as Crouch unwrapped the bundle of cloth and revealed a rather horrid looking infant. It was thin and scaly looking, and Harry swore he could smell rotting flesh as Crouch placed the baby into

the boiling cauldron. Harry's eyes went to his fallen wand, and he tried to fight through the crippling pain in his skull to summon it.

"Please." He begged silently. "Come on!" The wand remained immobile as ever next to the body of his friend.

Crouch shook his heavy cloak off of his shoulders, folding it neatly before he took a long thin bone white wand from his pocket and placed it with great care on the cloak. He then took his own wand from another pocket and aimed it at the ground under Harry's feet.

"Bone of the father," He called out, a maniacal glint in his sunken eyes.

"Unknowingly given, you will renew your child!"

The ground ripped open and a dirty rotted bone emerged from the earth and was levitated into the cauldron, dropping with a splash and a long hiss.

Crouch licked his lips as he replaced his wand into his pocket and drew a long silver knife. He went around the cauldron so that he was clearly visible to Harry, staring into the boy's bright green eyes as he leveled the knife over his left wrist. Harry stomach turned as he watched the scene.

"Don't do it. Please don't do it." Harry whimpered, struggling hard against his bonds in a vain effort to free himself.

"Flesh of the servant, willingly sacrificed, you will revive your master."

Crouch said, his unblinking eyes staring hard into Harry with deepest loathing. Crouch slashed down upon his own arm, slicing off his left hand, the fallen limb splashing into the now reddening concoction.

Crouch barely grimaced. Quickly he wrapped his bleeding stump in cloth.

He picked up the knife he'd dropped and cleaned it off by wiping the bladed on his trousers. He then looked up at Harry, a mad light in his eyes as he approached the squirming boy.

"Blood of the enemy," He spoke now, his voice husky. He raised the knife

and stabbed at Harry's arm, cutting a long line in the boy's forearm.

"Forcibly taken. You will resurrect your foe."

Crouch turned and returned to the boiling basin and tapped the knife making droplets of Harry's blood the fall into the now blood red liquid.

With each drop, the color deepened and black smoke rose up.

"Arise, My lord." Crouch intoned as he stepped back from the cauldron that was now shaking over the fire. "ARISE!"

Violent red sparks began to fly out of the cauldron as the liquid began to boil over, hissing loudly as it struck the ground. Harry was mesmerized and couldn't tear his eyes away from the sight before him. Heart pounding now so fast that Harry was sure that it might burst from his chest, he silently prayed that it had all gone wrong somehow. That Crouch had messed it up and he would be set free.

Slowly something began to emerge from the blood like fluid. Something round. More emerged and Harry saw that it was a head, neck, then shoulders. It was human in form, but Harry had not doubt that whatever it was, it was wrong.

"No." Harry tried to convince himself that this was some nightmare. That the spiders in the maze had killed him and he was in hell. This had to be hell.

More of the body emerged. Tall, thin though slightly muscled the thing rose until it stood proud. The fluid was now gone, having been absorbed into that creature's skin, if it could be called such. What stood before Harry and Crouch was nothing short of abomination.

Flesh like alabaster, though thin and nearly transparent it turned and flexed as if testing it's mobility. It was turned away from Harry so he could only see it's back. It was bald, and appeared to have no visible ears. Slowly it turned and Harry now saw the true horror of it. There were no

lips on it's mouth, and no nose, though it did have two long slits where the nose should have been. It's eyes were deep red with long black serpentine like irises.

"Robe me, my servant." It spoke in the same cold cruel voice that Harry had heard in his nightmares.

Crouch went to the heavy cloak he had removed and helped the creature step out of the basin and slip into the cloak.

"And, my wand." It said, holding out it's long thin skeletal like hand.

Crouch bowed low, averting his eyes as he placed the wand into his master's hand. The thing turned and set its wand on the basin.

"Reducto." It hissed and the basing exploded into nothing more than fine grains of sand.

"It worked." The creature intoned. "I have been reborn."

It turned to its servant who now held out his left forearm where a black tattoo was writhing. Harry felt his stomach lurch and bile rose in his throat. Were it not for the gag, Harry knew he would have thrown up.

"They will have seen it now. They will know. Now we see who is truly loyal, and who will try to run from me. Now we will see." The thing said as it pressed its wand to the tattoo. Crouch gave the slightest hiss, but the atrocity paid it no mind.

"You have served me most faithfully, Crouch. You did all that I asked of you without question, and you gave yourself to bring me back. For that, Lord Voldemort is pleased. Accept this gift, and may your loyalty never waver."

"Never, Milord." Crouch said, his head bowed. The creature who Harry now knew to be the Dark Lord Voldemort, removed the bloody cloth that bound Crouch's arm and placed the tip of his bone white wand upon the wound.

It was slow and horrific to watch as from out of the bloody stump, skeletal fingers emerged. Crouch's face was twisted in pain, but he didn't cry out. He didn't whimper. He simply endured.

When the full skeleton hand was finally formed, veins appeared wrapping around the bones, though they looked more like wire. Then muscles and finally a skin. A shining silver skin.

Crouch held up his new hand and flexed it, balled it into a fist and smashed it upon the ground. He then picked up several twigs and crushed them into dust.

"My lord is too good. I will use this hand to crush the life out of my enemies in your name, starting with my own father." Crouch snarled as he rose to his feet.

"In time, my servant, in time."

Voldemort then turned to look at Harry, approaching him as if gliding.

"Harry Potter. At long last we face each other again. I daresay the years have been far kinder to you than to myself. But I am being most rude. I must introduce myself. I am your executioner. I am, Lord Voldemort."

Harry struggled against his bonds, his eyes bright with murderous rage. His fear had disappeared the moment he discovered who this monstrosity was. The man who'd killed his mother and father. The man he'd been hidden from for very near fourteen years. The man everyone in Britain feared was standing before him, alive and well once again. And all Harry wanted to do was wrap his fingers around the thing's slim throat and squeeze the life out of him.

"LEB EE LUBE YOOB BATHARD! ALL GILL YOOB!" Harry screamed into his gag. "ALL GILL YOOB!"

Voldemort laughed a high cold pitiless laugh, and Crouch joined in his master's mirth.

"How truly like your mother and father you are. They had the same fighting spirit. I shall enjoy breaking it before I kill you. Crucio!"

Pain like Harry had never experienced in his short life coursed through him like electricity. Every single nerve ending in his body was on fire and despite his desire to not give this psychotic animal satisfaction, he cried out in utter agony through his clenched teeth. His muscles seized up and Harry thought his insides might actually be on fire. And then, it was all gone.

