

Little Lamb Gone to Slaughter

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Little Lamb Gone to Slaughter

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Harry doesn't think much about the Triwizard Tournament beyond being relieved that he won't have anything to do with it at all. It seems like he might finally have a quiet, peaceful year.

So, of course, his name ends up coming out of the Goblet of Fire despite the fact that he would never in a million years enter this death tournament willingly.

The entire school turns their back on him once more, only this time, he truly feels alone. Is this how it's always going to be? Year after year of being thrown into life-threatening danger at Hogwarts while surrounded by people who can't decide whether they love or hate him only to be shunted off to the Dursleys –who certainly aren't shy about how much they hate him– every summer?

It feels like the fighting never ends. Harry is so, so tired...

Notes

I swear that I'm going to get back to my complete series rewrite of Harry Potter eventually, but this muse was speaking to me and absolutely refused to be silent so X'D Drarry it is. I'm super excited for both this work and series, and I hope you all enjoy it! Poor Harry is absolutely going through it right now, but it does get better. Eventually. It gets worse before it gets better, though.

I also made a [playlist](#) for this series if you want to give it a listen while reading!

Chapter 1

Nothing good ever happens on Halloween. Maybe that's why a sense of trepidation has clung to him like a thick, heavy fog settling over the earth. He watches with bated breath as the champions of the Triwizard Tournament are selected. Viktor Krum from Durmstrang, Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons, and Cedric Diggory from Hogwarts. He breathes a sigh of relief when the final name is announced.

Logically, Harry knows that there's no way it could've been him. The Age Line prevents anyone under the age of seventeen from entering the tournament, so even if he had wanted to be part of the tournament –which he doesn't; he's had quite enough excitement in the past three years to last himself a lifetime– he couldn't have put his name in the goblet. He's going to have a nice, peaceful year and–

The Goblet of Fire flares to life a fourth time. It's glowing bright red as sparks fly out of it, and anxiety crawls up his throat until it hurts to breathe. He supposes that some part of him knew exactly what the final slip of paper would say before Dumbledore reads it aloud.

"Harry Potter."

He's going to be sick. Distantly, he's aware that every single person in the Great Hall has turned to stare at where he's sitting, frozen in place. But it all feels so far away that he can't bring himself to care about that right now. His hands are trembling. How is this happening? Why him? Why is it always him?

"I didn't put my name in," he whispers disbelievingly. Wide eyes stare into a sea of red and gold that stare right back, open-mouthed in shock. "You know I didn't."

Professor Dumbledore nods to Professor McGonagall as he repeats, "Harry Potter! Harry! Up here if you please."

"Go on," Hermione whispers with an encouraging nudge.

He's surprised that his legs don't give out as he takes one wobbly step after another. He stumbles and nearly falls several times along the way to the Head Table, and it has never felt as far away as it does in this moment. It's like he isn't making any progress at all, and the eyes boring down on him from every direction have him hunching his shoulders and ducking his head. Harry's eyes don't leave the ground beneath his feet, too afraid that he'll well and truly fall if he doesn't put every bit of focus he has into putting one foot in front of the other.

Dumbledore... Isn't smiling. Harry has never seen him look more unhappy than he does in this moment. His skin crawls at the disapproval hidden in those eyes, eerily reminded of when he'd ruined one of Aunt Petunia's prized rose bushes by over-pruning it. He was only six at the time, but he's never been able to forget that look.

"Well... Through the door, Harry."

He's going to be sick. Even Hagrid is staring at him with an utterly dumbfounded expression, and he wants to cry. He wants to scream. This is so unfair, and he doesn't understand why it keeps happening to him.

Viktor, Fleur, and Cedric are all huddled around the fire, cutting impressive silhouettes against the flickering flames that only serve to make him feel that much smaller. He shouldn't be here. His vision blurs.

Fleur casts a glance at the door, jolting slightly at whatever expression she sees on his face. "What is it? Do zey want us back in ze hall?"

He opens his mouth, but he cannot force a single word past his lips. How can he even begin to explain the nightmare that he has suddenly found himself trapped in? A single tear streaks down his cheek.

"Are you alright?" Fleur whispers. Both Krum and Diggory look mildly alarmed and uncomfortable, but the expression on Fleur's face is swiftly approaching a sort of protective fury that reminds him of the enraged veela during the World Quidditch Cup. Maybe Ron is onto something there. "Zey sent you to fetch us, yes? Zere is no need to be so afraid. We don't bite."

The sound of scurrying feet behind him nearly makes Harry jump out of his skin, and when Ludo Bagman grabs him by the arm and hauls him forward, he can't quite repress the flinch. "Extraordinary!" Bagman's grip on his arm tightens even further. He's going to be sick. "Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen... Lady," Bagman adds as if it's an afterthought, dragging him toward the fireside without a car in the world for his bruising grip or how Harry is digging his heels into unforgiving stone as if it will somehow save him from this fate. "May I introduce, incredible though it may seem, the *fourth* Triwizard champion?"

Viktor Krum straightens up, and any lingering hints of concern are washed away by a darkly evaluating gaze as he studies Harry's faintly trembling form. Cedric looks nonplussed, looking between Harry and Bagman as if he surely must have misheard him and is waiting for someone to tell him what was truly said. Fleur, on the other hand, tosses her hair back with a faint smile and a tinkling laugh as she says, "Oh, vairy funny joke, Mr. Bagman."

He wishes it was a joke. He really, really wishes it was a joke. Or maybe his whole life is all one sick joke, and this is simply another inevitable chapter of it. "Joke?" Bagman sounds utterly bewildered at the very thought of it. "No, no, not at all! Harry's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

"Well, zair 'as clearly been a mistake!" Fleur snaps with a narrow-eyed glare. "'E cannot compete. 'E is too young."

"Well... It is amazing," Bagman says as he rubs his chin, smiling down at Harry. He's going to be sick. "But, as you know, the age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as his name's come out of the goblet... I mean, I don't think there can be any ducking out at this stage... It's down in the rules, you're obliged... Harry will just have to do the best he—"

The door behind them slams open, and a crowd of people pushes through it. Dumbledore, Crouch, Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGonagall, and Snape all join them, and the faint buzzing of hundreds of students can be heard through the cracked door before Professor McGonagall closes it behind them.

“Madame Maxime!” Fleur cries out as she immediately marches toward her headmistress. “Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!”

Madame Maxime draws herself up to her full height, brushing against the candlelit chandelier as she scowls down at both him and Dumbledore. “What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-door?”

“I’d rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore.” Karkaroff’s smile holds a glint of steel that sends a shiver down his spine, and his eyes are like chips of ice reflecting the sunlight in a blinding show of fury. “Two Hogwarts champions? I don’t remember anyone telling me that the host school is allowed two champions, or have I not read the rules carefully enough?” He gives a short, nasty laugh that has Harry fighting back the burning acid threatening to rise up and out of his throat.

He’s going to be sick.

“C’est impossible! ‘Ogwarts cannot ‘ave two champions. It is most unjust.”

“We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore. Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools.”

“It’s no one’s fault but Potter’s, Karkaroff.” His breath hitches. He doesn’t know why he’s surprised. Snape has had it out for him from the very beginning, but this... Surely his reaction alone is proof enough that he never wanted this. “Don’t go blaming Dumbledore for Potter’s determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here—”

“Thank you, Severus,” Dumbledore cuts Snape off abruptly, and though Snape falls silent, his eyes still glint with gleeful malice. He’s acting as if Christmas and his birthday have come all at once. Acid burns at the back of his throat as he swallows harshly around a gag. Dumbledore locks eyes with him as he murmurs, “Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?”

“No.”

Dumbledore ignores Snape’s quiet noise of disbelief to ask, “Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?”

“No...!” He hates the way his voice cracks around the word, choking on a sob that he barely bites back. Harry has never felt less like a Gryffindor than he does in this moment. This fear is too all-consuming for any amount of bravery to take root in it.

He’s going to be sick.

“Ah, but of course ‘e is lying!” Madame Maxime cries. Snape’s lips curl in a cruel sneer that he can barely make out through the tears blurring his vision, and he cannot stop the slow, constant stream of them that travel down his skin.

“He could not have crossed the Age Line,” Professor McGonagall disagrees firmly. “I’m sure we are all agreed on that—

“Dumbly-door must ‘ave made a mistake wiz ze line.”

“It is possible, of course.”

“Dumbledore, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!” Professor McGonagall says angrily. “Really, what nonsense! Harry could not have crossed that line himself, and as Professor Dumbledore believes that he did not persuade an older student to do it for him, I’m sure that should be good enough for everybody else!” She shoots a very angry glare at Snape.

“Mr. Crouch... Mr. Bagman.” Karkaroff’s voice sends another shudder down his spine, though this time for the oily, greasy quality of it that reminds him of Snape’s hair. “You are our, er, objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?”

“We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament.”

“Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front!” Bagman says with a beaming smile, turning to face the foreign headmasters and nodding his head as if the matter is now closed.

“I insist upon submitting the names of the rest of my students.” Karkaroff’s face is twisted in a very ugly expression, indeed. “You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It’s only fair, Dumbledore.”

“But Karkaroff, it doesn’t work like that,” Bagman protests. “The Goblet of Fire’s just gone out. It won’t reignite until the start of the next tournament—”

“—In which Durmstrang will most certainly not be competing! After all our meetings and negotiations and compromises, I little expected something of this nature to occur! I have half a mind to leave now!”

“Empty threat, Karkaroff,” a voice growls from near the door. “You can’t leave your champion now. He’s got to compete. They’ve all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?”

“Convenient?” Karkaroff echoes with a scoff. “I’m afraid I don’t understand you, Moody.”

“Don’t you?” Moody murmurs quietly, and Harry is so relieved that at least someone understands what’s really happening here. “It’s very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter’s name in that goblet knowing he’d have to compete if it came out.”

“Evidently, someone ‘oo wished to give ‘Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!”

“I quite agree, Madame Maxime,” Karkaroff concurs with a bow. “I shall be lodging complaints with the Ministry of Magic and the International Confederation of Wizards—”

“If anyone’s got reason to complain, it’s Potter,” Moody growls. “But... Funny thing, I don’t hear him saying a word.”

“Ow could ‘e?!” Fleur snaps with a sharp glare at the bickering adults around them, gesturing sharply in his direction. “Look at ‘im! ‘E’s terrified!!”

He doesn’t have to see his face to know that it’s a mess of tears and snot as he trembles silently. *‘I’m going into shock,’* he realizes distantly. Everything feels fuzzy around the edges, and he’s quite certain that if he takes a single step, he’s going to collapse. He can’t breathe. He’s going to be sick.

This time, the acid burns and burns until it forces its way out of his mouth with a wretched gag. A dainty hand rubs circles on his back, and though the slightly pointed tips of Fleur’s fingernails look nothing like his aunt’s, he still flinches minutely. “It is going to be okay,” she murmurs. “It is not your fault. Zere must be somezing zhat we can—”

“There isn’t,” Moody cuts off firmly with a shake of his head. “It’s what makes this plan so clever. Clearly, someone is hoping to off Potter without dirtying their hands directly. Makes it much harder to trace it back to them...”

Bagman rocks back and forth on his feet anxiously. “Moody, old man... What a thing to say!”

“We all know Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn’t discovered six plots to murder him before lunchtime,” Karkaroff scoffs derisively. “Apparently he is now teaching his students to fear assassination too. An odd quality in a Defense Against Dark Arts teacher, Dumbledore, but no doubt you had your reasons.”

And he couldn’t help it, really. A hysterical little laugh escapes his lips, and once he starts, he cannot stop. Everyone is staring at him. He doesn’t care anymore. “L-Like someone hasn’t tried to kill me every year like bloody clockwork!” he sobs. “Ever since I got here, it’s been one thing after another after another, and now this?!” Every fire in the room flares with his outrage. Flickering candles burn down to the wick in an instant, and the fireplace roars higher and higher until the flames leave black, scorched marks on the stone ceiling. “Mr. Bagman?” Bagman startles at being addressed, looking somehow even more nervous than he did before. The sparks flickering around Harry probably have a lot to do with that. “What happens if you break a magical contract?”

Bagman isn’t the one who answers. A whirring, magical eye stares him down as the wizard attached to it murmurs, “Your magic is bound. Permanently. Meaning you’ll never cast another spell so long as you live. It is a fate worse than death for any wizard. One way or another, they’d succeed in being rid of you. You must compete, Harry. You have no choice.”

Doesn’t he, though? It’s not a good choice, not when refusing will only end with his wand snapped and being sent back to the Dursleys, but if he can find a way to avoid going back then— Is he... Really considering giving up his magic to avoid a tournament?

'It's not just about the tournament,' a quiet, exhausted voice whispers in the back of his mind. 'You know that.'

It still feels cowardly. It doesn't feel like something a Gryffindor would do, but part of him still wants to. Just to prove a point. If only Pettigrew hadn't escaped...

"I understand," he whispers after several long, charged minutes of silence. The fires have died down to reasonable levels, though there's no saving the candles that were once hanging above them. A few globs of melted wax have already fallen onto the floor, and many more are likely to join them shortly.

