

Chapter 32

The morning of the second task dawned bright and early, thankfully fairly mild for late February. Harry readied himself in the dorm, putting on his swimming trunks under his robe and stuffing the gillyweed in his pocket. Neville was waiting for him in the common room with a bacon sandwich, and Harry grinned at him. "Is the hall a bit mad?"

"It's been worse," Neville said with a shrug, "but I still thought you'd prefer to avoid it."

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Harry was surprised the pair weren't there with them, since they were so determined to be his best friends again. They hardly let him go to the bathroom without their company these days.

"I haven't seen them, actually," Neville replied. Harry frowned, but shook it off; he had bigger things to worry about.

Eating his sandwich on the way down to the lake, he raised his eyebrows at seeing the stands from the first task constructed on the bank of the lake, overlooking the calm water. Neville hugged him and wished him good luck before hurrying off to get a seat, and Harry made his way towards the judges' table, where he could see Viktor waiting. There was no sign of Fleur or Cedric yet.

"Morning," Harry greeted, glad for the Warming charm on his robe. Snape had promised the gillyweed would help him adjust to the water temperature, and Harry prayed he was right about that. It had to be freezing in there. Viktor nodded in greeting, his dark eyes fixed sharply on the water. He was clearly in the zone, and Harry left him to it, scanning the rest of the crowd. He was surprised to see Percy sat in Mr Crouch's seat, and he wandered over. "Where's Mr Crouch?"

"He's still not well," Percy told him with a frown. "Terrible thing, he hasn't been in the office in weeks. Of course, I'm handling everything as per his instruction — owls me every morning, you see. I have it all under control." Percy puffed out his chest. "But of course I wish him the speediest recovery."

Harry's brow furrowed; that couldn't be right. He'd seen Mr Crouch's name on the map half a dozen times since the Yule Ball. But of course he couldn't say that, or he'd have to explain the map, and then he'd be in all kinds of trouble.

Before he could ask for any detail on Crouch's mysterious illness, Bagman appeared at Harry's side, slinging a heavy arm over his shoulders. "Alright, there, Harry?" He ducked in close, dropping his voice. "Need any last-minute pointers?"

Harry firmly removed the man's arm from his person, taking a step away. "I'm fine, thanks." Why was the man so insistent on helping him? Surely Harry didn't look *that* pathetic.

The arrival of Cedric and Fleur was the perfect excuse for Harry to ditch Bagman, and he bumped Cedric's shoulder with his own. "You ready for this?"