"Not too much at first." Voldemort said almost sweetly. "I do not wish to drive you mad. No, I wish for you to quite coherent when the end comes, and it will come, Harry Potter. Yes, tonight you will die, but not yet. No, there must be witnesses. I wish there to be no doubt ever again of my true strength, Harry Potter."

Voldemort spit out Harry's name like it was poison on his tongue.

Voldemort was distracted from further torturing the boy when he caught the sound of swishing cloaks and heavy foot falls. In groups of twos and threes, black robed and hooded figures emerged from the dark and formed a large semi circle around Lord Voldemort. Crouch stepped into the semi circle and as one, the gathered fell to their knees.

"My Death Eaters, you have come. Fourteen long years it has been and yet you all came when called as if it had only been a day. Yet, there are so few of you, and I must confess myself, disappointed. Where were you when I was felled? Why did none of you come to look for me? Did you all truly believe me finished? Did you all forget the means which I painstakingly took to protect myself from true death? I am truly disappointed."

Voldemort hissed coldly and started to pace around the circle. Harry looked up weakly to see that there were gaping holes in the circle. Harry

guessed that there were people missing, which was confirmed as Lord Voldemort stepped to the start of the circle.

"Dolohov should stand here, but he is trapped in Azkaban. He was unafraid of his fate, never renouncing me, never giving in, as you did, Avery." Voldemort had reached down to the first figure and helped him to stand upright by holding his chin. "You convinced the Ministry you had been enchanted."

"I wished to remain a spy for you, Milord. Only to gather information for your return." the one called Avery said in a shaky voice.

"Yet your accounts have grown quite fat all these years serving my foes, have they not?" Voldemort said in a low whisper, and Avery shook. "You will of course donate it all to my cause, I have no doubt."

Voldemort continued around the circle. "Here there are two missing. One I believe lost to us. He will of course feel the full power of my wrath soon enough. And the other died in my service only this night. Weak though he was, he remained loyal to me and worked very hard to bring me back. We will honor him."

There were a few whispers around the circle, but Voldemort paid them no heed. He continued to the next two and stared coldly at them. They were the biggest of those gathered.

"Crabbe and Goyle. You two are now the weakest of my Death Eaters now that Wormtail has passed on. I expect much from the pair of you. You will serve me much better in the future or you shall serve as food for my pet."

The two men bowed and then rose to their feet.

"Lucius, My slippery friend. I have been told that you among all of my followers have held tight to the old ways, and yet you ran from my mark at the Quidditch World cup. If you believed as strongly as you once did,

should you have not led the search for me all these years instead of playing lap dog to the Minister of Magic?"

"My lord." Lucius Malfoy said in a very shaky voice. "I would have come straight away were there any hint, any whisper of your whereabouts..."

"You do not fool me, Lucius. I see your mind. There were always signs. You were merely too concerned for your own gold to bother. I expect much more loyalty in the future, my friend."

Lucius nodded subserviently and rose as the Dark Lord passed.

"And here should stand the LeStranges, Rudolphus, Rabastian, and fair Bellatrix. All of whom rot in Azkaban. Not to worry, for they will be liberated soon and rewarded beyond imagining. Not once did they waver of renounce me. The rest of you could learn from their example. Macnair, I am told you have been relegate to exterminating poor defenseless creatures. I shall grant you much more favorable prey, shall I?"

"Thank you, My lord." Macnair said from under his hood.

"My Lord?" Avery asked. "How is it you are hear? How is it you survived? Please tell us."

Voldemort's eyes glinted in the firelight. "A thrilling tale to be sure, and it all begins, and ends with our very special guest."

Voldemort turned and pointed to the boy tied to the statue of a weeping angel like woman. "Harry Potter."

The Dark Lord began a tale of his near downfall, but Harry paid no attention. He tried again to call his wand into his hand, knowing it was useless, but having no other recourse. He just wanted to be free, to escape back to Hogwarts and be finished with this nightmare. He had no idea where he was but he was positive that help was not coming. Panic was suffocating him with every passing minute. He was going to die here. He was going to die, and there was no escape.

Fleur awoke feeling nauseous and groggy, her head pounding. She knew at once that she was no longer at Hogwarts, though she had no idea where she could be. She sat up shakily and took in her surroundings. She had awoken at the foot of a low hill against a wrought iron fence. In front of her was a small headstone. Fleur turned to her left and right and saw more in long rows. She was in a graveyard.

Slowly she got to her feet. She felt the back of her head and found it was sticky. Her fingers were darkened, and she knew she had cut open the back of her head. She felt tired, but her she was nearly certain that she didn't have a concussion, which, she thought, was probably a sign that she had a concussion.

Taking a few deep breaths and taking in her surroundings better, she began trying to piece together what had happened.

She had seen the short fat man knock Viktor out of his way, just as she had clapped her hand on the Tri-Wizard cup. She had wanted to help him, but had felt the tug behind her navel, and everything had spun. But she had let go of the cup. She knew she had, and then she remembered nothing else.

Something pierced the silence of the night. It sounded very far away, but she was sure that it was a scream of some sort. She started to move, but her head swam, and she had to clutch a nearby headstone to prevent herself from falling over.

When she felt steady, she got to her feet and looked up the hill and saw what must be a fire, though it was small. But she knew that was where the sound had come from. Grasping her wand tightly, she began to very slowly make her way up the hill, taking refuge behind tombstones as she progressed. She didn't know why, but she felt it was smart to keep out of sight as much as possible.

Fleur hoped that Cedric and Harry were alright, as she was certain that Viktor had not made the journey with them. Somehow, she could not help but believe that Krum had been lucky. Slowly she edged herself closer to the glowing light of the fire, ducking behind a large tombstone when she could see the scene clearly.

Fleur's heart leapt into her throat as she scanned the scene. Harry was tied to a large marble statue of a weeping angel. There were about a dozen people in black robes listening to a thin pale looking man who was pacing in front of them. What was more, she couldn't see Cedric anywhere.

Heart hammering in her chest, Fleur tried to think of some way she could help Harry, but nothing occurred to her. There was another muffled scream and Fleur peered out of her hiding spot to see Harry writhing in his bonds while the thin man held his wand at him. Harry was being tortured. And the people in black were laughing.

Fleur's hand went to her mouth to keep from screaming out.

She knew that she was in trouble. She was alone. She was outnumbered. And her friend was being tortured. She needed to get a better idea of what she was up against if she had any hope of finding a way out.

As quietly as she could, Fleur circled around the scene, keeping low and out of the light. Fighting back her panic, she managed to get herself around to a large granite stone just behind the back of the large statue that Harry was tied to. Harry was no longer screaming. Fleur just hoped that he was still alive.