"As I was explaining," Moody continues after he clears his throat. "A powerful witch or wizard put Harry's name in that goblet. It would require an exceptionally strong Confudus charm to fool the Goblet of Fire into believing that there were four schools competing, and I reckon that Harry was the only member of this fake fourth school. No other way to make sure his name came out of the goblet."

"You seem to have given this a great deal of thought, Moody," Karkaroff says coldly. "And a very ingenious theory it is. Though of course, I heard you recently got it in your head that one of your birthday presents contained a cunningly disguised basilisk egg, and smashed it to pieces before realizing it was a carriage clock, So you'll understand if we don't take you entirely seriously..."

"Those are those who'll turn innocent occasions to their advantage," Moody retorts with a menacing voice. "It's my job to think the way Dark Wizards do, Karkaroff. As you ought to remember..."

"Alastor!" For a moment, Harry's confused about who Dumbledore is talking to, but he supposes that Moody's actual name couldn't be Mad-Eye, in hindsight. Ugh, but he feels awful. He can't blame himself for being a bit slow on the uptake right now. It feels like the whole world is swimming in molasses. "How this situation arose, we do not know," Dumbledore continues, turning to address the entire room. "It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in this tournament. This, therefore, they will do..."

"Ah, but Dumbly-door--"

"My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it." She does not answer, only glares at him quite crossly. Karkaroff is livid, and one look at Snape is all it takes to know that he'll be gunning for him even worse than usual this year. Just what he needs, really.

Bagman, on the other hand, looks utterly thrilled. The fireplace burns just a touch brighter. "Well, shall we crack on, then? Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we? Barty, want to do the honors?"

"Yes... Instructions. The first task... The first task is designed to test your daring. So we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is a very important quality in a wizard... Very important."

Great. Fantastic. He's already absolutely bungling this; Harry hasn't been this terrified since he faced down the basilisk.

"The first task will take place on November 24th, in front of the other students and a panel of judges. The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete tasks in the tournament. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands."

'I'm going to die,' he thinks. 'I'm not going to make it out of this one, am I? I barely know enough magic to get myself through classes.' Really, the only impressive spell in his repertoire is the Patronus charm, and he can't see that helping him very much here.

"They will receive information about the second task when the first is over. Owing to the demanding and time-consuming nature of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests." Harry feels as if a feather could knock him over. He has to fight down another hysterical laugh. As if he's even vaguely worried about tests that he likely won't live to take anyway. Crouch turns to Dumbledore and says, "I think that's all, is it, Albus?"

"I think so," Dumbledore agrees, looking at Crouch with open concern despite him looking only half as sick as Harry is certain he does. Everyone seems quite content to ignore that fact, with the exception of Fleur who hasn't stopped hovering around him. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay at Hogwarts tonight, Barty?"

"No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry. It is a very busy, very difficult time at the moment... I've left young Weatherby in charge... Very enthusiastic... A little overenthusiastic, if truth be told."

"You'll come and have a drink before you go, at least?" Dumbledore asks imploringly.

"Come on, Barty, I'm staying!" Bagman cheers brightly. "It's all happening at Hogwarts now, you know, much more exciting than at the office!"

"I think not, Ludo."

"Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, a nightcap?"

But Madame Maxime has already wrapped her arm around Fleur as she ushers her out of the room, the two of them speaking rapid French that makes his head spin. Fleur glances back with a wobbly little smile that tells him that she at least isn't angry with him. Probably. Karkaroff beckons for Viktor to follow him, and they, too, leave the room, though it is in dead silence.

Dumbledore clears his throat. "Harry, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed. I am sure Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are wanting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of this excellent cause to make a great deal of mess and noise."

That is the literal last thing that Harry wants to do right now, but the way Dumbledore says it makes it clear that this isn't a suggestion. And as much as he might want to, he can't avoid the others forever.

Harry glances at Cedric, and the two of them leave together. The Great Hall is utterly deserted now, and the low light from burnt-out candles gives the jack-o-lanterns a distinctly eerie quality. "So," Cedric says with a strained smile. "We're playing against each other again!"

"I suppose..."

"So, tell me... How did you get your name in?"

And... What? He has to be joking, right? He's almost flattered that Cedric thinks he's that good of an actor, but it's overridden by a flare of irritation that has him grinding his teeth. "I didn't," he repeats firmly as he glares up at him. "I didn't put it in. I was telling the truth."

"Ah... Okay." He doesn't believe him. It could not be more apparent that he doesn't believe him. Harry is getting a sickly feeling of dread that creeps up his throat like vomit, and he wonders if he's going to be sick again. "Well... See you, then."

He watches Cedric go with a weary sigh. Is anyone going to believe him? Ron and Hermione, surely, but beyond that... This is going to be second year all over again, isn't it? He almost doesn't go back to his dorm. He really doesn't want to. But the Invisibility Cloak is currently stashed inside his trunk, and if he's going to wander around the castle until it feels a bit less like his heart is going to beat straight out of his chest, then he's going to do it while hidden from sight.

Harry hardly registers the stairs beneath his feet, and he finds himself quite startled to suddenly be faced with the Fat Lady's portrait. Only, she's not alone right now, and he has no doubt that the portraits have already spread what happened tonight across the entire castle. Both the Fat Lady and her visitor are looking down at him with keen interest.

"Well, well, well. Violet's just told me everything. Who's just been chosen as school champion, then?"

He is not in the mood for this. "Balderdash."

"It most certainly isn't!" the pale witch cries out.

"No, no, Vi, it's the password," the Fat Lady reassures her... Friend? Her portrait swings open to allow Harry entrance into the common room, and forcing himself to take those few final steps takes all the bravery he has left in him.

The blast of noise that assaults his ears nearly bowls him over. Next thing he knows, he's being dragged inside the common room by about a dozen pairs of hands, and not a single one of them pays any mind to the way he flinches or how his skin crawls as he's manhandled into the middle of the crowd. Maybe he is going to be sick again. Everyone is screaming, applauding, and whistling, and Harry wishes more than anything that he could disappear right now.

"You should've told us you'd entered!" Fred bellows. He looks half annoyed and half deeply impressed, and that sick feeling only grows stronger. Surely he knows that Harry would

never—

“How did you do it without getting a beard? Brilliant!” George roars.

“I... I didn’t. I think someone—”

But Angelina swoops down on him before he can even begin to explain. “Oh, if it couldn’t be me, at least it’s a Gryffindor—”

“You’ll be able to pay back Diggory for that last Quidditch match, Harry!” Katie Bell shouts with a blinding grin.

“We’ve got food, Harry, come and have some—”

“I’m not hungry.” He’s going to throw up if he tries to force anything down right now. “I had enough at the feast—”

But no one is listening to him. No one wants to hear that he isn’t hungry, no one wants to hear that he didn’t put his name in the goblet, and not a single person in the room seems to notice that the very last thing he wants to do is celebrate the fact that his name came out of it.

He wonders if he made the wrong choice back then. Talking the hat out of putting him in Slytherin, that is. It’s only a fleeting thought—he dreads the thought of having to deal with Snape even more than he already does, and it isn’t as if the Slytherins like him— but... They likely would’ve seen that something is wrong here, right? Slytherins are supposed to be cunning like that. Maybe they would understand that...

Harry is absolutely surrounded by people, and he has never felt more alone in his life.

Lee Jordan manages to pull a Gryffindor banner out from somewhere, draping it over Harry’s shoulders like a cloak. It only serves to make him feel even less like he belongs. Because a Gryffindor would be happy about this, wouldn’t they? Everyone else is. But Harry is just... Horrified. Queasy. He wants to be alone. But every time he tries to leave, the crowd around him closes ranks, forces another butterbeer into his trembling hands, and starts interrogating him about how he got past Dumbledore’s Age Line all over again. They don’t even notice when he drops the mug, spilling butterbeer all over the carpet.

“I didn’t,” he repeats over and over, growing increasingly desperate by the minute. “I don’t know what happened!”

But for all the notice they took of him, he may as well have not answered at all.

He manages to last all of half an hour before he’s well and truly had it, snapping as the fireplace flares once more. The cheering is cut off by a few startled screams by those sober enough to notice it. “I’m tired!” he shouts, though it sounds far more like a sob to his own ears. “No! Seriously, George, I’m going to bed—”

Harry wants nothing more than to be with his friends right now, but neither Ron nor Hermione is anywhere to be seen. He needs a moment to get himself together, free of

grabbing hands and excited yelling that makes him want to collapse and curl into a little ball in the corner. He wonders how long it would take them to even notice.

He nearly bowls over the Creevey brothers in his desperate attempt to get back to his dorm, but he manages to escape the crowd this time. They certainly try to stop him, but he just keeps walking –sprinting, really– and refuses to look back. He doesn't want them to see him cry. It's bad enough that the other champions did.

To his immense relief, Ron is in their otherwise empty dorm, laying on his bed and idly picking at the sheets. "Where've you been?" Harry asks, and he knows that he sounds more than a bit desperate as he does so. He could've really used the help escaping the others' clutches...

"Oh. Hello." Something about the weight in Ron's voice and the strange tilt of his smile has Harry's heart stuttering to a halt inside his chest. He's distantly aware that the Gryffindor banner is still tied tight around his neck, and he doesn't even bother trying to untie it, ripping the fabric until the gap was large enough for him to slip his head out. He chucks it across the room. "Congratulations."

'You've got to be kidding me,' Harry thinks despairingly. "What d'you mean, congratulations?" His voice is barely more than a whisper, utterly disbelieving as his best friend turns the same look on him as all the others.

"Well... No one else got across the Age Line," Ron says with a shrug. His smile is definitely more of a grimace now. "Not even Fred and George. What did you use? The Invisibility Cloak?"

"The Invisibility Cloak wouldn't have gotten me over that line," he answers with a wobbly voice. This cannot be happening. Surely Ron doesn't believe–

"Oh. Right," Ron agrees easily enough, and for a minute, he almost deludes himself into believing that will be the end of it. "I thought you might've told me if it was the Cloak... Because it would've covered both of us, wouldn't it? But you found another way, didn't you?"

"Listen," Harry begs as his vision blurs once more. "I didn't put my name in the goblet. Someone else must have done it."

Ron merely cocks an eyebrow. "What would they do that for?"

"To kill me, I reckon." Ron knows how awful his luck is. He's been right there by his side as someone tried to kill him every other year, so why does he suddenly look so disbelieving now?

"It's okay, you know, you can tell me the truth." Ron isn't listening to him. Just like all the others, he's already decided what happened tonight and refuses to be convinced otherwise. Refuses to even entertain the possibility that Harry wouldn't enter himself into a tournament known primarily for its death toll against students three years older than him. "If you don't want everyone else to know, fine, but I don't know why you're bothering to lie. You didn't

get into trouble for it, did you? That friend of the Fat Lady's already told us all that Dumbledore's letting you enter. A thousand Galleons prize money, eh? And you don't have to do end-of-year tests either..."

"I didn't put my name in the goblet!" But his shout may as well have landed on deaf ears for all that Ron believed him.

"Yeah, okay," Ron says in the exact same skeptical tone that Cedric had earlier. "Only, you said this morning that you'd have done it last night instead of in front of everyone, and no one would've seen you... I'm not stupid, you know?"

That isn't what he said. He said that they wouldn't know everyone that entered the tournament since they could put their names in at night if they wanted to avoid a spectacle, but trying to argue that point is useless right now. Ron's not going to listen. None of them are going to listen. "You're doing a fine impression of it," he mutters angrily.

"Yeah?" And there isn't even a trace of a smile on Ron's face anymore. It feels like the beginning of the end, of a rift growing between them that can never be closed again, and honestly, at this point, Harry is content to let it. If this is what Ron thinks of him after years of being thrown into situations that they were utterly unprepared for again and again—if he truly thinks that Harry would enter this tournament for... For fame or glory or money—then maybe they were never really friends at all. "You want to get to bed, Harry. I expect you'll need to be up early tomorrow for a photo-call or something."

He wrenches the curtains around his bed shut, and Harry stares in numb shock at the dark, velvet curtains that hide one of the few people in this world he had truly thought would believe him. They do not open again. There are no apologies to be heard, no promises to listen, and no indication that Ron is in there at all beyond having seen him beforehand.

Harry stumbles toward his bed in a detached, wooden manner before collapsing on top of it. Shaking hands nearly tear the curtains down as he struggles to wrestle them shut, and no sooner than he's given himself a bit of privacy, Harry curls his fingers into the plush blanket that currently offers absolutely no comfort and cries.

He cries and cries and cries until his eyes are red and heavy with exhaustion, and it's less that he falls asleep and more than he collapses under the weight of yet another burden that's been forced upon his shoulders.

