

“Well, if no one cares, then it shouldn’t be a problem,” Skeeter retorted, smirk dripping with malice. “Why don’t you give me a quote, Harry? About the Hagrid *you* know.” She pulled her lime green quill from her crocodile-skin handbag. “The man behind the muscle. Would you call him a father substitute?”

“Are you so bad at your job that you can’t get a headline without making up utter tripe?” Ginny cut in furiously, appearing at Harry’s shoulder. Skeeter glared at her, lips pursing.

“Sit down, you silly little girl, and don’t get involved in matters that don’t concern you,” she dismissed. Ginny’s hands clenched into fists at her side.

“Like you’re one to talk!” she argued. “Hagrid’s personal life is none of your business, but you stuck your ugly nose in where it wasn’t wanted, and now look what you’ve done!”

Harry recognised the malicious glint in Skeeter’s eye, and his heart sank. They were going to end up in more trouble than it was worth. “Come on, Ginny,” he urged quietly, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Let’s just go.” He glanced over at Neville, who nodded and set his mostly-empty drink down, taking Ginny by the hand and urging her out of the pub. Harry didn’t look back at Skeeter as they left.

“She’s not gonna take that lying down,” Neville said with furrowed brows, eyeing Ginny in concern. “She’ll be after you next.”

“Let her,” Ginny replied, scowling. “I’ll take whatever that lying cow can dish out.”

Harry hoped that was true. If there was one thing Rita Skeeter was good at, it was hurting people.

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From books about merpeople, Harry moved on to researching water-based spells, trying to find something that might allow him to be underwater for an hour. He found spells for walking on water, transporting large amounts of water, and plenty of spells to help *find* water, but nothing that told him how to survive in it past the usual limitation of his lung capacity. There had to be something. He was just looking in the wrong place.

Remembering Sirius’ words about asking Remus, Harry donned his invisibility cloak one Friday evening and headed down to the dungeons. Remus was usually around on Friday nights, and he’d mentioned something about being there when Harry had spoken to him last.

He glanced around to check the coast was clear, then knocked on the frame of the portrait. It opened, and he snuck inside, waiting until the door was closed before removing his cloak. He looked around the unusually empty room, frowning. “I thought Remus was supposed to be here?”

“He was,” Snape replied curtly. He’d taken off his teaching robes, leaving him in just a black shirt and trousers. He looked exhausted, if Harry was honest. “There was a change in plans.”