From her new vantage point, Fleur could see the faces of everyone. They were all still focused on the tall one in the center who was talking though she couldn't make it all out.

Fleur then saw something that broke her heart in two.

Cedric.

Dead.

"Oh, no." She whispered. Cedric's body was only a few feet away from her at the bottom of the statue that Harry was on. Tears spilled from her eyes as the full weight of their situation hit her. Cedric was dead, and Harry would be next. There was a chance that no one knew she was there, but she couldn't rely on that being fact. If she and Harry had any hope at all, it was going to be up to her to do something.

And then she saw something that gave her hope. Lying about ten feet away from Cedric's body was the Tri-Wizard cup, still shining as brightly as it had been in the maze. There lay a chance.

It stood to reason that the cup was originally a portkey out of the maze.

In a pinch Fleur could make a portkey, she knew the spell, and the theory. She'd learned it in her sixth year. The trouble was, she didn't know the exact location of Hogwarts. Fleur just hoped she wouldn't have to worry about that.

Peeking around from her hiding spot, she tried to get a good look at each of the people present.

As she took in each figure, she could see that there were no women.

And that's when the idea struck her. But could she do it? It was crazy. It would never work. She was strong, it was true, but she wasn't as powerful as Cedric, or Harry. She'd come in last in every task. Hell, she'd failed the second task all together. So this... this was absolutely crazy.

But what else did she have? Harry was hurt. Cedric was dead, and she was petrified. But she was also the only one who could do anything. It was up to her to save them all.

She just needed an opening. Just something where she could get to Harry while keeping all that testosterone in check. First thought, she needed to

be as appealing as possible.

Reaching up, she pulled the band that held her blonde hair up, and shook it out. Heart hammering in her chest, she ran her wand over herself to clean off as much dirt and grime as she could. And then, she transfigured her uniform. When she was finished, she turned to watch, hoping her opening would come before long, and praying that it would come before Harry was killed.

"And now, my loyal Death Eaters." Voldemort said to his faithful, finishing his tale of his resurrection, he turned to face Harry whose head was hanging limply, gasping for breath. "Now you will bear witness to your master's power. You will now have no doubts that this boy was ever anything but lucky. Tonight, in front of your very eyes, you will watch Harry Potter die. Crouch, untie him, and return his wand to him."

Crouch dashed forward as the rest of the Death Eaters stepped back to give their master room to play with his new toys. Harry fell heavily to the ground when Crouch cut the ropes holding him up. Harry spat out the cloth that had been shoved in his mouth and felt himself pulled roughly to his feet, his wand shoved into his hand.

"I hope that you have been showed how to duel, Harry. It would be such a shame if you did not know how to face an enemy. First, we bow like gentlemen."

Voldemort bent low in a grand show of chivalry. But Harry did nothing, his eyes looking everywhere for a way out.

"There is no escape, Harry." Voldemort said, a thin smile on his lipless mouth. "Your only hope is to defeat me."

There was a round of laughter, and Harry felt his anger rise up. He was being goaded into doing something stupid. He was being bullied.

"Come now Harry, you must observe the niceties. Surely your godfather

would be disappointed if you forgot your manners. I said bow."

Harry felt as if he'd been hit in the stomach and doubled over. He heard the laughter of the Death Eaters and his anger surged again. He gripped his wand so tightly in his hands he swore it might snap in his hand.

"Very good. Very good Potter. Now, you face me as a man, Harry, the way your father did, just before he died. Head held high, shoulders back, for now... We duel!"

Voldemort moved like lightning, and Harry was on the ground. For the third time tonight he was under the torture curse. He'd bitten his tongue and his mouth was filled with blood. When Voldemort lifted the curse, Harry panted and spit out the blood. The pain was terrible, but his growing anger was quickly overpowering it.

"Why was Voldemort playing with me?" Harry wondered. "Why not just kill me and be done with it?"

"I will grant you a break, Harry. It would be unfair of me to continue, as you are so weak now. I wish for you to die, yes, but I wish for you to die on your feet. Yes, I believe you are wondering why I haven't killed you yet. Perhaps I am waiting for you to beg me to end your life. Perhaps I wish for you to crawl before me and beg for mercy, just as your filthy mother did.

Harry felt his muscles tense and his temper flare. Harry leapt to his feet, slashing his wand through the air. Harry didn't even speak, he just wanted to hurt this man, this thing. The person responsible for killing his mother and father. He just wanted to hurt him as badly as he'd been hurt.

Voldemort laughed, as he deflected Harry's curse. He deflected two more before he flicked his own wand, knocking the boy off his feet once again.

Harry was back on his feet again, and this time, he managed to cut the Dark Lord. The cutting curse had been a little wide, but a small line had

opened on the pale white skin, a small trickle of blood oozing out onto his cheek.

The laughter stopped. Voldemort's eyes narrowed, his smile falling away as he stared at the panting, and seething boy standing before him now.

The cut was shallow. Barely worth bothering with. But the boy had been quick. Voldemort's own rage flared and he sent the boy flying back once again.

Harry knew this must be the end now. The Dark Lord would hold him under the torture curse until he lost his mind or his body gave out altogether. He screamed until he couldn't, his throat ripped apart from it all. He wanted it to end. He wanted to die. The pain was unbearable, and he just wanted it to be over. He prayed for something, anything to make it all end.

Then he saw it. Or rather, her. She was beautiful. He'd never ever seen anything as remotely beautiful. Her silver blonde hair fell down her shoulders like honey. Her body was slender, and impossibly smooth. Her breasts were stunning, high and proud on her chest, her legs long and slender. She was the image of perfection. She was wrapped in what could only be wisps of vapor in the form of some kind of robe.

"She must be an angel." Harry thought in his pain befuddled mind. "She's an angel and she's come to take me away from all this."

Harry had no idea how close he was to the truth.

Fleur had been forced to wait. She knew that she had to time things just right. When the moment came, she sucked in a deep breath, and rose to her feet as she let it out. Reaching into her very core she summoned her Veela allure and put every ounce of energy she could to bring it to its fullest power. She needed to ensnare every man there if she stood a chance.

She pushed away her embarrassment at her attire, a sheer see through robe that was like breath on a cold morning wrapping around her. She may as well have been completely naked for all it hid. But that was the point.

She came out into the open as the tall thin pale creature held Harry under the torture curse. She spared the briefest of glances for her young friend as she stepped into the light of the fire. All eyes fell on her and she knew without a doubt that she had them. All of them.

The pale thin one turned at her approach, releasing Harry from the torture curse, and she could see him clearly now. Her heart drummed in her chest, but she pushed down her horror. She couldn't stand to lose her focus. She needed to keep their minds if she and Harry stood any chance here.

"So many strong, powerful men." She said in a soft, husky lustful tone.