A small part of him hopes that he never wakes up again.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Did I really just churn out another chapter in less than 24 hours, five of which were spent at work? You bet I did. I'm literally so excited for this story that I couldn't help myself, haha. I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry wakes up feeling quite miserable the next morning. He's hardly gotten any sleep at all, and what little snatches of it that he managed were plagued with nightmares. He feels even worse when he realizes that Ron has gone to breakfast without him, clearly not inclined to be any more reasonable after sleeping on it. *'Fine then,'* he thinks as he worries at his lip. *'I don't need him. If he wants to throw away our friendship over... Over... Then let him. I'm done.'*

He feels quite done with the whole lot of it, really.

The sentiment grows stronger when he trudges out of his dorm room and into the common room, greeted by deafening applause and cheering that makes him want to curl up on his bed and never leave it again. He doesn't say a word to the others as briskly walks past them, barely dodging the Creevey brothers as he steps through the portrait. He nearly starts crying all over again when he nearly bumps into Hermione.

She's holding a napkin piled high with slices of toast and greets him with a wobbly smile. "Hello, Harry. I brought you this. Did you want to go for a walk?"

"That's a wonderful idea," he whispers gratefully, trailing after Hermione with misty eyes as he nibbles on the toast she gives to him. At least he still has one friend...

It's a brisk morning. A chilly breeze musses their hair as they walk out toward the lake, staring at the massive boat moored at the shore. There are a few Durmstrang students puttering around on it, so they walk further away until they are nearing the edge of the Forbidden Forest. They take a seat beneath one of the gnarled, twisting trees just on the outskirts of it, and he breaks their peaceful silence with a stammered, "I didn't do it, you know? Put my name in? No one else believes me. Well, except for Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Moody, anyway... Moody seems pretty sure that someone's trying to kill me."

"Well of course I knew you hadn't entered yourself," Hermione says as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. "The look on your face when Professor Dumbledore read out your name... The question is who did do it? Because I think Professor Moody is quite right, Harry. No student could have done it. They'd never be able to fool the goblet, never mind getting past Dumbledore's Age Line!"

A flood of relief so immense that it's damn near suffocating engulfs him. It is because of this, perhaps, that he asks a question he really should have left well enough alone. "Have you seen Ron?"

"Erm... Yes... He was at breakfast."

"Does he still think I entered myself?"

"Well... No, I don't think so... Not really," Hermione stammers awkwardly.

"Not really? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, Harry, isn't it obvious?" Hermione asks despairingly. "He's jealous!"

"Jealous?! Jealous of what? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school, does he? Wants to be forced to choose between participating in a tournament that got cancelled because it kept killing people and losing his magic?!"

"Look," Hermione murmurs placatingly. "It's always you who gets all the attention. You know it is." Attention that he's never wanted. Attention that he's made it clear a million times over that he hates. Hermione cuts him off before he can even speak, seeing the outrage that flickers across his face and attempting to diffuse it. "I know it's not your fault. I know you don't ask for it... But, well, you know, Ron's got all those brothers to compete against at home, and you're his best friend, and you're really famous. He's always shunted to the side whenever people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose this is just one time too many..."

"Great," Harry mutters bitterly. Maybe he doesn't have any friends left after all. "Really great. Tell him that he's welcome to swap any time he wants. People gawping at my forehead everywhere I go, constantly fighting for my life, going home to a family that'd be cheering right alongside the Death Eaters if this was the year that finally did me in—"

"I'm not telling him anything," Hermione interrupts him, sounding quite cross. "Tell him yourself. It's the only way to sort this out."

"It's not like I can bloody well force him to listen to me, is it?!" he snaps. "It's not my fault he refused to listen, and I'm not gonna chase after him like a kicked puppy begging for scraps!" Several nearby owls take off at the sound of his shouting, hooting in alarm. "Maybe he'll finally believe I'm not enjoying myself when I've got my neck broken or—"

"That's not funny, Harry," Hermione whispers nervously. It isn't meant to be. He isn't joking. "That's not funny at all. Harry, I've been thinking... You know what we've got to do, don't you? Straight away, the moment we get back to the castle?"

"Yeah, give Ron a good kick up the—"

"Write to Sirius. You've got to tell him what's happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts... It's almost as if he expected something like this to happen. I brought some parchment and a quill out with me—"

“Oh, come off it,” he scoffs derisively. He ignores the flash of hurt that dances across Hermione’s face. “He came back to the country just because my scar twinged. He’ll probably come bursting right into the castle if I tell him someone’s entered me in the Triwizard Tournament—”

“He’d want you to tell him,” Hermione repeats sternly. “He’s going to find out anyway.”

“How?”

“Harry, this isn’t going to be kept quiet.” Hermione almost sounds pitying then. “This tournament is famous, and you’re famous. I’ll be very surprised if there isn’t anything in the Daily Prophet about you entering... You’re already in half the books about You-Know-Who, you know? And Sirius would rather hear it from you. I know he would.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll write to him,” he grumbles as he shoves his final piece of toast into his mouth. He’s not happy about it, but Hermione has a point. He still really regrets writing to Sirius about his scar in the first place. “Whose owl am I going to use?” he muses idly. “He told me not to use Hedwig again.”

“Ask Ron if you can borrow—”

“I’m not asking Ron for anything,” he says quite flatly. He will not budge on that.

Hermione huffs out a quiet sigh before saying, “Well, borrow one of the school owls, then. Anyone can use them.” The two of them walk up to the Owlery together, and Hermione keeps a lookout while he pens his letter to Sirius.

Dear Sirius,

You told me to keep you posted on what’s happening at Hogwarts, so here goes: I don’t know if you’ve heard, but the Triwizard Tournament’s happening this year. And on Saturday night I got picked as a fourth champion. I don’t know who put my name in the Goblet of Fire because I definitely didn’t. The Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff.

Harry pauses. For a moment, he considers pouring all his anxieties out on the page, admitting just how afraid he is of this whole tournament and the fact that he’s very likely to die in the process. But he doesn’t know how to put it into words, so in the end, he simply dips his quill back into the ink with a sigh.

Hope you and Buckbeak are okay,

Harry.

“Finished,” he murmurs quietly as he gets to his feet and brushes the straw off of his uniform. His hands are bound to itch later, but he doesn’t really care about that right now. Hedwig comes fluttering down onto his shoulder and holds out her leg, eagerly awaiting the letter.

“I can’t use you,” he whispers apologetically. “Not for this one. I’m sorry, girl, but I’ve got to borrow one of the school owls— Ouch!”

Hedwig's talons dig into his shoulder as she takes off with an indignant hoot, and spots of blood well up in the punctured flesh, hidden only by the dark color of his school robes. She refuses to even look at him as he ties the letter to a barn owl's leg, and when he reaches out to stroke her, she clicks her beak furiously, snapping at his fingers and only just barely missing them before soaring into the rafters, far outside of his reach.

"First Ron, and now you?" he whispers despairingly, ashamed to feel tears welling up in his eyes again. "It's not my fault...!"

Somehow, it only gets worse from there. He's unable to avoid the rest of school once Monday—and thus, lessons—rolls around, and it becomes abundantly clear that they, like the Gryffindors, believe he entered himself into the tournament. Unlike the Gryffindors, however, none of them are very impressed. He isn't sure whether that's better or worse.

The Hufflepuffs, who are usually on remarkably good terms with every house, are giving the whole of Gryffindor the cold shoulder. One Herbology lesson is all it takes to be certain of this. It's very clear that the Hufflepuffs believe he is stealing their rare chance at glory and recognition, and he wants to shout from the rooftops that Cedric is more than welcome to it. But what does it matter? They've already made up their minds. Even Ernie and Justin, who he usually gets along with quite well, refuse to say a word to him during the lesson even though they were working right beside each other. The only sound he hears out of them at all is a mean laugh when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggles free from Harry's shaky, unsteady grip and smacks him in the face.

Ron still isn't talking to him either, but he honestly cannot bring himself to care about that anymore. Hermione sits between them and tries to make very forced conversation, but eventually, when it becomes clear that Harry isn't going to answer her either, she huffs and directs her full attention to Ron. He has nothing to say to her either so long as she thinks he's the one being unreasonable here, like he owes Ron an apology for existing or something.

Harry's almost dreading Care of Magical Creatures. He's usually quite excited for this class, even with the Blast-Ended Skrewts to deal with, but the thought of dealing with the Slytherins after being declared champion is like lead weighing down his every step. He's practically dragging his feet the whole way there.

He feels sick. He's not sure he'll ever feel well again.

"Ah, look, boys, it's the champion!" Draco jeers with a smirk. He looks back to Crabbe and Goyle as he mutters, "Got your autograph books? Better get his signature now, because I doubt he's going to be around much longer... Half the Triwizard champions have died... How long d'you reckon you're going to last, Potter? Ten minutes into the first task's my bet."

Honestly, that feels like a generous estimation. He says as much. "I didn't realize you thought so highly of me, Malfoy," he mutters quietly. Crabbe and Goyle's guffawing laughter slowly dies out as confusion flickers across their faces. "I've got my money on five minutes. If I'm lucky. And, well, I'm not really counting on that..."

Malfoy's signature sneer wavers as a hint of unease flashes in his eyes. But he doesn't get a chance to hear whatever he was going to say next because Hagrid walks out of his hut,

carefully balancing a teetering tower of massive crates containing Blast-Ended Skrewts. They're all quite horrified to hear that he believes they've started killing each other due to pent-up energy, and they're even more so when Hagrid suggests they walk them to help them burn off some of said energy.

"Take this thing for a walk?" Malfoy echoes with disgust. "And where, exactly, are we supposed to fix the leash? Around the sting, the blasting end, or the sucker?"

He barely stifles a snicker at that. It shouldn't be funny, but honestly, it kind of is. It isn't like Harry is looking forward to walking them either...

"Roun' the middle," Hagrid says while demonstrating on one of the Blast-Ended Skrewts. Er, yeh might want ter put on yer dragon-hide gloves, jus' as an extra precaution like. Harry, you come here an' help me with this big one..."

But Hagrid is not subtle, and it's clear that isn't the real reason why he's asking Harry to step to the side. He waits until the rest of the class has walked off with their skrewts, many of them struggling and cursing under their breaths as they barely avoid getting stung or singed, before saying, "So, yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion."

Harry shakes his head firmly. "Just an extra. Cedric is the school champion."

Hagrid looks just as anxious as he does. "No idea who put yeh in fer it, Harry?"

"You believe I didn't do it, then?" he whispers with a flood of gratitude. Maybe he's not completely alone in this after all. That hope is snuffed out quite quickly when he remembers that professors aren't allowed to help their champions, but Hagrid doesn't seem to notice the wobble in his relieved smile.

"Yeh say it wasn' you, an' I believe yeh. An' Dumbledore believes yer an' all..."

"I just wish I knew who did do it," he mutters bitterly.

Maybe Hagrid isn't quite as oblivious as he thought because he does not comment on the skrewts dragging several of his classmates along, instead looking down at him with a sad smile. "Ah, I don't know, Harry... A champion... Everythin' seems ter happen ter you, doesn't it?"

Yes, not half as oblivious as he thought. At the very least, he sees what no one else seems to. "Yeah..." he whispers. "Hagrid?"

"What is it, Harry?"

"I..." He's exhausted. He feels worn down to his very bones and is struggling to even get out of his bed in the morning. It doesn't feel like there's much point in it. The first task is rapidly approaching, and he's quite certain that, come the end of November, the person who entered his name will get their wish. He's just not strong enough. At least in previous years, he had his friends by his side and some idea of what he was getting himself into. This year? He has

no one and no idea what is coming. He's afraid. He's so afraid that the thought of refusing to participate at all, consequences be damned, is growing more and more tempting by the day.

"Harry?" Hagrid prods him gently, and the worry that furrows his brows makes Harry feel like the worst person on earth.

"It's nothing," he whispers with a shake of his head. His smile is a flimsy excuse of one that clearly does nothing to reassure Hagrid, but he doesn't have it in him to offer anything more. "Don't worry about it."

"... If yeh say so."

The next few days are some of Harry's worst that he's ever had at Hogwarts. This is even worse than second year. At least then, there were some people who believed he was innocent, and he had his friends back then. But now, almost everyone believes that he entered himself into this tournament. The hatred pouring in from all sides is threatening to drown him. Hermione has given up on getting him to talk to her, only pleading with him to make up with Ron if she bothers speaking to him at all. He refuses. Sirius still hasn't responded to his letter, Hedwig still refuses to come anywhere near him, Professor Trelawney is predicting his death with even more certainty than usual, and he does so badly in Charms that Professor Flitwick assigns him extra homework on top of it all. He's the only one outside of Neville to get any. And he has Double Potions this afternoon to top it all off, so the day can only get worse from here.

Being trapped in the dungeons with Snape and the Slytherins, all seeming determined to punish Harry as much as possible for daring to become champion, is almost the worst fate he can imagine. His skin crawls with unease, leaving him jittery and tense in a class that he really cannot afford to lose focus in. He's already suffered through one Double Potions since the announcement, and he cannot see today going any better. It might go even worse.

When he arrives at Snape's classroom just after lunch, it's to a sea of Slytherins wearing a large badge on the front of each of their robes. For a moment, he almost thinks that Hermione has somehow badgered them into wearing S.P.E.W. badges, but then he gets close enough to read them. 'Support Cedric Diggory— The Real Hogwarts Champion!'

