

shoving it all in his bag on the way out. He caught sight of a familiar crocodile-skin handbag, and he threw himself around the corner suddenly. Skeeter walked right by him, chatting away to her photographer friend. "She must be staying in the village," he muttered to Neville and Hermione. "She'll be at the first task, then."

Harry vindictively hoped he had a case built up against her by then. Amelia Bones had written back promptly, assuring him that it was quite illegal to quote a minor without consent, and the entire article was easily a case of libel, but that Rita Skeeter was a tricky one and it might take some time. Harry was just happy to know there was a lawyer working on it.

They finally made it to the Three Broomsticks, where Harry put his foot down once more about sitting with Ron. "Harry, *please*," Hermione urged, but Harry wasn't having it.

"Hermione, maybe you should just let it go," Neville suggested gently.

"Oi, Harry!" Harry whipped around at the call, seeing Cedric sat in a booth with Cho Chang, who was waving at him. "Want to join us?"

Cedric was a *lifesaver*. "See you, Hermione. You coming, Nev?" He didn't wait for either response, heading straight for the booth. Luckily, Neville was right behind him.

"Hi, Harry," Cho greeted brightly. "And... Neville, right? Neville Longbottom?"

"Yeah, it's nice to meet you," Neville returned.

"You looked like you could do with a bit of a save," Cho said by way of explanation.

"Besides, Cedric keeps ditching me to go sit with you at lunch, so I thought I'd see what all the fuss was about." She gave him an impish wink, and Harry remembered the time last year where he'd briefly thought he had a crush on her.

"Well, here I am," he said dryly, holding his arms out as if to say '*ta da*'. Cho laughed. "I'm gonna grab drinks, can I get you anything?"

He bought a round of butterbeers for all of them despite their protests, bringing them back to the table with barely a glance over to where Hermione was sat with a scowling Ron. He'd definitely made the better choice, he thought when he took his seat back in the booth. "So how's it going?" Cho asked, sipping at her drink. "Have you been driving yourself as mad as Ced trying to prepare for the first task?"

Harry shrugged. He hadn't told anyone of his suspicions about dragons yet, just in case he was wrong. "Kinda. I've been brushing up on spells I think I might need, but it's hard to prepare for the unknown. I figured I'd just wing it and hope for the best."

"Your approach to all of life's challenges, then," Neville cut in with a smirk. Harry rolled his eyes, but couldn't deny it.

"I hope they don't keep all the tasks a mystery," Cedric mused. "That'd be a nightmare."

"I think it's just this one. Supposed to test our quick-thinking and all that." Considering the last time he'd faced an enormous bloodthirsty beast, he'd stabbed it with a sword he'd pulled