She heard a few groans, and knew they were hers for the manipulating. It gave her confidence and she fueled her aura a bit more.

"Who are you?" the thin creature asked with curiosity. Fleur realized that his mind was not ensnared. But he was very curious. He hadn't killed her outright, so she had a chance. She didn't dare waste it. She had to act now.

"Impress me." She said huskily to the gathered Death Eaters. "Show me how powerful you are. Kill him."

Voldemort's eyes went wide as wands came out. In a flash all of his servants had turned against him. Voldemort's rage exploded as he was forced to retreat from his own servants. Ducking and weaving to avoid the flurry of killing curses, the Dark Lord retaliated, knocking his Death Eaters down. He would make them all pay for their idiocy after he killed the woman, but for now, he needed to eliminate the threat posed by his

own servants. One by one they fell under his power. It wasn't as simple as he would have liked. They kept coming, each of them desperately trying to impress that Veela witch.

When the last man, Lucius Malfoy, was stunned on the ground, Lord Voldemort swept back up the hill to find the boy and the witch gone. The only thing remaining was Potter's wand, which the Dark Lord blasted to slivers as he screamed in rage.

Fleur dove for Harry the moment the Death Eaters lunged for their master. He was hurt badly. But he was conscious, and seemed to be fairly lucid, if not a bit confused.

"Harry? Please, stay with me. I'm going to get us out of here." She said in his ear, pulling him up and dragging him to where Cedric's body lay. She let Harry down next to Cedric, and told him to hold tight to Cedric.

"Fleur?" Harry asked his voice raw and hoarse. "Are you alright?"

"Fleur couldn't help but smile at Harry. As hurt as he was his first concern had been her safety. If they weren't in such danger, she would have kissed him.

"Can you walk?" She asked quickly, pulling him up. She could see the pale figure dispatching his followers quickly and time was running out. Harry managed to get to his feet with her help and they got to Cedric's body with little trouble.

She saw Harry clutch Cedric's arm and the front of his shirt. Tears falling from his eyes. Fleur grabbed hold of Harry's arm and summoned the Tri-Wizard cup to her, prepared to attempt to make a portkey.

However, luck was with them. The moment Fleur's hand clasped around the Tri-Wizard cup, the graveyard disappeared, just as the last of the black robed figures fell.

Fleur felt her stomach lurch from the spinning and when the three landed

in a heap on the hard ground once again, Fleur vomited.

"Fleur?" Harry asked, his hand clutching her wrist. "We need to get to Hogwarts. We need to tell Dumbledore."

Fleur gasped as she sat up looking at Harry who looked exhausted and weak. "I know Harry. But I think we're back. I think the cup brought us back."

"They're here!"

Fleur turned, aiming her wand as someone approached. She breathed a great sigh of relief as Madame Maxime came into view.

"Oh my dear, what has happened?" The half giant Headmistress screamed, tearing off her cloak and wrapping it around the nearly naked young woman, who began to weep.

"You're safe, my dear, you are safe."

More people approached and Fleur saw Harry's godfather pull Harry up and cradle him in his arms. "Harry, are you ok, what happened?"

Dumbledore, Snape, Moody, and more gathered now, listening close as Harry tried to speak.

"He killed Cedric." Harry gasped, tears falling from his bright green eyes. "

He killed Cedric and tortured me. I tried to fight him, but I couldn't. I tried... He killed him. Voldemort killed him."

"Did you see him Harry?" Dumbledore asked, kneeling next to Sirius.

"What happened?"

"He's back, Professor. Lord Voldemort is back..."

Harry then fainted.

21. Chapter 21

He finally awoke in the quiet dark Hospital wing, and sat bolt upright in panic.

"It's ok." Sirius said, clutching his shoulder. "It's ok, you're safe, Harry."

You're safe."

"Sirius?" Harry asked, looking to his godfather who lit a candle next to Harry's bed. The man looked pale, but he smiled at the young man and nodded. "You're back at Hogwarts. You and Fleur made it back, and you're both safe."

"but Cedric..." Harry said, his voice raw from all the screaming he'd done that night."

"I'm so sorry, kid." Sirius said sadly, grasping Harry's arm. Harry's eyes stung with tears, but it wasn't sadness. It was fury.

"I couldn't do anything. I couldn't think straight, and he just kept..." Harry tried to say, but Sirius squeezed his arm and shook his head.

"I know Harry. And I am really sorry that we weren't there for you. I wish I had the words that could make it easier, but there just aren't any."

Harry nodded heavily and slowly lay back in his bed. He kept seeing Voldemort's face in his head. That cold demonic smile as he held him under the torture curse. And then Cedric's body on the ground, his life stolen from him.

"He never had a chance." Harry whispered. Sirius looked into Harry's face with puzzlement. "It happened so fast. He was next to me, and then... he was gone."

"Harry, you should never have had to go through all this."

"You couldn't have stopped it. No one could have.. He said so when he was talking to his people. He told them he'd known I was alive all these years." Harry said gravely. "He's known all this time. He said he'd seen into my mind, whatever that means."

They fell into silence for a few minutes before Harry thought of the other two champions.

"Viktor and Fleur?" Harry turned to Sirius who nodded to another bed

where someone was sleeping.

"She's fine. She hit her head, and had some badly bruised ribs, but she's fine. She was terribly worried about you. Madam Pomfrey almost had to stun her to get her into bed. Viktor is just fine, barely got a scratch. He was in her until midnight. You've got a fair few others who are probably awake right now, wondering what's happened. So far as I know, there was no announcement about you lot coming back. I think Dumbledore plans to let everyone know in the morning.

"Do Cedric's parents know?"

Sirius nodded his head and Harry shut his eyes for a moment, trying to calm himself before continuing.

"I don't understand it. Not any of it." he said bitterly.

"Perhaps then I may be of some help." Dumbledore said softly, not wishing to disturb Fleur. "But first, I must ask you Harry if I may see your memories of tonight."

"My memories? How?" Harry asked not quite understanding the request.

"I would like you to concentrate on everything that happened tonight. I will then extract the memories from your mind so that we may examine them in my pensieve."

"you're going to take the memories away?"

"I'm afraid not. I will simply be making copies of them. You will retain all of your memories, as much as I would like to release you from their cruel reminders. But it is very important, Harry. I can not explain to you just how yet, but I made you a promise, and I intend to keep it. This will help me to understand things better so that I may give a better explanation to you."

"Fine." Harry said flatly. He shut his eyes and focused on the moment he stepped into the Champions tent right after dinner. He felt the tip of

Dumbledore's wand at his temple, and the strange sensation of lightheadedness.

