

Wrapped up in the threads of so many lies and secrets, Harry had entirely forgotten about Buckbeak until he went with Ron and Hermione to visit Hagrid, only to find the man crying into his enormous teacup. The guilt piled higher in Harry's gut. He was being a terrible friend. Hell, the only reason they'd gone to Hagrid in the first place was that Ron and Hermione seemed to think he wanted to go hunting down Sirius Black. The old Harry probably would have, under that Compulsion curse. The new Harry had bigger things on his mind.

Still, he put in a good attempt at helping do the research to start putting a case together for Buckbeak. Ron lasted all of four hours in the library before he made an excuse and bailed out, while Harry stuck around for six. It wasn't the research that was the problem, or even the time spent with his nose in books — Hermione's preferred style of studying was a little... overwhelming for those around her. She was much better suited to independent research. Eventually, Harry got tired of her yanking the book out of his hands every time he said he might have something interesting, and just left her to it.

He didn't see much of his two best friends in the run-up to Christmas. Sure, they were around, and they hung out in the evenings in the common room. But honestly Harry couldn't remember the last time the three of them had had a proper conversation, especially not one that wasn't related to some disaster or another. Sometimes it felt like they only came together to solve problems. Whenever there was quiet time between the three of them, it would promptly get ruined by Crookshanks existing in Ron's presence and Ron going off on one about how the evil cat was out for blood. It was better for Harry to just... not.

Luckily, Professor Lupin had agreed to start Harry's Patronus lessons. Harry was practically vibrating with excitement the first time he approached Lupin's office, and his eyebrows rose at the enormous packing case sitting on the man's desk. It was rattling. "What's that?"

"Another boggart. It's the closest we'll get to a dementor without actually inviting one into the castle, and, well," Lupin said with a wry smile, "this is far easier to deal with."

Harry thought about having to face a real dementor, and his stomach turned over. Yes, the boggart was a much better idea.

He listened attentively as Lupin explained the Patronus charm to him, going over the incantation in his head. "Expecto Patronum," he murmured, wrapping his tongue around the sounds. "It just needs a happy memory?"

"The happiest one you can think of," Lupin confirmed. "When you think you've got one, give it a try."

Harry stood, lips pursed in thought. As tragic as it sounded, he didn't have an abundance of happy memories. He rolled a few through his mind — the moment Hagrid told him he was a wizard, maybe? No, that was mostly just confusion. His first Christmas at Hogwarts? That didn't feel right either.

Eventually, he settled on the first time he ever rode a broom. Simple, uncomplicated, breathless joy. He held the memory in his head, grasping his wand tight. "Expecto Patronum!"