

“Don’t have much choice, do I?” Cedric pointed out dryly. “Hey, have you seen Cho this morning? She wasn’t at breakfast.”

“I haven’t,” Harry replied, puzzled; that wasn’t like Cho at all. “But I didn’t go to breakfast. Neville brought me up a sandwich so I could avoid the crowd.”

“It’s not him, is it?” Cedric asked with a wiggle of his eyebrows, making it clear what he was referring to. Harry blushed, jabbing the Hufflepuff in the side.

“No!” he hissed, wide-eyed. “It’s not Neville, God! And keep your voice down, Skeeter’s bound to be around here somewhere.”

Cedric looked apologetic, glancing around for any sign of the blonde reporter. “That is weird, actually; she’s usually right on top of the action. Maybe your lawyer finally scared her off.”

“I can only hope,” Harry said ruefully.

It drew closer to the starting time, and as the stands began to fill with people Bagman cast Sonorus on himself, striding out to the water’s edge and starting up a chatter to pass the time. “All four champions are ready and raring to go! For those of you who aren’t aware, the second task is thus; each champion has had a person they care about taken from them, stolen away into the depths of the lake by its resident clan of merpeople. It is up to the champions to find what has been taken from them and retrieve them within the hour!”

At Bagman’s words, all four champions shared horrified looks. “A person,” Viktor murmured grimly.

“Cho!” Cedric gasped, casting panicked eyes on the water’s surface. Harry gripped his arm to stop him diving in then and there.

“They’re safe, they have to be. The task hasn’t started yet.” He wasn’t sure which of them he was trying to reassure.

“But after an hour...” Fleur trailed off, her blue eyes fearful. “I do not know ‘oo zey ‘ave taken from me.” She disappeared, hurrying over to her headmistress, and there was a rapid conversation in French that ended with Fleur’s hands sparking with fire in her fury.

“Gabrielle!” The quarter-veela stomped over to Ludo Bagman, grabbing him by the front of his robe and hoisting him off his feet, glaring. Her hair had flames licking at the tips, and Harry could smell burning ozone. He hadn’t realised Fleur had that much of her heritage in her. “If *anyzing* ‘appens to my leetle sister, I will *kill you*, Bagman,” she declared spitefully. Harry’s jaw dropped. Fleur had talked about her little sister before; Gabrielle was barely nine years old! How could they possibly think it was a good idea to put her at the bottom of a lake?

Bagman looked like he was about to wet himself, but he bravely patted Fleur on the shoulder. “Not to worry, Miss Delacour,” he said, voice shaking. “We’ve got every precaution in place.”