"That will do, I think. Try to sleep, Harry. We will speak tomorrow morning. We have so very much to discuss."

"Here, drink this, Harry. Dreamless sleep potion." Sirius gave a sad smile as he gave a vial to Harry who gulped it down and settled into his bed. In the blink of an eye, he was asleep again.

"Sirius, I would like it if you and Remus were to join me immediately to view this." he said holding up a tiny crystal vial that contained the swirling silver vapor that was Harry's memory.

"I want to stay with him." Sirius started to say but the headmaster cut him off.

"if we are to prepare him for what's coming, I will need your help. He will be fine until the morning."

Sirius nodded and rose from his seat to follow the headmaster, glancing over his shoulder at the sleeping boy he cared so much for.

"James, Lily, I'm sorry." He thought as he left the hospital wing.

When Harry awoke again, the sun was shining in the windows, and he felt someone holding his hand. He looked up to find Fleur smiling down at him.

"My guardian angel." he said softly, causing the beautiful French girl to smile softly. She bent down and kissed his forehead gently. "Thank you." he smiled when she pulled away.

"You would have done the same for me, I have no doubt." She smiled.

"I think I might have kept my clothes on." Harry joked, making Fleur laugh suddenly. She swatted his arm softly and helped him to sit up.

"Are you okay?" he asked, and she was overcome again by how selfless Harry was. All the torture and horror he had endured last night, and he

still was worried for her.

"Physically, I zink I am okay, but emotionally..." She looked away from him. "I feel numb. I can't feel anything right now. Perhaps it is just too much to for me to understand. I just have so many questions, and I do not zink I wish to know ze answers."

"I think I know how you feel." Harry nodded in understanding. "I was actually looking forward to the end of this whole thing so I could finally get answers, but after last night..."

"It was like a living nightmare." Fleur said flatly and Harry nodded.

"Have you seen Viktor yet?" Harry asked, but fleur shook her head.

"I am afraid to leave. I am afraid of ze questions. I just want to hide in here for a while longer."

"I expect he might come looking for us." Harry tried to smile.

"I think you might be right." she nodded.

"This isn't what I had in mind when I suggested we all work together you know?" he asked. "I just thought it would be cool if we all won. I mean you've all become my friends, and I just liked the idea of the four of us..."

"You don't have to explain, Harry. I understand. We all did. We all wanted the same thing you did."

The door to the Hospital wing opened and Remus and Sirius entered, both looking extremely tired.

"Hey, kid, how are you feeling?" Sirius asked as he got close to Harry's bed.

"Can I answer that in a few years?" Harry asked, and Sirius nodded.

"Once madam Pomfrey checks you over, we're going to take you up to Dumbledore's office. He's going to have breakfast up there for us, and then we're all going to talk."

"Did you see the memories?" Harry asked curiously. Both Sirius and

Remus nodded and Harry felt embarrassed, though he couldn't explain why.

"Harry, you did incredible, given what you were up against. We couldn't be prouder of you. You did the impossible, and you escaped."

"Thanks to Fleur." Harry said, smiling at the blonde who gave his hand a squeeze.

Both Sirius and Remus thanked Fleur for what she did to save Harry, causing the girl to blush. A moment later, Madame Maxime and Fleur's sister Gabrielle, as well as her mother and father, came sweeping into the Hospital wing, where they gathered Fleur up in their arms. Madam Pomfrey also approached both champions and gave them each an examination, pronouncing them fit to leave, though she asked to see Harry later that day, so that he might take a few more potions.

When Harry got out of bed, he felt for the first time how tender he felt. Every step hurt. Madam Pomfrey gave him two potions that eased the pain away, and with Sirius and Remus flanking him, they went up to Dumbledore's office.

They encountered nearly no one on their journey, which Harry found curious. However, he didn't bother to voice his puzzlement. For some reason, he was dreading the coming conversation. Most of his life he had wondered why someone had tried to kill him when he was still just a child, an infant. But last night he had met that person, and after all he'd seen and heard and felt, he didn't want to know anymore. All he wanted was to leave Hogwarts now. To leave and spend the rest of his life trying to forget everything.

It wasn't long before he was sitting before a very haggard-looking Headmaster. Harry was a bit surprised to find Snape there as well, looking very tired.

"Good morning, Harry." Dumbledore said. "Please, have a seat. There is plenty to eat, and if there is something you would like, we can have it brought up."

"Thank you sir." Harry said politely, pleased to see orange juice. He felt incredibly thirsty, and the sweet tangy juice felt nice going down his throat.

"First, allow me to congratulate you on your win. You, Miss Delacour, mister Diggory and Mister Krum showed the entire world what people can accomplish when united. Your friendship is something to be emulated. Even though mister Krum did not actually touch the Tri-Wizard Cup, we have decided that he should share the victory with those of you who did. He showed great bravery."

"Thank you." Harry said with a nod.

"Harry, I can not express in word just how very proud I am of you. What you accomplished over these few months is something I myself have been striving for for many years. Unity, not only among the students of this school, but of our whole world. And you did it by simply being who you are. A fine young man with an exceptionally big heart."

"Sir." Harry said, halting the headmaster. "I swear I don't mean to be rude, but can we skip all this and move on to the reason we're all here. I just..."

"

"It's alright, Harry. You asked me when you first arrived here at Hogwarts if I knew the reason why Lord Voldemort sought to kill you when you were just a baby. The truth is that I do indeed. A prophecy was made to me about a child who would have the power to destroy the Dark Lord. It so happened that one of his followers also heard part of that prophecy and reported it to him."

"That follower was me, Harry." Snape said from his seat. "I wished to

elevate my status in his inner circle, as did many others. It was a few months before he reached a conclusion that would be the end of your parents lives."

"You're the reason?" Harry started to say, but Sirius placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Hear him out before you jump to conclusions, kid." Sirius said easily.

"I am partially to blame, Harry, it is true, but I do not bear all of the guilt. As you guessed, I loved your mother. She was my very first friend in my life, and I took her for granted. I let my jealousy overrule my heart and I drove her away. I allowed myself to be sucked into the Dark Lord's lies, and became another mindless follower. That is until I learned who he believed the prophecy to be about. When I learned what he intended to do, I came to Dumbledore, and turned spy for him and for the side of right."

"Severus told me all he knew then for the promise that I protect your mother, and though he hated him, your father. I did all I could. I even offered to be the secret keeper for them. They refused, deciding to use one of their friends instead."

"You remember how I told you that we knew there was a spy among us, don't you?" Sirius asked and Harry nodded.

"You thought it was Remus."

"And I thought Sirius the guilty party."

"But it turned out to be Peter." Harry remembered.

"Yes. And it was Peter who sent you to that Graveyard last night." Sirius said.

