

Last year, Hermione had been too busy with her overloaded timetable and Buckbeak's appeal to care much about Harry's grades. If she was going to spend the whole next year insisting he needed her help, ignoring the fact that he was clearly capable by himself, they were going to have issues.

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One afternoon, a couple of days before they were due to go back to school, they were all out in the garden, enjoying the last dregs of the summer sunshine. Hermione and Ginny were stretched out on a blanket by the pond, talking quietly and giggling every now and then; the two girls were thick as thieves this summer, and Harry sort-of wondered what they talked about all the time. From some of the looks they sent him before bursting into giggles, he probably didn't want to know.

Harry and the other boys were, as they often were, high in the air on their brooms. Bill had brought an old quaffle home with him, and they were tossing it between them, thinking up increasingly ridiculous forfeits for anyone who dropped it. Harry was currently having to sit sidesaddle on his broom, which made it even harder to catch future passes. He was doing alright, though; Charlie was working with one hand spelled behind his back, and it was not doing him any favours.

"This is ridiculous," the dragon tamer complained when the quaffle dropped to the ground below him. "I was never a chaser for a reason!" He swooped down to grab it, zooming back to the same level as the rest of them. "They're putting us seekers through our paces, eh?" he added to Harry with a grin. "If we had a snitch, we could show them."

Harry remembered the little wooden box tucked away in his trunk. "I've got a practice snitch," he volunteered. Charlie stared at him.

"And you're just mentioning this *now*? Poor show, Potter!" He shook his head exasperatedly. Then he grinned, eyes flashing in challenge. "Fancy a seeker's match?"

Harry, who — other than the one glorious day when Draco visited — had been chasing the snitch all summer without any real competition for it, smirked. "You're on." He landed and raced up to Ron's bedroom, squeezing through the extra beds and piles of clothing to get to his trunk, digging through until he found the box containing his practice snitch. When he got back out into the garden, all the boys had landed, and even Ginny and Hermione had abandoned their blanket, interested in the proceedings.

Bill held a hand out, and Harry passed him the box. "Alright, seekers," he announced, taking the whole thing incredibly seriously, though there was a curve to his lips he couldn't quite hide. "Here's the rules. Snitch gets a ten second head start, with your eyes closed. If it goes over the property line, we'll have to summon it back; don't want the muggles seeing anything they shouldn't. And I want a good, clean match, alright?" He was channelling Madam Hooch, and it made both seekers snicker.

Harry and Charlie shook hands, then mounted their brooms but kept their feet on the ground. Bill flicked the lid of the box open, and Harry's eyes were on the little golden ball as it unfurled its wings and shot off into the air. Bill cleared his throat, and Harry squeezed his