"Like them, Potter?" Malfoy crows loudly as he approaches. "And this isn't all they do— Look!" He presses his badge into his chest, and in a flash of green, the words shift before their very eyes. 'Potter Stinks.'

The Slytherins howl with laughter as they all make their badges match, and he can't help it. He laughs too. It just seems so inconsequential —downright silly, really— compared to everything else going on right now. "Yeah, I do like them, actually. Mind if I have one?"

Malfoy gives him that strange look again, but in the end, he tosses a badge his way with a shrug. Harry proudly affixes it to his robe, though he does tap it again to make the text go back to 'Support Cedric Diggory— The Real Hogwarts Champion'. Maybe the Hufflepuffs will ease up a little if they see him wearing it. "Thanks, Malfoy."

"... Whatever, Potter."

The atmosphere in the classroom after that is... Strange. Hermione doesn't even hesitate before sitting down with Ron this time, and Harry is left to sit at a table alone. Snape's robes fan out behind him as he stalks into the room, and he levels Harry with a nasty glare. "Antidotes! You should all have prepared your recipes now. I want you to brew them carefully, and then, we will be selecting someone on whom to test one..."

Snape's eyes glitter with a sadistic sort of satisfaction. He can see how this is going to go already. Snape is going to poison him, and he's going to bungle his antidote because he can't focus on anything but the looming dread of the tournament these days. His hands never quite stop shaking. Snape is going to kill him.

He wonders if it would hurt less than whatever is waiting for him in this tournament. Maybe this is a good thing...

But before he can ponder on that thought for too long, there's a hesitant knock on the door. Colin Creevey edges into the room when Snape opens the door, shooting a starstruck smile in Harry's direction that makes him squirm in discomfort.

"Yes?" Snape asks impatiently.

"Please, sir, I'm supposed to take Harry Potter upstairs."

Snape stares down his hooked nose and levels Colin with a sneer that slowly wipes the eager smile off his face. He starts shuffling nervously. "Potter has another hour of Potions to complete," Snape refuses curtly. "He will come upstairs when this class is finished."

Colin flushes pink, but he squares his shoulders even as he stutters out, "Sir- Sir, Mr. Bagman wants him. All the champions have got to go. I think they want to take photographs..."

He can physically feel his will to live slowly drain from his body. Ron is going to be so insufferably smug about this -not to his face, but he'll still hear him- and the very thought of getting dragged around by some reporter or another for pictures makes him want to scream. He almost prefers getting poisoned.

"Very well, very well," Snape snaps with a glower. "Potter, leave your things here. I want you back down here later to test your antidote."

"Please, sir, he's got to take his things with him!" Colin squeaks nervously. "All the champions--"

"Very well!" Snape barks, and Harry shrinks beneath the murderous glare that pins him in place. His heartbeat quickens. Snape reminds him of all the worst parts of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia combined, and that comparison feels especially apt right now. He yells and looks for any excuse possible to hurt him, just like Uncle Vernon, and he always looks down his nose at Harry like he's something disgusting that he's stepped in, berating him with cruel words just like Aunt Petunia. He's also probably gonna be pretty happy when Harry dies in this thing. "Potter! Take your bag and get out of my sight!"

He practically sprints out of the classroom. His legs wobble as soon as he escapes the room, and Colin's eyes widen in alarm when Harry has to brace himself against the wall with a shaky breath. "Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah, just fine, Colin. Thanks for the save there. Pretty sure Snape is racing to off me before the tournament can."

"It's amazing, isn't it, Harry?" Colin says, a smile returning to his face as the two of them walked down the hall. "You being champion?"

"No," he says curtly, and he hates himself a bit for the way Colin's smile falters again, but he means it and isn't going to take it back. Maybe the rest of Gryffindor will finally get it through their thick skulls that he isn't happy about this if he shuts them down at every available opportunity. The bragging and gloating about someone trying to kill him is worse than the other houses hating him, he's decided, and he's really quite sick of it. It's only making everything else worse too.

The rest of their walk is silent, save for Colin's whispered, "Good luck," as he leaves Harry standing on the other side of the door separating him from the rest of the champions. For a moment, he seriously considers turning around and walking away. He might be trapped in this tournament, but an interview is hardly one of the tasks. It's not like they can force him to do this, can they? His magic won't be bound if he doesn't.

Nodding decisively, he turns around, but unfortunately for him, the door opens before he can make his escape. "Ah, there's our fourth champion!" Bagman smiles and grabs his arm, leading him into the room without a care in the world about how tense Harry is. He kind of wants to punch that smile right off his face, but he refrains. Barely. "Nothing to worry about! It's just the wand-weighting ceremony, and the rest of the judges will be here in just a moment."

"Wand-weighting ceremony?" he echoes nervously. Harry's never liked letting anyone else touch his wand, and that feeling has only grown stronger after the disaster at the World Quidditch Cup.

"We have to check that your wands are fully functional –no problems, you know– as they're your most important tool in the tasks ahead. The expert's upstairs now with Dumbledore. And then there's going to be a little photo shoot! This is Rita Skeeter," Bagman gestures to a shrewd-looking witch in magenta robes. Harry really doesn't like the gleam in her eyes. "She's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet."

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," Skeeter titters with a smile. Her eyes haven't left Harry's form for a second. "I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?" she asks Bagman as if Harry isn't standing right there. "The youngest champion, you know... To add a bit of color."

"Certainly!" Bagman agrees without hesitation, and he can feel his eyebrow start twitching. "That is– If Harry has no objection?"

"No."

“Excellent!” Bagman claps his hands together with a smile, and Skeeter stalks toward him like a house cat about to pounce on a particularly elusive mouse, all vindicated satisfaction and malice that make him take several swift steps back just before she can sink her claws into him.

“You misunderstand me,” he repeats, a bit louder this time. “No, I won’t do it.”

“Come dear, Harry,” Skeeter attempts to coax him, and he bristles further when she takes another step forward. “Our readers are positively dying to hear more about you.”

“I guess you’ll have to plan a bunch of funerals then,” he retorts. Fleur smothers a delicate laugh behind her hand, and even Viktor—who is looming in a corner by himself, as per usual—snorts quietly. “I said no.”

Bagman looks between Harry and Skeeter with a hopelessly confused expression. “Now, Harry, it’s truly no big—”

“E said no, Mr. Bagman.” Fleur practically floats across the room, standing close to him but refraining from reaching out this time. He’s immensely grateful for it. “Zat is zat. Unless you don’t want either of us to answer any questions at all...?”

“Now, now, there’s no need for that,” Skeeter chides them dismissively. “It is tradition! You wouldn’t leave our readers without an interview, would you? They want to know about their champions!”

“This isn’t a task,” he says firmly, pointing at the faintly glowing badge that is still pinned to his robes. “And Cedric is the Hogwarts champion. I’m being forced to participate in the tasks themselves, but the rest of it doesn’t fall under the magical contract, right, Mr. Bagman?”

“Er— Technically not, I suppose...?”

Harry levels Skeeter with a firm look and repeats, “I said no, and if you keep pushing it, then I will just leave. I don’t care what anyone thinks about it.”

Skeeter looks quite like she’s bitten into a sour lemon, but she backs off. Fleur smiles proudly at him, dipping her head in a regal nod as she murmurs, “Well ‘andled, ‘Arry.” She leads him over to where the champions are sitting, and he takes a seat between her and Cedric with a wobbly smile. Cedric’s eyes linger on his badge as a faint grin tugs at his lips.

“... You really don’t want this, do you?” Cedric whispers.

“What reason could I possibly have to enter this tournament?” It’s a bit snippy, but considering that Cedric refused to believe him the first time, he kind of deserves it. “Fame? I don’t want what I already have. Money? A thousand Galleons is... Really nothing to me. I’d probably just give it away. Glory? I have almost died every single year since I’ve been here. I would like that trend to stop, actually.”

“Huh... I guess when you put it like that...”

“You were being ridiculous,” Fleur sniffs derisively. “‘E looked like a stiff breeze could knock ‘im over. Zat is not zhe face of someone who entered willingly.”

Cedric rubs at the back of his neck with a nervous laugh. “I’m sorry, Harry. I’ll try to get the Hufflepuffs to back off. Where’d you get that badge, by the way? It’s an interesting piece of charmswork.”

Harry taps on his badge with a smile, snickering at the dumbfounded look he gets when the text shifts to ‘Potter Stinks’. “Malfoy was passing them out earlier. I bet he’d be willing to give you one.” He leaves the badge exactly like it is, crossing his arms with a defiant glare at the photographer’s defeated look. Harry is being dragged into this thing kicking and screaming, and he intends to make it as difficult for everyone around him as humanly possible.

The judges slowly trickle into the room, and Dumbledore is the last of them, followed by a familiar face that Harry hopes isn’t a sign of bad things to come. If Ollivander goes on that tangent about his wand again...

“May I introduce Ollivander?” Dumbledore says quite cheerily, though his eyes do linger on Harry’s robes for a touch longer than the rest of them. “He will be checking your wands to ensure that they are in good condition before the tournament.”

“Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?” Ollivander asks politely as he steps into the center of the room. Fleur answers him with a graceful nod, sweeping across the room before passing over her wand.

“Hm...” Ollivander twirls the wand between his fingers, and it emits a shower of pink and golden sparks. Harry wonders if that means Ollivander is compatible with Fleur’s wand or if it’s just a wandmaker thing. “Yes,” he murmurs quietly. “Nine and a half inches... Inflexible... Rosewood... And containing, dear me...”

“An ‘air from ze ‘ead of a veela,” Fleur answers with a pleasant smile. It’s a touch sharp around the edges. “One of my grandmuzzer’s.”

“Yes... Yes, I’ve never used veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes rather temperamental wands... However, to each his own, and if this suits you...”

Fleur’s smile grows even sharper, and Harry can’t help thinking that it wouldn’t look out of place in a shark’s mouth. “You’ll find I’m a razzier temperamental person. Zhe veela is strong in me.”

Ollivander runs his fingers up and down the wand, checking for any chips or cracks before he mutters, “Orchideous.” A bunch of flowers blossoms from the wand-tip, all pretty blues and purples that match Fleur’s uniform quite well. “Very well, very well, it’s in fine working order.” Ollivander passes both her wand and the flowers to Fleur. “Mr. Diggory, you next.”

Cedric stands up, casting a faint smile back at both Harry and Fleur before walking forward. “Ah, now this is one of mine, isn’t it?” Ollivander’s voice has far more enthusiasm than it did while he was holding Fleur’s wand. “Yes, I remember it well. Containing a single hair from

the tail of a particularly fine male unicorn... Must have been seventeen hands tall; he nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quarter inches... Ash... Pleasantly springy! It's in fine condition. You treat it regularly?"

"Polished it last night," Cedric answers with a grin.

Harry looks down at his own wand with a faint grimace. He can see fingerprints and smudges all over it, but in his defense, it's not like he knew he was supposed to polish it... He tries to discretely wipe it clean with his robe, but he only succeeds in sending a few golden sparks fluttering to the floor. Fleur gives him a reassuring look before whispering, "Scourgify." His shoulders sag with relief when his wand looks far better afterward, even though it still doesn't look nearly as clean as Cedric's. "Zere you are. It's not zhe best, but it's better zhan nothing, non? And I can show you 'ow to polish it later."

"Thanks, Fleur," he whispers with a wobbly, genuine smile. She's a lot nicer than he expected her to be.

"Of course! We champions must stick togezzer."

A stream of silver rings pours from Cedric's wand, and Ollivander nods with satisfaction before handing it back over to him. "Mr. Krum, if you please." Viktor looks almost as unhappy as Harry is to be here, though he's beginning to suspect that's just his general demeanor whenever he isn't on a broom. He slouches the entire way over to Ollivander, scowling as he holds out his wand. "Hmm... This is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I'm mistaken? A fine wandmaker, though the styling is never quite what I would have... However..."

Ollivander lifts the wand and inspects it closely, turning it this way and that in his hand. "Yes... Hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he questions Viktor, who merely answers with a nod. "Rather thicker than one usually sees... Quite rigid... Tend and a quarter inches... Avis!"

The thundering blast that echoes from Viktor's wand as birds fly out of the tip of it and straight out of a window makes Harry startle so badly that he nearly falls out of his chair. He flushes with embarrassment when he sees the sharp, calculating gleam in Skeeter's eyes as she jots something down. Fleur makes a point of leaning forward to better shield him from her view. "Are you alright?" she murmurs quietly. "You are quite jumpy, non?"

"A bit," he mutters with a wry chuckle. "More so now than usual."

"Good," Ollivander declares decisively. "Which just leaves... Mr. Potter."

It's a bit easier without quite so many eyes watching him, but he still feels a bit queasy as he walks up and hands over his wand. *'Don't say a word about Voldemort's wand. Don't you dare.'* Maybe, just maybe, if he thinks it hard enough, he can keep a bad situation from becoming even worse.