"He killed himself not long afterwards." Remus added. "We think Voldemort placed a suggestion in his mind in case he got caught."

"But how?" Harry asked. "I mean, I saw him come back last night. He was

nothing more than a... I don't think baby would be an accurate description but..."

"We will get to that." Dumbledore said, holding up a hand. "During the time that you and Sirius spent in hiding, Lord Voldemort also hid. He was less than spirit, but he was alive."

Dumbledore continued his tale, telling Harry of the protection his mother invoked when she bravely sacrificed herself and of the importance of Harry being hidden from Death Eaters who might wish to seek retribution. Dumbledore and Snape then explained how Britain attempted to recover and of all the chaos in the years that followed.

Harry learned of Voldemort's growing influence in the last few years and how both Snape and Dumbledore knew that the Dark lord was growing in strength, though neither knew where he might be.

When Harry asked, Dumbledore explained as best as he could about Voldemort's connection to Harry and how he was sure it was the lightning shaped scar that allowed Voldemort to see into Harry's mind at times when he was most emotional. He then went on to explain what they now understood of the Dark Lord's plan and why he had chosen Harry as part of the resurrection ritual he had been a part of the night before.

"So he believed that by using my blood he would be untouchable?" Harry asked.

"In a way. You see, Voldemort is acting upon the small bit of information he gleaned from that Prophecy." Dumbledore explained.

"What did it say? Why is he so afraid of me? I'm nobody." Harry looked to the four men.

"First of all, he put too much faith in a prophecy." Dumbledore smiled.

"What Lord Voldemort failed to understand is that prophecies are not

written in stone unless we help them along. As he only heard a part of it, he took it to heart and sought those who he believed the prophecy must be about. Two young boys fit the description, you, and your friend, Neville."

"Wait, This asshole could have tried to kill Neville?" Harry asked, feeling fear for his friend. "Why did he choose me, then?"

"You are much more like him than Neville. You Harry are a half blood Wizard, just as he is. His father was a muggle."

"Wait..." Harry stopped the Headmaster. "This maniac who preaches all about blood purity is a half blood. And they believe him? Aren't there birth records and family trees and all that?"

"He hid his past. In fact," Dumbledore said, sitting back in his seat.

"Nearly no one knows that he attended this very school as Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"You're kidding me." Harry got up from his seat. "You could have ended his stupid campaign before it began if you told everyone!"

"He killed everyone who knew of his beginnings." Dumbledore smiled sadly. He was very meticulous in his efforts to hide the truth, Harry. But even if we had done as you suggested, it would not have made much difference to his loyal followers, They would have continued to believe in him."

"So, why me? Why was the fact that I was a half-blood the deciding factor?" Harry asked.

"Harry, if Lord Voldemort had bothered to learn the full contents of the prophecy, he might not have acted at all. By attacking you, he sealed his fate, and most unfortunately, yours as well. You two are now locked together until the end. And it is my intention to make sure that when it is all over, you are still alive. You did not ask for this, and you most

certainly do not deserve any of this. But you are now tied to him, and he to you. Harry, it is you and you alone who can defeat him."

"No." Harry said flatly. "No. I don't want any part of this. I want to go home. Now!" Harry snapped, looking desperately at Sirius. "I want to go home. Can't we just go home? This isn't my fight. I don't want any part of this."

"Harry," Sirius got up, grabbing his godson by the shoulders. "I know. We all know, but running away isn't going to make it go away."

"But I don't want to be a part of this." Harry tried, panic edged in his voice. "I'm not even fifteen! I don't want to fight some maniac! I don't want to die!"

"Harry, I know." Sirius said, hugging the boy tightly. "None of us want you to die. This is extremely unfair to you. No one should have this on their shoulders, but Harry, you're not alone. We're here, and we're going to do everything in our power to help you."

"Starting with the Prophecy itself." Dumbledore said rising from his seat.

"Harry, I would like it if you would accompany me to the Hall of Prophecies. There we will collect the prophecy, and destroy it. Lord Voldemort can never learn it's full contents."

"I don't care!" Harry shouted now. "I don't want to be a part of this! I want to go home! NOW!"

Harry tore out of the office and ran as fast as he could as far as he could. This was too much for them to ask. To become some kind of weapon to fight that monstrosity who had very nearly killed him last night. The one who'd killed Cedric. He wasn't strong enough, and he doubted even in a million years he would ever be.

He ran down stairs and pushed past students who all turned to gawk at him, just as they had done when he'd first come to Hogwarts. Like he was

some sort of curio in a shop window. He wasn't he was a human being. A human being who had just been told he was destined to save the world. Well, part of it anyway.

Harry crashed roughly into a tree by the lake where he fell out of breath. He rolled onto his back and stared up into the deep blue sky, as if something would pop up and tell him it was all a great big joke. That it was a big cosmic ha ha.

"James?"

Harry turned and saw Mark and Stacy running towards him. Harry sat upright as they came to a stop.

"Man you can run." Mark said falling to his knees beside Harry. "Are you alright? They told us all this morning that you came back and that someone died."

"Cedric. Cedric was killed. He was killed and I couldn't stop it."

"Oh, Harry." Stacy said, wrapping her arms around her friend. At once, the floodgates opened, and Harry broke down. He felt Mark grabbed his shoulder in a show of support while Harry let out all his frustration and his sorrow.

"I'm so sorry." Stacy whispered. "A lot of people are hurting. Cedric was really popular, but no one said that you saw it."

"I wish there was something we could do for you." Mark said. "I know how hard it is to lose a friend, or someone. You remember when I lost my Uncle Frank?"

"Yeah, but he wasn't killed. Mark." Harry said, forcing himself to calm down. "I know he was your favorite Uncle, but he died of natural causes, He wasn't killed right in front of you."

"No." Mark shook his head. "No he wasn't. Man, I just. I ... you're my best friend, and I just don't know how to make this any better."

"Well, it gets worse." Harry said, finally pulling away from Stacy. "They want me to stay and fight him. They think I'm the only one who can kill this monster. Like I'm some fantastic savior or something. This guy killed my parents and tried to kill me because of some prophecy he didn't even hear. And they want me to fight him."

"Wait." Stacy said shaking her head. "Can we just back up for a minute? This guy who took your parents away from you and died trying to kill you..."

"He's back. That's why I ended up in this stupid tournament in the first place, this whole thing turned out to be a big set up to get me. He needed my blood so that he could come back from the dead." Harry rubbed his eyes angrily. "And they think that I'm the only one who can kill him for good."

"He's back from the dead?" Mark looked shocked. "Dude. This is so... I... Whoa."

"What the hell?" Stacy looked just as confused as Mark, and Harry had to smile. His friends, his best friends were here in support of him.