"Ah, yes..." Ollivander's pale eyes positively gleam with interest—even more so than they did with Cedric's wand—and that queasy feeling only intensifies. "Yes, yes, yes... How well I

remember.” Ollivander spends much longer inspecting Harry’s wand than he did with any of the others, but thankfully, that time is spent either muttering quietly to himself or not saying much of anything at all. A fountain of wine shoots out of Harry’s wand before Ollivander nods, passing it back over to him as he mutters, “Expecting great things indeed...”

Harry cuts him a sharp glare before he can say anything else, and a haunted look flashes across Ollivander’s face before he shakes his head slightly, returning Harry’s wand to him and stepping back to rejoin Dumbledore’s side. “Thank you all,” Dumbledore says with a smile. “You may go back to your lessons now. Or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as they are about to end—”

He’s so, so close to making it out of the door before they’re halted by the photographer. Harry sighs. Cedric laughs at the despondent look on his face, but at least it isn’t a mean laugh. He sounds genuinely amused by it.

“Photos, Dumbledore, photos!!” Bagman cries excitedly. “All the judges and champions! What do you think, Rita?”

“Er— Yes, let’s do those first,” Skeeter says distractedly. Her eyes are focused on Harry again. “And then perhaps some individual shots.”

The photographs took ages. Madame Maxime is so tall that she casts a shadow on whoever she stands behind, and the photographer couldn’t stand far enough back to get her completely in frame. In the end, they wind up standing around her as she sits. Krum seems as displeased to be in the spotlight as Harry is, skulking around the back of the group with what could generously be considered a grimace plastered on his face. They keep trying to get Harry to take off the button, but the most he is willing to do is tap it again to show a message of support for Cedric. The photographer keeps dragging Fleur to the front of the photos, but Skeeter keeps doing the same with Harry. He is firmly in the scowling instead of smiling territory toward the end of the group photos. Skeeter tries to force them to stay behind for individual pictures, but he does not like the gleam in her eyes and ignores her shout as he storms out of the room. Fleur’s tinkling laugh rings out behind him, and the photographer gapes quite dumbly as she follows him out of the room. Both Cedric and Viktor practically sprint after them.

“I zought it would never be over,” Fleur grumbles unhappily. “I am starving.”

“Are you sure it was a good idea to ditch them like that?” Cedric murmurs worriedly. “They’re just trying to do their jobs...”

“Vultures,” Viktor grunts firmly. “Vey are all vultures.”

“It’s probably better that they only have pictures of us together,” Harry murmurs with a scowl. “Did you see how Skeeter was looking at me? She was practically drooling. I didn’t want her to make the whole article about me. I’m the last person anyone should be focusing on here.”

“... Is that why you refused to take off the badge?” Cedric asks with a laugh. “She looked right pissed off about it.”

“Mostly. There’s also the fact that it pissed her off to consider...” Viktor snorts at that, looking quite amused.

The four of them enter the Great Hall together, and Harry grimaces at the sight of the Gryffindor table. He’s too drained to deal with their boisterous excitement and inevitable interrogation right now. His thoughts must be plainly visible on his face because Cedric pauses and asks, “Did you guys want to sit with me? The Hufflepuffs won’t mind, and it’s a good opportunity to convince them to lay off of you, Harry...”

“That sounds great, actually.” His smile is still a bit strained around the edges, but this is the lightest that Harry has felt ever since his name came out of the Goblet of Fire. “Thanks, Cedric.”

“I will join you, of course,” Fleur agrees with a nod. “Ow about you, Viktor?”

“... I don’t see why not.”

This whole situation is still absolutely awful, but... Maybe Harry won’t have to face these tasks quite as alone as he feared. There are no rules against the champions helping each other, after all.

Chapter End Notes

I love that the entirety of Draco and Harry's interactions right now are basically:

Draco: *Says something deliberately antagonistic that would usually get a rise out of Harry.*

Harry: *Backs down without a fight, laughs, and generally doesn't act like how he typically would*

Draco, internally and with great confusion: *'Why aren't you following the script, Potter? What is wrong with you?'*

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A letter is waiting for him when he gets back to his dorm room. It sits innocuously on top of his bed, and his heart pounds with fear at the realization that anyone could've opened it and seen the return letter from Sirius. He's never using one of the school owls again.

Harry,

I can't say everything I would like to in a letter. There's always the risk of an owl being intercepted. We need to talk face-to-face. Can you ensure that you are alone by the fire in Gryffindor Tower at one o'clock in the morning on the 22nd of November?

I know better than anyone else that you can look after yourself, and while you're around Dumbledore and Moody, I don't think anyone will be able to hurt you. However, someone seems to be having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very risky, especially right under Dumbledore's nose.

Be on the lookout, Harry. I still want to hear about anything unusual that happens. Let me know about the 22nd of November as soon as you can.

Sirius

The world feels a bit fuzzy around the edges. On one hand, he wants nothing more than to talk to Sirius and be reassured that everything will be okay, but on the other hand, it's such a huge risk to talk to him in Gryffindor Tower. There's bound to be someone else awake regardless of the hour. He casts a furtive glance around the room before collapsing on his bed with a sigh. "But what else am I supposed to do?" he murmurs. "I don't have any other ideas..." He startles when a familiar face suddenly pops up at his bedside, peering up at him with huge, green eyes. "Dobby...?"

An eager nod is his answer, and the house elf snaps his fingers before beginning to speak. "The great Harry Potter sir be looking for a private place to be making calls? Dobby can help!"

"Shh...!" he hisses quietly. "The others can't hear about this."

"Oh, they not be hearing, sir! I be casting a Muffling Charm first! The great Harry Potter sir's secrets be being too important to risk, I knows."

The tension lining his shoulders slowly melts out of them. "Thanks, Dobby. That was really clever of you." Dobby beams at the praise, offering a thin, bony hand as Harry gets to his feet. He should really probably get some sleep, but this is far from the first time he's spent a sleepless night wandering the castle, and it's certainly not going to be the last. "You said you had an idea...?"

“Oh, yes! You be needing the Come and Go Room, sir, otherwise known as the Room of Requirement! The room can be anything you needs it to be. I can be showing the great Harry Potter sir if he has his cloak...?”

A wide, eager grin splits his face. “I always have my cloak, Dobby.”

“Then I be leading the way!”

He’s relieved when Dobby slips underneath the cloak with him, grasping Harry’s hand as they walk in tandem. Despite being much smaller, Dobby seems to have no trouble keeping up with Harry’s pace, and, in fact, Harry finds himself struggling to keep up with the house elf rather than the other way around. It feels like they’re walking for ages. Down the spiralling staircase in Gryffindor Tower, through a maze of hallways, and up several staircases they go, avoiding a few trick steps that even Harry didn’t know about thanks to Dobby. They don’t stop moving until they’re standing in front of a peculiar portrait of a wizard trying to teach trolls ballet on the seventh floor, and Harry tilts his head in curiosity.

“The great Harry Potter sir only need be walking in front of the portrait three times while thinking of what he be needing. Be specific! If sir be needing a private place to speak to his dogfather, then he needs be making sure no one can finds him.”

He nods seriously. “Thank you, Dobby. I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, of course! It be the least I can be doing after the great Harry Potter sir freed him from his awful, nasty master. You be calling on Dobby if you ever needs anything, okay? There be no rules against house elves helping champions.”

His eyes go misty again, and he really needs to get a handle on this whole crying thing. “Thank you, Dobby,” he repeats very emphatically. “You’re a wonderful friend.” And the best friend he has now, come to think of it. Dobby’s eyes go very wide, and a pleased squeak escapes his throat as he flutters about.

“The great Harry Potter sir needs be testing the room now!” Dobby sounds downright embarrassed, barely pausing to say, “Dobby has many chores to be doing around Hogwarts, but he always be answering sir’s call,” before he pops away as silently as he came.

Harry paces back in forth in front of the tapestry, thinking over and over again, *‘I need a place to make a private floo call to Sirius Black. A place where no one else will be able to find me.’* An entrance appears on the wall opposite the tapestry, and he takes a cautious step into the room with a smile slowly spreading across his face.

The Room of Requirement is currently empty of anything beyond a fireplace and some floo powder on the mantel. The door shuts behind him the instant he walks through it, and he finds himself very glad that he hadn’t bothered to put away his school things yet when Dobby came to visit. He pulls out a parchment and quill and pens his response.

Sirius,

I can do you one better. On the 22nd of November, make a floo call to the Room of Requirement. One of my friends, a house elf named Dobby, gave me the suggestion, and it'll keep anyone from overhearing our conversation. I can be there at 1 am.

I can't use one of the school owls again. It left your letter sitting on my bed, and I'm lucky that no one else grabbed it. I won't risk it. I'll try to find a way to disguise Hedwig, but in the meantime, we'll have to take the risk of her being spotted over the risk of one of my dormmates finding out that we're talking.

I don't... Exactly have Ron to cover for me anymore. Or Hermione, for that matter. This whole tournament thing really sucks. At least the champions are being cool about it.

Be safe and don't get caught.

Harry

Maybe Hedwig won't be quite so angry with him if he sends her off with this letter. He decides to give it a go tomorrow morning; he really needs to get some rest if he isn't going to be dead on his feet during lessons tomorrow.

He's still a bit dead, but Hedwig does forgive him, so Harry has that going for him. He'll have to send her off to pick up more owl treats soon. He's already running low on them, and bribery is the best way to get back into Hedwig's good graces whenever he upsets her. This is the longest it's ever taken him to soothe her ire.

Classes are the same as ever, but at least the Hufflepuffs are talking to him again. Mostly because he still hasn't taken his badge off. It's especially fun to see the way Snape's face screws up whenever he sees it, but he can't make Harry take it off without forcing all of Slytherin to remove theirs too. It's immensely satisfying.

Meals have become far more relaxing too. Harry, Fleur, Cedric, and Viktor make a point of sitting with each other more often than not, and it's strange to think that sitting among a sea of black and yellow is becoming more familiar to him than red and gold. Everyone is so welcoming now that they aren't angry at Harry anymore, and it's easy to see how Hufflepuffs, in general, tend to have more friends both within and outside of their house. It's nice. Maybe he should have talked the hat into putting him in Hufflepuff instead...

On second thought, the Hufflepuffs may have been even more insufferable than the Gryffindors are being right now if the goblet had picked two champions from their house. It's probably for the best that he wound up where he is.

He tries his best not to think about the first task too much. There isn't much he can do in the way of preparing for something he knows nothing about, so beyond Fleur teaching him a few more advanced, defensive spells –specifically, the Shield Charm, Smokescreen Spell, and Exploding Charm with the promise to teach him the more powerful version of the latter once she's sure he can manage it safely– and helping him finally figure out the Summoning Charm that he's been struggling with in lessons, there isn't much to be done. It makes him more than a bit nervous.

Hey, he said that he's been trying not to think about it, not that he's been particularly successful.

Skeeter's article for the Daily Prophet certainly doesn't help matters. Despite his refusal to answer any of her questions, the entire article is about him. She's edited one of their photos to show only Harry's face, leaving out the badge that he refused to take off, and his displeased scowl takes up nearly the entire front page. Fleur and Viktor are only mentioned in the last line of what he does reas-their names are even misspelled- and he doesn't think Cedric is mentioned at all. He's proper furious about it, but maybe it's for the best that she didn't sink her claws into them too. This article is actually nauseating.

"I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me if they could see me now... Yes, sometimes at night I still cry about them, I'm not ashamed to admit it... I know nothing will hurt me during this tournament, because they're watching over me..."

Blech. Aside from being blatantly fabricated, it's so horrifically forced and unlike him at all. "Can I sue?" he murmurs with a furrowed brow, glancing up at Fleur with a hint of trepidation. She looks even more furious than he is, and he won't be surprised in the slightest if her copy of the Daily Prophet goes up in flames. Fleur is especially skilled with fire spells; that's a veela thing, apparently. "This feels like something I should probably sue for."

"You should," Cedric agrees with a stubborn set in his brow. "This is blatant libel, and if you let her get away with it once, then she'll just keep doing it. Skeeter wouldn't dare write this sort of thing about most people with your influence, but she's probably banking on the fact that you're a kid and won't know what to do to stop it. It's sick. I'll have to write my dad, see if he can lend you our barrister..."

Viktor nods. "Ve vill be vitnesses. Ve vere all there, and it will be hard for her to call you a liar if ve back you up."

The lump in his throat is really hard to swallow around, all of a sudden. "Thanks, you guys."

"Of course!" Fleur ruffles his hair with a fond smile, and even though he usually finds himself shying away from touch, he can't help leaning into it. "Zis is an outrage, and we will not let zem treat you like zis! You are only a child. You should not be part of zis tournament at all."

Having other people looking out for him once is... It's really nice. He could get used to it, he thinks.

It feels like the entire school is quoting the article at him, mostly the Slytherins, mocking him for Skeeter's blatant falsehoods that spilled across several pages. There's apparently a segment on how close Harry and Fleur –name still misspelled and primarily referred to as simply Beauxbaton's champion– have become since she arrived at Hogwarts too. It insinuates all sorts of things that really does make Fleur set the paper on fire when she hears about it. "Zat is absurd!" she snaps at one of the older Slytherins, and he's more than a bit pleased by how pale and uneasy their previously smug face gets. "'E reminds me of my little sister!"

That starts up a whole new round of mocking, but Harry can't say that it bothers him at all. Not with the warm, fuzzy feeling in his chest that comes with Fleur basically calling him her little brother. Or at least admitting that she treats him like one.

The closer it gets to the day of the first task, the quicker the days seem to pass by. Harry is getting increasingly anxious about it, and he's grateful that the Saturday beforehand is a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry won't have to sneak around this year, and though Cedric is going on a date with Cho, both Fleur and Viktor agree to go with him.

"I wonder how different it will be from Bulgaria..." Viktor murmurs. "There are far more restrictions here."

"Zat is true. But I've 'eard zey can get quite creative too! Zey keep 'aving to ban new things that someone creates to get around zhe bans..."

Honestly, he has no idea what they're talking about, but they seem to be enjoying themselves, so. At least, they are until they stumble across Rita Skeeter prowling around the village, likely hunting for new victims to interrogate about him.

Viktor and Fleur exchange amused looks. "Vant to go scare her?"

"Oh, I'd love nothing more."

His new friends are a little scary. It's the coolest. It also keeps the instinctive panic from settling in when Skeeter's sharp eyes lock onto him in the distance, rushing toward their group of three with her photographer right by her side. Harry pulls out the piece of parchment that Cedric's barrister drew up for him, and he hands it to her before she can utter a word.

"How wonderful to see you again, Harry!" Skeeter simpers. "Is this for me? I knew you'd love that article—" her voice abruptly cuts off when she opens the roll of parchment, face paling as her smile fades into a grimace.

"It's a cease and desist," Harry says, more for the sake of the crowd gathering around them than Skeeter herself. She knows what it is. Cedric's barrister recommended that he give her this somewhere public, somewhere that she can't deny it was given to her, so this meeting is pretty fortunate, actually. Giving her a chance to back down will make him look more reasonable and mature than if he went after her for a single article, and it will also make anything she writes about him afterward subject to far more scrutiny. "If you write another blatantly fabricated article like that, then I will sue you for libel."

The murmuring around them fades into mere whispers as Skeeter stammers, "I- I have no idea what you are insinuating! I tell only the truth!"

"Vhat a funny thing to say," Viktor deadpans. "Since ve vere with Harry the entire time, and he never said any of those things."

Fleur crosses her arms with a fierce scowl. "And 'Arry is a child. You cannot interview 'im without 'is magical guardian's consent, even if 'e 'ad given his own. Which 'e didn't."

Magical guardian? What? What does that mean? “Oh, but his magical guardian did agree,” Skeeter says with a predatory glint in her eyes. “Dumbledore is hardly going to keep me from interviewing the champions.”

His train of thought abruptly screeches to a halt. What? Dumbledore is his magical guardian? Then why...? Why has he been forcing him to go back to the Dursleys? Even if there are protections on the Dursleys' house or whatever, he hardly imagines that he's any safer beneath those than he'd be by Dumbledore's side. He tries not to let the shock show on his face, but he's probably not doing a very good job of it. “I still refused,” he whispers with a shaky voice. “Don't do it again.”

It's pretty hard for him to enjoy shopping around in Hogsmeade after that.

Fleur and Viktor do their best to cheer him up, though, and they eventually make their way to the Three Broomsticks. He should probably feel a bit childish for sipping on his Butterbeer while the two of them drank Firewhisky, but they don't make it weird at all.

“Ow are you feeling about zhe task, ‘Arry?” Fleur can't quite mask the concern in her voice.

“Really nervous,” he admits. “I'd feel better if I had some idea of what I was getting into, but... There's nothing for it, I guess.”

“Ve can go over some curses and jinxes later?” Viktor offers, though it sounds more like a question than a suggestion. “Defensive spells vill be quite helpful, but ve don't know if ve'll have to fight.”

“That would be really awesome,” he agrees with a smile. “Are you sure? I feel kinda bad getting so much help from you guys...”

“I am sure.”

“Zhis tournament is supposed to be about improving international relations.” Fleur's smile is nothing short of mischievous. “Zey cannot stop us from ‘elping each other without looking bad. I want to win, yes, but I want us all to live even more.”

“You've got a good head on your shoulders, girl.” Harry nearly jumps out of his skin at the sudden appearance of Moody. Hagrid isn't far behind him, holding a tankard as large as Harry's head in his hand and giving them all a friendly wave. “It'll serve you well. Though you could stand to be a bit more aware, Harry...”

His cheeks flush with embarrassment. “I'm not really at my best right now.” That feels like the understatement of the century, but it's as much as he's willing to say. Moody levels him with a contemplative look before falling into an easy conversation with Fleur, eyeing Viktor warily from the corner of his eye.

Hagrid leans down, trying and failing to be subtle, and murmurs, “Harry, meet me by me cabin at midnight. Bring yer cloak.” He nods in answer, and Hagrid's beaming smile as he and Moody leave them be has a smile twitching on Harry's lips.

He should have known that a few rules wouldn't stop Hagrid from helping him.

"You zhink 'e is going to tell you what zhe task is?" Fleur asks with a contemplative hum.

"Probably," he admits sheepishly. "I'll tell you guys tomorrow?"

Viktor nods in easy agreement. "Thank you. It will be easier to train you if ve know what ve're doing."

"You should probably take a nap," Fleur murmurs with a fond smile. "Sounds like you won't be getting much sleep tonight."

He scrunches up his nose at that, but she's right. They end up heading back to the castle shortly after they finish their drinks, and he does take that nap, too anxious to do much of anything else. His sleep is fitful, but he really does need it when he's going to be floo calling Sirius right after meeting with Hagrid. He'll probably be cutting it pretty close...

Harry slips beneath his Invisibility Cloak and out of the Gryffindor common rooms, and he's lucky that the Fat Lady is fast asleep. She would have questioned why her portrait opened with no visible reason to do so. He creeps through the castle, walking faster than is probably wise and stumbling over his feet a few times in the process. But he somehow manages to make it outside without running into anyone, and he's steadily making his way toward the flickering lights of Hagrid's cabin as his heart pounds in his chest. The Beauxbatons carriage is lit up too, and he can hear Madame Maxime's voice through it. He knocks on Hagrid's door very quietly, casting a wary glance back.

"You there, Harry?" Hagrid asks with a whisper, looking around furtively.

"Yeah." Harry slips through the door and pulls his cloak off his head. The rest of him is still invisible, and he'll be able to duck back under it quickly if Madame Maxime comes this way. "What's up?" He really hopes that this is about the first task and not something else. He doesn't know if he has it in him to deal with another three-headed dog or the Blast-Ended Skrewts laying eggs or something right now.

"Got summat ter show yeh. Come with me, keep quiet, an' keep yerself covered with that cloak. We won't take Fang, he won't like it..."

"Okay," he agrees easily enough, slipping back underneath his cloak. "But I can't stay long. I need to be back up at the castle by one o'clock—" But Hagrid isn't listening. He's already walking outside, so Harry heaves a quiet sigh and follows. He's quite surprised to be led straight to the Beauxbatons carriage. He keeps silent as Hagrid knocks three times on the door, wondering what on earth is going on here but knowing better than to ask. He'll find out soon enough.

Madame Maxime opens the door, and she smiles when she sees Hagrid.

"Ah, 'Agrid... It is time?"

“Bong-sewer,” Hagrid absolutely butchers as he beams at her and holds out his hand, helping her down the golden steps. Madame Maxime doesn’t seem to take any offense, closing the door behind her and accepting his offered arm as he leads the three of them into the Forbidden Forest.

“Wair is it that you are taking me, ‘Agrid?” At least he isn’t the only one in the dark here.

“Yeh’ll enjoy this,” Hagrid says gruffly. “Worth seein’, trust me. Only– Don’t go tellin’ anyone I showed yeh, right? Yer not s’posed ter know.” Ah, so this really is about the first task. Looks like Fleur is probably going to find out without him telling her. He still plans on telling all three of them anyway, just in case.

“Of course not,” Madame Maxime lies quite convincingly, fluttering her eyelashes. Hagrid seems quite pleased. Harry has to practically jog to keep up with their far larger strides, and he nearly falls over when he hears men shouting up ahead followed by an ear-splitting roar. That... Does not sound good.

Harry swallows harshly before continuing forward, peering around Hagrid and Madame Maxime with no small amount of trepidation. He freezes in place at the sight before him. Dragons. Four fully-grown, huge dragons are rearing up on their hind legs and spitting goutts of fire into the air as they make their displeasure known. Four dragons. Four champions. That cannot be a coincidence.

He feels sick. He’s going to die. Oh, what a horrible way to go...

There are at least thirty wizards, seven or eight per dragon, attempting to wrangle them into submission, and they are struggling. It doesn’t exactly inspire much confidence in his chances.

“Keep back there, Hagrid! They can shoot fire at a range of twenty feet, you know?! I’ve seen this Horntail do forty!”

“Is’n it beautiful?” Hagrid murmurs softly. Harry isn’t sure if he’s talking to himself, Madame Maxime, or Harry, but either way, he disagrees. He disagrees very strongly. They are terrifying, and he is going to die a brutal, agonizing death in front of the entire school. He’s not going to last a minute against one of these things–

“It’s no good! Stunning Spells on the count of three!”

They all shout “Stupefy!” in unison, and it takes a long time for even that many stunning spells to take effect. The dragons teeter and stumble before slowly collapsing, and the wizards rush forward to tighten their chains and fasten them to iron pegs that they send deep underground, tethering the dragons to the earth.

“Wan’ a closer look?” Hagrid asks Madame Maxime, clearly excited and not even waiting for an answer before he leads her forward. Harry recognizes the wizard that called out to Hagrid as Charlie, Ron’s brother, and suddenly his comment about them seeing him sooner than expected makes an awful lot of sense.

Oh, he should've figured this out ages ago. He feels so stupid.

"Alright, Hagrid?" Charlie pants as he heads over for a talk. "They should be alright now. We put them out with a Sleeping Draught on the way here, thought it would be better for them to wake up in the dark and the quiet, but, like you saw, they weren't happy. Not happy at all—"

"What breeds you got here, Charlie?" Hagrid's eyes are locked onto the huge, black dragon that looks the most like a lizard of all the dragons here. Its piercing, yellow eye is only just cracked open despite the Stunning Spells that it's currently under. Truthfully, it probably would be a bit beautiful if Harry wasn't staring his imminent death in the face.

"This is a Hungarian Horntail. There's a Common Welsh Green over there, the smaller one. That blue-gray one is a Swedish Short-Snout, and the red one is a Chinese Fireball." Charlie looks around as Madame Maxime strolls forward, studying the petrified dragons with sharp eyes. Harry is still frozen stiff. It's hard to breathe.

"I didn't know you were bringing her, Hagrid," Charlie says disapprovingly as he glances in Madame Maxime's direction. The champions aren't supposed to know what's coming. She's bound to tell her student, isn't she?"

"Jus' thought she'd like ter see 'em." Hagrid shrugs, still gazing at the stunned dragons with nothing short of reverence.

"Really romantic date, Hagrid," Charlie teases with a shake of his head.

"Four... So it's one fer each o' the champions, is it? What've they gotta do, fight 'em?" Bless Hagrid for asking questions that he really needs to know the answers to. Even if part of him almost wishes he didn't know anything at all.

"Just get past them, I think. We'll be on hand if it gets nasty, Extinguishing Spells at the ready. They wanted nesting mothers. I don't know why, but I'll tell you this: I don't envy the one who gets the Horntail. Vicious thing. Her back end is as dangerous as her front, look."

The Horntail has long, bronze spikes all the way up her tail. They look wickedly sharp, and Harry wonders, more than a bit morbidly, if being killed by spikes would hurt more or less than the fire.

Five of Charlie's coworkers march toward the Hungarian Horntail, carrying a clutch of gigantic, granite-gray eggs between them in a blanket that they settle beneath her while she still can't move. Hagrid lets out a noise of pure longing that has Charlie leveling him with a sharp look. "I've got them counted, Hagrid." Then, far more gently, "How is Harry?"

"Fine," Hagrid murmurs. He still hasn't looked away from the eggs.

"Just hope he's still fine after he's faced this lot. I didn't dare tell Mum what he's got to do for the first task; she's already having kittens about him..."

Harry stiffly turns around, not wanting to hear another word of this. Dragons. Even just having to get past one is... *'Well,'* he thinks. *'At least I'll get to talk to Sirius one more time*

before I die.'

He waits until he gets just outside of the Forbidden Forest before he whispers, "Dobby?"

Dobby appears before him in an instant. "The great Harry Potter sir be calling Dobby?"

"Can you take me to the Come and Go room? I don't want to risk missing Sirius." It would take him forever to get up to the seventh floor from out here...