"I just want to go home." Harry groaned. "I just want to go home and forget all of this."

"No." Mark said softly, making Harry turn to stare at him incredulously.

"Fuck and No! No, Harry, this asshole took way too much from you. Why should you run away from him? He's obviously afraid of you, and right now he has every reason to be. If I were you, I'd be so angry I'd want to hunt him down and rip his god dam throat out. He took your parents, He killed your friend, and nearly killed you. And on top of all that, he took your blood so that he could come back from the dead. Fuck that!"

Stacy tried to stop Mark from continuing, but Harry was starting to see his friend's point. Mark was right. Voldemort had taken a lot from him,

Why wasn't he as angry as Mark was? Voldemort had taken a lot from him. He'd robbed him of his parents. The mere memory of him had forced he and Sirius to spend most of Harry's life on the run. And then, He'd taken his blood and killed Cedric and then tried to kill him. Why wasn't he angry?

"You're right." Harry said softly. Mark nodded. You're gods damned right I'm right. If these people are going to show you how to kill this asshole, I say you stay and fight!"

"But, what about..."

"Us?" Mark pointed between himself and Stacy. "What you think we can't get along without you? Harry, James...whoever you are, you are not the center of the universe, despite what this asshole thinks. And just because you're half a world away does not mean you stop being my best friend. For as long as I live, you will always be my very best friend, and I will always be there when you need me to be. No questions asked. You're going to be the best man at my wedding, the godfather to my children."

"Who are you going to bribe to be your wife, and where are you getting these kids?" Harry smiled for the first time since the day before. Mark laughed at their old joke and gave Harry a playful shove.

"If you did return to Salem, if this guy is so obsessed with killing you, he'd come there to find you, wouldn't he." Stacy said, brushing some of her honey blonde hair out of her face.

Harry hadn't thought of that. Stacy could be killed, or Mark.

"Maybe Mark's right." She said after a long silence. I know you didn't ask for this, but maybe the right thing to do here is to stay and fight. Let them show you how and then take this maniac out once and for all and get on with your life, Harry."

She looked into his eyes, and he felt a deep concern for him, but also

her belief that he was stronger than he realized. He felt very powerful at that moment.

"You've got people willing to help you here. People who obviously care about you." Mark said. "We sat with them this morning, and while a lot of people were upset about tha other guy, there were more than a handful of people who were worried about you. That hot redhead for one."

"Mark! Is now the time for talking about girls? I really don't think he's too concerned about his love life right now."

"Susan was worried about me?" Harry asked, making Stacy throw her hands up in exasperation.

"Will you two grow up?"

"Yeah, she was nearly in tears when no one knew what had happened to you. The Dumbledore guy wouldn't answer any questions and she and the girl with the mane started crying and wondering if you were ok."

"Seriously?" Stacy asked now beginning to wonder if they forgot she was there with them. "Can we just try and focus on the big picture?"

"Sorry." Harry said. "So you two think I should stay and see this thing out?"

"If it were me?" mark said sitting back against a tree. "No question. But it's your life. It's your choice, and you're the only one who can decide what's right for you. You stay and fight, you do it on your terms. You come back to Salem, you could spend the rest of your life running."

Harry nodded at the uncannily wise words from his friend.

"I can't imagine having to decide something this big." Stacy said with a sigh. "But I think Mark's right again. What kind of life would it be to be constantly looking over your shoulder."

"I could die."

"Yeah? So?" Mark said with a shrug. "I hear it happens to us all. But the

question you should ask is how you want to go out. Facing down your fear eye to eye, or cowering under you bed."

"Did you take a wit sharpening potion this morning?" Stacy looked awed.

"Well, That pumpkin juice did taste a bit funny.' Mark shrugged.

"Thanks, you guys. Seriously. I needed to hear all of this." Harry said, clutching them both and hugging them tightly.

They spent another hour out in the morning sun just talking. The two Salem teens told Harry all about how uninteresting it had been watching the last Task. And how Madam Blaylock had returned that morning with Duncan and Jennifer.

"She told us that Dumbledore asked that we get to stay for a day or so. She said he felt it was important to you." Stacy explained.

"He wasn't wrong." Harry confirmed.

Many Hogwarts students were out on the grounds, though they all respectably kept their distance from Harry and his friends, for which Harry was grateful. He didn't wish to be hounded with questions. He just wanted to pretend that he was normal for a few moments.

When Harry's hunger got to be too much, They headed into the Castle where lunch was being served. Upon entering the great Hall, Harry was grabbed up by Viktor.

"No one has been able to tell me if you vere ok. I saw fleur this morning for a moment before she went into the Beauxbatons carriage. I am very sorry. I failed you and Cedric."

At that, Harry hugged Viktor. "No. you were there with us from nearly the beginning, Viktor. We all came together as friends, and as far as I'm concerned, we all came out of this as champions, and more importantly, Friends."

"It seems wrong without Cedric." Viktor smiled sadly.

"He'd say the same if it were any of us." Harry said confidently.

"Yes. He would." Viktor nodded. Harry sat at the Hufflepuff table as he usually did, and was greeted by friends who all hugged him and told him how happy they were to see him alive. No one brought up the events of the previous evening. Even Zacharias Smith kept his mouth shut, likely because both Hannah and Susan kept their eyes on him all during lunch. When the meal was over, most everyone went back to their dormitories to pack. The year was ending, and they were all set to return to their homes the next day. Harry, Stacy and Mark remained in the Great Hall, talking quietly about nothing more important than what classes they hoped to take or where they might go on their next vacation.

"Harry?"

Harry turned to see Susan Bones standing there, looking very nervous.

"Could I speak to you, you know... in private?"

Harry nodded and followed the red head out of the Great Hall and into the courtyard outside. She turned, her hands fidgeting as she looked into his green eyes.

"I'm an idiot for waiting so long, but since everyone's leaving tomorrow, I just couldn't let you go without telling you. If I were braver I could have said something a long time ago and maybe things wouldn't be so complicated, and this may not be something you want to hear right now, especially after everything..."

"Susan, Calm down. What is it?" Harry asked.

"I think I'm in love with you." she said in a rush. "I don't know when it happened, but it did. And I tried to fight it because you're leaving. I knew that I was going to get my heart broken, so I just tried to ignore it, and get over it but the more time we spent together, I just... I don't know."

"You're in love with me?" Harry asked, taken aback.

"I just thought you should know." Susan said in a soft tiny voice.

"Sue, Why tell me now? I mean, if I was going back, this would really suck to hear right now. I mean. I've been fighting my feelings for you too. But I had Mandy and the tournament and everything, and every girl I started to like I just screwed it all up, but you liked me and we could have tried to figure things out all this time."