"I can be taking you to the hallway!" Dobby agrees with a rapid nod. "I just be needing your hand." Harry allows his fingers to slip out from beneath his cloak, holding onto it tightly with his other hand as Dobby's hand wraps around his. There's a brief twisting sensation that makes him gag before they're suddenly right in front of the tapestry. "Is you being okay?"

"I'm fine," he croaks faintly. "I already wasn't feeling very well. Thank you, Dobby. I really appreciate it."

"Of course! I be doing anything for the great Harry Potter sir. He need only be asking." Dobby's beaming smile makes him feel the tiniest bit lighter before the house elf disappears, and Harry starts pacing back and forth immediately. He doesn't have time to linger around out here, no matter how awful he feels.

'I need a place to make a private floo call to Sirius Black. A place where no one else will be able to find me. I need a place to make a private floo call to Sirius Black. A place where no one else will be able to find me.' He has to focus extra hard on what he wants this time. His mind is swirling with so much panic and fear that he's afraid of what might happen if he lets his mind wander for even a second.

He breathes out a sigh of relief when he finds himself in the same room as last time. Just in time, too. The fireplace crackles and flares green as Sirius's head appears in the flames.

"Huh. I don't think we ever found this room. Good job, pup!"

Just the sound of Sirius's voice has tears welling up in his eyes. "I didn't find it," he murmurs. "One of my friends showed it to me. How're you?"

"Forget me, how're you doing, pup?"

"I'm—" Harry chokes on a sob when he tries to say 'fine'. He isn't. Not even remotely. "I'm so scared, Sirius...!" His godfather's eyes widen with alarm. "Only the other champions believe I didn't enter myself into the tournament, and I can't walk down the hall without getting sneered at by someone. Skeeter wrote those awful lies about me, and even after giving her a cease and desist, I know she's gonna do it again. I could just see it in her eyes. She's just gonna try harder to be close enough to the truth that I can't sue her for it. Ron... Ron didn't believe me. About the tournament. He was mad. He was jealous, can you believe that?!" He laughs, and he knows that he sounds more than a bit hysterical. He is hysterical. "I'm going to fucking die, and he's jealous! Hermione thinks I'm being ridiculous for not trailing after him and sucking up to him, like I should be sorry for being thrown into this mess, and now she's not talking to me either! Ron seems annoyed that she keeps trying to make him apologize too, so I don't know why she's still trying..."

He's not sure when his hand drifted into his hair or when he started pulling on it, but it does make him feel the tiniest bit better. "And now Hagrid just showed me that the first task is dragons, Sirius! Dragons!! I'm a goner! I'm gonna get eaten, or burned alive, or skewered, or..."

Sirius is watching him with open concern, unable to hide his worry despite the deadened, haunted look that still lingers in his eyes despite looking so much healthier than when he saw him last. He keeps his voice carefully gentle as he says, "Dragons we can deal with, Harry, but we'll get to that in a minute. I haven't got long here. I've broken into someone's house to use the floo, and they could be back any minute... There's something that I need to warn you about."

Dread crawls up his throat and threatens to choke him. What could possibly be worse than dragons? "What?" he croaks.

"Karkaroff. Harry, he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don't you?"

"Yes. He... What?" He doesn't really seem like a Death Eater to Harry –far too nervous and jittery– but then again, considering Pettigrew...

"He was caught. He was in Azkaban with me, but he got released." And how on earth is that fair? Sirius is still on the run despite being innocent, and they just... Let an actual Death Eater walk free? One with the mark, presumably. He wonders if they ever even bothered to check Sirius for one before throwing him in Azkaban. "I'd bet everything that's why Dumbledore wants an Auror at Hogwarts this year, to keep an eye on him. Moody caught Karkaroff. He was the one to put him in Azkaban in the first place."

"Karkaroff got released?" he repeats slowly. "Why?"

"He made a deal with the Ministry of Magic," Sirius says bitterly, clearly just as unhappy about it as Harry is. "He said he'd seen the error of his ways, and then he started naming names... He put a lot of other people into Azkaban in his place. He's not very popular there, I can tell you." Well, that explains the nervousness. "And since he got out, from what I can tell, he's been teaching the Dark Arts to every student who passes through that school of his. So watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well."

"Hey!" he barks sharply. Sirius looks pretty startled by it. "Viktor is my friend. He's not like that. He's helping me prepare for the task, and–"

"I'm just saying to be careful, Harry," Sirius groans. "And to maybe consider that he doesn't have your best interests in mind." He will not. Something in the stubborn set of his brows must have given him away, because Sirius just shakes his head before saying, "It's pretty likely that Karkaroff put your name in the goblet."

"Well, if he did, then he must be a really good actor. He seemed absolutely furious about it. And it still doesn't have anything to do with Viktor."

"We already know that he's a good actor. He never would've gotten out of Azkaban otherwise. Now, I've been reading the Daily Prophet and–"

“You and everyone else in the world,” he mutters bitterly.

“And,” Sirius continues with a quiet laugh. “I’ve been reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman’s article last month. Moody was attacked the night before he started Hogwarts. I know she says it was another false alarm, but I don’t think so, somehow. I think someone was trying to stop him from getting to Hogwarts. I think that someone knew their job would be a lot more difficult if he did. And no one’s going to look into it too closely; Mad-Eye’s heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn’t mean he can’t still spot the real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Ministry ever had.”

“So... What, you think Karkaroff is trying to kill me? Even if he did put my name in, the task is more important right now. It doesn’t really matter that he wants me dead if a dragon flambés me for him! And it’s not like he’s going to go out of his way to kill me when this tournament will do the job just fine.”

“I’ve been hearing some very strange things,” Sirius says as if he’s not listening to him at all. Maybe he’s not. Harry is starting to get very frustrated. “The Death Eaters seem a bit more active than usual lately. They showed themselves at the Quidditch World Cup, didn’t they? Someone had to set off the Dark Mark... And then— Did you hear about the Ministry of Magic witch that went missing?”

“Bertha Jorkins?”

“Exactly! She disappeared in Albania, and that’s definitely where Voldemort was rumored to be last... And she would have known that the Triwizard Tournament was coming up, wouldn’t she?”

This really feels like grasping at straws to Harry, and he feels a bit awful for not caring one bit about any of it. He’s too freaked out by the dragons. They need to get back to the topic at hand, especially if Sirius doesn’t have much time. “Yeah, but... It’s not very likely that she would’ve walked right into Voldemort, is it? The dragons, Sirius—”

“Listen, I knew Bertha Jorkins.” He is going to cry. Again. “She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years above your dad and me, and she was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It’s not a good combination, Harry. I’d say she’d be very easy to lure into a trap.”

“Okay, so maybe Voldemort found out about the tournament through her,” he says, mostly just to placate him. “That still won’t help me survive it, so if we could please focus on the dragons—!!”

“Right, the dragons,” Sirius says, speaking very quickly now and glancing behind him. That cannot be good. “Now, Harry, don’t be tempted to try a Stunning Spell. Dragons are strong and too magically powerful to be affected by a single Stunner; you need about half a dozen wizards to overcome a dragon—”

“Yes, I know!! I just saw!! Just tell me what to do, Sirius!!”

“But you can do it alone. There is a way, and a simple spell’s all you need. Just—” Sirius jerks back, and Harry barely has the chance to register him shifting back to Padfoot before his face

disappears from the fire. He sits and stares at the fireplace for several long moments, dragging his hand down his face when it becomes clear that Sirius isn't coming back.

"I guess they came home..." he murmurs. "I hope he got out okay..." Because Harry isn't going to. He is going to die on Tuesday. Even if the others try to help him, there's no way that he can learn anything that will help him get past a dragon in just a couple of days. There's just this... Numb sort of acceptance of that by now. Even if he manages to summon the Invisibility Cloak, the dragon will still know he's there, and she'll probably be able to smell him. Mrs. Norris can certainly sense that he's around, even if she can't see him, and she's not half as magical as a dragon. There's just... Nothing he can do. He's going to die.

Harry isn't sure where his feet are taking him, but it's not toward Gryffindor Tower. He's holding onto the Invisibility Cloak, but he doesn't bother putting it on either. Even if he is caught, what does it matter? He's not going to live long enough to serve detention for it anyway. He just... Walks. Walks and walks until he finds himself climbing a different spiral staircase, emerging at the very top of the tower as a cool breeze blows across his face.

He slowly makes his way over to the edge of the Astronomy Tower, sitting down and dangling his feet over the ledge as he stares up at the stars. He traces several constellations with his finger before spotting Sirius, the Dog Star, and pausing as his vision blurs with tears. He's going to die. He's never going to get to know what it's like to live with Sirius, to live with someone who actually cares about him. He's never going to get to know what it feels like to kiss someone, to love someone so much that just being apart from them makes his chest ache.

Harry Potter is fourteen years old, and he's going to die on Tuesday. He's going to die horribly and brutally in front of the whole school, in front of his friends, and Mrs. Weasley is going to be so upset...

'But it doesn't have to be like that,' that quiet voice in the back of his head whispers. It's a strangely familiar voice, but he can't quite place why that is. It's a very young voice, though, even younger than him. *'They don't have to watch you die.'*

His gaze slowly shifts down. He is... Very high up. It's even later—or earlier, he supposes—than he thought it was, but the sun still hasn't risen quite yet. It'll be a while before everyone is awake, especially since it's Sunday. Would... Would this be so bad? Falling doesn't sound anywhere near as painful as whatever will happen to him if he tries to get past a dragon. It's just like flying, isn't it? One last dive for the snitch before he can finally rest. No more fear, no more pain, no more fighting...

He scoots even closer to the edge. His heart is pounding, but his mind is utterly calm. This is the best way, isn't it? For everyone? He's going to die anyway, so what does it really matter? At least this way, he can choose how.

Trembling, calloused fingers grip onto the cool stone beneath him as he leans forward.

"Oi, are you stupid?! Get away from the edge, Potter!" He startles violently at the sudden shout behind him. He doesn't fall off the tower, but it's a near thing. Harry glances back, and

he's surprised to see Malfoy standing there, wide-eyed, pale, and trembling just as badly as Harry is.

"I'm surprised you didn't take the chance to push me off it, Malfoy. No one would have suspected you." Harry chuckles. It's a rueful, bitter thing that burns the back of his throat. "Don't look so worried. I'm not going to jump." Not with an audience, anyway.

"You could still fall, you bloody idiot! Of all the reckless—!"

"Would that be such a terrible thing...?" he whispers. He may as well have shouted it for how deafening the silence that follows it is.

"Would it— Merlin, Potter, what is wrong with you?" There's a sneer on Malfoy's face, and it's clearly meant to sound derisive, but... He looks worried. He sounds worried. He's shaking like a leaf, taking an anxious step forward as his hand twitches like he wants to reach out for Harry.

"I'm going to die anyway," he says simply, shrugging as he glances back down. He can hear Malfoy scrabble forward, and that's the only reason he doesn't flinch when he gets dragged back a few inches. That trembling hand hasn't let go of his robes. "This tournament is going to kill me. I'd rather not make a spectacle of it, I think."

"I don't think there could be a much bigger spectacle than the bloody Boy-Who-Lived throwing himself off the Astronomy Tower."

"Maybe," he agrees easily enough. "But I won't be alive to care, so."

"Just— Just, why?" Malfoy whispers. "I was just messing with you. About the tournament. Don't— Don't do this."

"Oh, I know. But I wasn't. The first task is dragons, you know?" He's not sure how it's possible for Malfoy to get any paler, but he manages it. He looks as sick as Harry feels. "So... I'm going to die. Very painfully. In front of everyone. Surely you can see why I'd consider going for one last dive instead."

"I... Merlin. Merlin," Malfoy whispers faintly. He doesn't even look vaguely reassured when Harry stands up, rolling his shoulders and walking away from the edge. "Do you... Do you know what kinds? I know a lot about dragons, maybe we can—"

"Um... A Common Welsh Green, Swedish Short-Snout, Chinese Fireball, and a Hungarian Horntail," he recalls, mentally ticking off the list as he went down it. "Oh, and uh, they're all nesting mothers."

"... What?" Malfoy deadpans. "You have got to be kidding me. I thought they wanted fewer deaths this time. Are they out of their minds?"

"Apparently!" he hisses. "I don't know how the others are going to manage this. Me? I'm just dead."

"I'd say you should try to rig it somehow to get the Welsh Green, but..."

“I’m not even supposed to know about it. And knowing my luck, I’m going to get the Horntail anyway.”

Malfoy grimaces. “Probably. Merlin, what a mess. Just... Let’s get off this tower. I’ll figure something out, and you’ve got the other champions to help you, right? You guys seem pretty close.”

And oh. He feels awful now. Even if he knows that Madame Maxime is probably going to tell Fleur about the dragons, he really almost threw himself off the Astronomy Tower without passing that information along. He’s a horrible friend. “... Okay.”

Malfoy breathes a quiet sigh of relief, waiting until Harry starts making his way back down the staircase before following him. If he had done this yesterday, then Harry would think that he’s trying to stab him in the back or push him down the stairs. But he’s doing it today, and now he knows that Malfoy is making absolutely sure that Harry does not stay up on that rooftop.