"Hannah told me I was stupid for not telling you, and Hermione and Ginny both thought I was being ridiculous. I should have told you, I know, but I was scared that you didn't like me like that. And wait a minute....what do you mean if you were going back?"

Harry dropped his gaze for a moment and took a deep breath.

"Look, I don't want to get into it right now while it's still so fresh, but there are some things going on and I've talked to my friends about it, and I think I'm going to stay. I think I'll be coming back to Hogwarts next year."

Susan's mouth fell open in astonishment.

"Don't say anything. I haven't fully decided, but I think my friends are right. It's the right thing to do."

"So, you're staying here?" Susan asked, stepping closer to Harry, who nodded slowly.

"Yeah. I think I'm going to be around for awhile." he smiled softly. He reached out lightly and took a hold of her waist as she took another step closer to him, her bright brown eyes shining with delight.

"So, does that mean you'll write to me this summer?" she asked slowly.

"Of course, but I would have done that anyway." Harry smiled.

"And if I invite you to visit?" She smiled softly closing the gap between them, her hands sliding up his arms and onto his shoulders.

"Then I'll be there. And I expect that you'll come see me."

"There's no question." She said in a low whisper, her head leaning in towards his, her eyelids fluttering.

"There you are!" Sirius shouted, scaring Harry and Susan, making them jump apart. "We've been worried about you. Dumbledore just thought of looking for you on this." He held up the Marauder's map. "Oh."

Sirius only now registered that he was alone with Susan, and they both looked very pink.

"I'll see you at dinner." Susan said quickly and dashed back into the castle.

"Harry, I'm sorry." Sirius said, but Harry held up his hand.

"If I decide I don't want to do any of this, what happens? Do I get to go back to Salem?"

"I'm afraid not. Voldemort will know that's where you are, and he'll send his soldiers to come find you. Here, you're much better protected." He answered honestly. Harry merely nodded as if he'd expected that answer.

"He took my parents from me." Harry said, now looking out at the lake.

Sirius came to his side, and flung an arm over the boy's shoulders.

"He took my friends." Sirius said.

"He killed my friend in front of me, and he took my blood just so he could come back. What's worse, he tried to scare me, Sirius. He's a bully.

A big damned bully. I hate bullies." Harry said evenly, and a small smile appeared on Sirius' face.

"That he is."

"I'm not going to fight him."

Sirius turned to look at the determined face of his godson. "What?"

"We're going to fight him. All of us." Harry said with force. "We're going to stand against him and any of his pathetic loser idiots who think they can get what they want by scaring us."

"And that kid, is why I love you." Sirius grinned, hugging Harry.

"There's just one thing." Harry turned to his godfather.

"What's that?" Sirius asked.

"Can my girlfriend come to visit?"

Sirius roared with laughter and took Harry by the shoulders and guided

him into the castle laughing the whole way back to Dumbledore's office.

Harry spent the rest of the afternoon learning that he, Sirius and Remus would be taking up residence at his godfather's parent's house in London,

and that while he would need to be protected, he would be allowed to move about and visit anyone he wished to visit.

Harry agreed to go with Dumbledore to the Ministry on the first of July

to go into the Hall of Prophecies, as well as visit with The Minister of

Magic and a few other important heads of departments. Harry also

learned he would get special training during the summer months, and

would be sorted into his new house before returning to Hogwarts.

Dinner was bittersweet as Harry had to say goodbye to Mark and Stacy.

Both of his friends praised him for doing what they all believed to be the right thing to do, and promised to arrange visits and to keep writing.

Harry had never seen mark cry until they hugged right before mark went into the Floo.

"I'm really going to miss you.' Mark sniffed, trying to appear manly.

"Hey, we're going to be friends for life. You're going to be the best man at my wedding, and the godfather to my kids."

"Like any girl would be caught dead with you." Mark snorted, and Harry gripped his friend's hand tightly.

"Keep an eye on her.' Harry said, and mark knew he was talking about Stacy.

"You look after yourself. And remember. Anytime you need me. No questions. I'm there."

After another hug, Harry said good bye to mark for what he hoped was not the last time. He then went down to dinner where he sat with all of his friends, who all passed over slips of parchment with addresses so that he could write to them over the summer.

When the feast was concluded, it was time to bid farewell to both Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. Harry, Fleur and Viktor all took several moments together away from the crowds to say their goodbyes.

"I vill never forget you." Viktor smiled, shaking Harry's hand and hugging Fleur. "It has been a great honor getting to know you both, and I wish you both the very best."

"Oh come on, Viktor, you zink zis is zee last time we shall see each other?" Fleur smiled her brilliant smile. "Friendships like ours endure. We will always be friends, and I hope to see you again, both of you real soon."

"Write often. I want to know what's happening in your lives. Alright?" Harry smiled. Fleur hugged him tightly and kissed his cheek, and then Viktor.

"I love you both. Au revoir."

"She is something special." Viktor smiled.

"She's even better naked." Harry smiled. Viktor's smile fell as his eyes bugged out and he looked at Harry who was grinning.

"Take care of yourself, Alright?"

"I vill, and please take care of Hermione. She's very special." Viktor smiled. Harry nodded and Viktor clapped him on the shoulder and headed towards the waiting Durmstrang ship.

Harry spent his last night in the castle packing his things with Sirius and Remus chatting idly. Sirius promised that they were simply going to stop at the house and drop his things off before heading off to Italy for two

weeks. Sirius promised that the beaches there would be much more interesting than those in Florida. Harry had been confused until Remus said the magic word.

Topless.

It was an interesting sensation, Harry thought as he packed his books and his invisibility cloak in his trunk. He felt no fear now. There was a psycho madman hunting him, and Harry Potter felt no fear at all, but hope. Hope that the changes occurring in his life would make him as strong as people felt him capable of being. Hope that this war, or whatever was now looming over them all would end quickly. And Hope that he would get to see Susan in a bikini.

"All packed up?" Sirius said, hearing Harry close his trunk.

"Yeah. Let's get moving." Harry smiled.

"I hear the ocean calling to me." Sirius smirked.

"You hear half naked women screaming at you." Harry countered.

"Tomato, potato, kid."

Remus simply laughed as they all made their way out of the castle.

Of one thing, Harry was sure as he took one last look at Hogwarts castle before he and his godfather and uncle disappeared away. He was sure that this had been the toughest year of his life, and he had indeed become much stronger for it.

"Voldemort has no idea who he's messed with." He smiled to himself just as Sirius and Remus took him to London, and the beginning of his new life.

The End... for now.

Внимание! Этот перевод, возможно, ещё не готов.

Его статус: идёт перевод

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