He’s being... Really nice, actually, in his own way. He just hopes that the whole school doesn’t find out about his little episode. That would be embarrassing.

“... Be careful, Potter. I’ll pass whatever I find along through Krum. He’ll listen if I tell him it’s to help you, and he’s not likely to go spreading it around either.”

“I will. Thanks, Malfoy.”

“Don’t mention it. Seriously, don’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, I love this chapter. That last scene is one of the first ones I planned for this fic, and I am so excited that I finally got to write it. Things aren't just... Instantly fine between Harry and Draco, of course, but Draco got rather thoroughly shocked out of his pureblood mask and Harry is being very... C'est la vie at the moment, so he's not really hiding anything from him. Does not see a point in doing that when he's so thoroughly convinced that he's going to die anyway.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I am just blazing through these chapters something fierce. I had a lot of fun with this, and I hope you all enjoy the first task! The buildup to Drarry begins in earnest next chapter, so look forward to that >:3 I certainly am.

He drags the other champions off to the side as soon as they've finished eating breakfast. Both Fleur and Viktor look exceptionally nervous –a lingering hint of dread in their eyes that they're trying and failing to hide from him– but Cedric doesn't seem to have any idea about what's going on.

“Dragons, the task is dragons,” he hisses quietly once he's certain they're all out of earshot. “What are we gonna do?”

Cedric pales. “... Dragons?”

Fleur has a very grave expression as she nods. “Yes. Zere are four different kinds, one for each of us. Zhe Welsh Green, Fireball, Short-Snout, and ‘Orntail, non?” She looks to Harry with a questioning hum, and he nods. “Zhank you. Madame Maxime zhought so, but she wasn't sure.”

“Karkaroff didn't know that much,” Viktor grumbles. “But he vas sneaking around, so vat can I expect? Ve make a plan for each, then? Or a plan for each of us that ve can change depending on the dragon?”

Cedric seems to have regained his cool a bit, heaving out a sigh as he says, “Probably a plan for each of us that we can change if needed. It'll take our individual abilities into account better, and that'll make it more likely for all of us to make it out of this.”

The four of them head out onto the castle grounds, and Harry tries very hard not to look toward the Astronomy Tower. “I vas thinking the Conjunctivitis Curse,” Viktor muses idly as they sit down beneath a great, towering pine tree. “Dragons are very resistant to spells, but their eyes are vulnerable.”

Harry grimaces faintly at that. “I wouldn't. They're all nesting mothers, so attacking them in any way is just going to get you killed. And might even end up crushing some eggs. Besides, they're meant to be obstacles, not opponents. There's something else involved.”

“They're vhat?” Viktor repeats, sounding eerily similar to Malfoy. “That is... So stupid. I cannot even begin to–” he takes a deep breath, sighs, and mutters, “I vill come up with something else.”

“Well, we could always fly?” Cedric suggests hesitantly. “I know three of us are pretty good fliers, but we’re only allowed to come with our wands...”

“The Summoning Charm!” Harry cries out with a smile. He’s suddenly very glad that he was forced to struggle with it for so long, or else he may not have thought of it. “We could always place our brooms nearby, and then summon them to us when the task starts? It’s not against the rules. Technically.”

It’s a pretty good idea. It’d make for a good show too, but... Honestly, Harry isn’t sure he trusts himself high up in the air right now. It’s a little too tempting a thought to just... Fall for him to be completely comfortable with it.

“I’m not a vairy good flier, but I was zhinking zat I could ‘ypnotise them,” Fleur murmurs. “I ‘ave enough veela in me for zat, and I’m pretty fire-resistant too. I should be fine. Do you zhink you’ll be alright to fly, ‘Arry?”

“... Honestly? No. I’d feel better if Cedric borrowed my Firebolt instead. I know you like playing on the school Cleansweeps to be fair and all, but you’ll need every advantage you can get out there. And Viktor already has a Firebolt, so...”

“But vhat about you?” Viktor asks with a concerned furrow in his brows. “Vhat vill you do?”

“... How similar do you think Parseltongue and the dragons’ language are?” he muses with narrowed eyes. He has no real reason to believe that dragons can understand parseltongue. Norberta never spoke a word to him, but she was newly hatched. The dragons that just arrived for the task are, understandably, very upset. Their roars didn’t sound like anything but roars to his ears, but it’s very possible they weren’t meant to. They could have been screaming their fury to the world without any real meaning beyond that.

“Huh...” Cedric blinks, considers that, and tilts his head to the side. “That’s a really good question, actually. I have to imagine that they at least share some similarities...”

“You speak Parseltongue, ‘Arry?” Fleur asks with twinkling eyes. “Ow delightful! It is a vairy rare gift.”

“I do,” he confirms sheepishly, feeling rather surprised that she’s so pleased by it. Maybe the hatred for Parselmouths is just a British thing? That would make sense, what with the whole Voldemort situation.

“Draconic and Parseltongue share roots, but they are not the same,” Viktor murmurs. “She vill likely understand you, but you vill have no guarantee she vill listen. And some dragons are closer to serpents than others. You would be better off with the Fireball or Horntail.”

“Well, that’s only my first plan anyway... I’m thinking that I’ll phone in a friend.” Three blankly confused stares are the only thing that greets him, and he laughs as he explains, “We have to go into the first task with just our wand, but just like there’s no rule against summoning things afterward, there’s no rule against asking for help either, is there? As long as I’m the only wizard involved...”

Cedric's eyes widen in surprise. "Oh, that's so clever! You're going to ask a house elf, aren't you? I can't imagine too many would be terribly excited to be anywhere near a dragon, though..."

"Dobby?" He doesn't even have the time to blink before the house elf is by his side, rocking back and forth on his feet in clear excitement.

"The great Harry Potter sir be needing something?"

"Hey, Dobby!" He grins, patting the grass next to him and smiling even wider when Dobby takes a seat. "I have a question for you. Remember when you said there was no rule against house elves helping the champions?"

"Yes, I be remembering! Does the great Harry Potter sir be needing Dobby's help?"

"Only if you want to," he reassures him. "You can say no; I'll figure something else out. And you can just call me Harry, you know? We're friends."

Dobby's smile grows even wider. "I can be helping! Anything for the great— For my greatest friend Harry?" Dobby asks hesitantly, and he can't even begin to hide how pleased he is by it.

"Yeah, that works," he says with a warm laugh. "But seriously, you can say no. The first task is dragons, and we're supposed to get past them or something? I figured you could always just pop me past like you did before..." Honestly, he feels ridiculous for not thinking of that sooner. He was very overwhelmed, sure, and definitely not thinking clearly, but it's still more than a bit embarrassing.

"I can be doing that! You just be asking for Dobby when you needs him. I is being there. I is not caring if Winky calls me a bad elf for being away from the kitchen because I am a free elf, and my greatest friend Harry is being the one who freed me from my awful, no-good master. You be asking for anything, and I will say yes."

"Just remember that you can say no, okay?" he whispers quietly, feeling a bit guilty now. He's not trying to take advantage of Dobby, but it kind of feels like he is anyway. "You're a free elf. That means you don't have to listen to anyone, not even me."

"I be knowing that, Harry." Dobby pats his hand with a smile, standing up and brushing a few stray strands of grass off of his pillowcase. It's stained a faint green around the edges. "But I be thanking you for saying it anyway." He pops away with a barely audible gust of wind, and Harry leans back with a relieved sigh.

"That's me covered, then. Should we talk about the differences between the dragons now?" Fleur is staring at him like he's something wondrous, Cedric has a massive smile on his face, and Viktor just looks quietly confused. He's not quite sure what that's all about.

Viktor clears his throat before pulling out a roll of parchment. "One of your friends wanted us to have this." It is utterly surreal to even hear someone call Malfoy his friend. "Said he knew a lot about dragons? We can always do more research after, but..."

“Reading a condensed version first won’t hurt anything,” he agrees easily, mostly because he’s curious about what Malfoy would find helpful for them to know. They all lean in very close to read his very fancy, loopy handwriting that looks more like it belongs to a professor than a student.

I’m ranking these in order of least to most dangerous, for the record, though they’re all obviously still dragons and not to be underestimated.

1. Common Welsh Green: Not the most docile dragon there is, but definitely up there on that list. Welsh Greens prefer to avoid human contact altogether, so she’s the least likely to attack you unless you’re actively trying to harm her eggs. Merlin, I hope they don’t have you taking an egg. That would just be suicide, regardless of the dragon. They’re also the smallest of all the dragons involved in this, averaging about eighteen feet long from snout to tail tip.

2. Swedish Short-Snout: Their flames are a serious problem, and if you don’t get yourself medical attention almost immediately after getting burned, there’s a strong possibility that you could lose a limb. Their fire is blue for a reason. Do not let it hit you. They generally avoid humans in the wild, so at least they don’t typically have an inclination for human flesh? The last two would eat you without hesitation. I don’t think there are any rules against forfeiting so long as you genuinely try, so if it burns you, forfeit. Seriously, it’s not worth it.

3. Chinese Fireball: These dragons are dreadfully fast and just as clever, and they’re known for not only eating humans but actively hunting them. The good news is that it’s easier to dodge a fireball than a constant stream of fire. The bad news is basically everything else. You have to constantly keep moving with this one.

4. Hungarian Horntail: I cannot believe they actually brought one of these. What were they thinking? Horntails are easily the most aggressive of all ten dragon species, and they’re even more ferocious when defending their eggs or young. They can easily reach fifty feet long, their fire can shoot just as far, and even dodging their fire will not save you from their spiked tail if you’re within whipping range. They also actively hunt humans when the opportunity arises. I cannot even begin to express how utterly moronic it was for them to bring a Horntail into this. It’s like they’re trying to...

As for general advice, I only have one word for you: Run. Don’t make a production of it, don’t draw things out. Just get in, do whatever you have to do, and get out, quickly. Survive.

Good luck.

‘Huh,’ he thinks. ‘That’s positively helpful, actually. Abilities, temperaments, size for the notable ones... And all without any of us giving the game away by suddenly showing an increased interest in dragons. Who knew Malfoy had it in him?’

Maybe this isn’t quite as helpless as Harry feared. Though if dragons are the first task, he really dreads to think of the other two... *‘One step at a time, Harry,’* he reminds himself. *‘One step at a time.’*

The day of the first task arrives in what feels like the blink of an eye, and even with a solid plan –and the knowledge that he could always use the Summoning Charm to take his Firebolt

back from Cedric if he really had to— his nerves return in full force. He barely manages to force down any food at all, and he regrets doing so almost immediately afterward. He feels terribly queasy.

“It’s going to be okay, ‘Arry,” Fleur reassures him with a grim smile. “We are all going to make it out of this. And if I ‘ave to, then I will march onto zat field and ‘ypnotise your dragon too. I do not care if zey zhink it’s cheating.”

“Thanks, Fleur.” His voice is embarrassingly wobbly, and he tries to discreetly wipe at his eyes. The others definitely noticed, but he doesn’t care so long as the rest of the school doesn’t. “You’re the best, honest.”

“I find that very offensive, Harry,” Cedric sniffs with a playful smile tugging at his lips. “I may just have to revoke my offer to show all of you where the kitchens are afterward.”

“What? No—!”

Viktor chuckles at Harry’s clear dismay, the traitor, and says, “Ve could always get... Dobby to show us. Your threat is empty.”

“Damn, I didn’t think of that.” Harry snorts, giggling quietly as Cedric snaps his fingers and plasters an exaggerated –and downright unnatural, really– scowl on his face. He knows exactly what they’re doing. They’re trying to distract him from what’s about to happen so he doesn’t get too stuck in his head about it, and it’s working shockingly well.

They’re such good friends. It’s hard to even miss Ron and Hermione with Fleur, Cedric, and Viktor around. McGonagall approaches their group with a warm but nervous smile on her face. “It’s time for the champions to make their way down to the grounds. You’ll need some time to get ready for your first task.”

“Okay,” Fleur agrees easily, helping him stand and offering a reassuring smile before the four of them step forward as one. It looks like they’ve practiced this, and honestly, they have, just a little bit. They all really want to show a united front, and it’s working if the quiet murmurs around all the other tables are any indication. “Zen let us go.”

McGonagall’s smile only grows fonder when she sees the way the older champions close rank around him, shielding him from the view of others long after they’re outside of the castle. “Now, don’t panic,” she murmurs, clearly speaking to Harry. “Just keep a cool head. We’ve got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand. Just do your best, and none of us will think any worse of you. Are you feeling alright?”

“Not really,” he admits faintly. “But I think it’ll be okay. We have a plan.”

McGonagall levels an evaluating look at them then, and they all blink back with wide, innocent eyes. Or, well, they try to. Cedric looks dreadfully guilty, and Viktor only manages to look a bit cross-eyed. McGonagall snorts. “You all know exactly what you’re facing, don’t you?”

“I ‘ave no idea what you’re talking about,” Fleur sniffs indignantly. “Us, cheat? Never. Zat is absurd.”

“Why am I even surprised?” McGonagall mutters as she leads them toward the Forbidden Forest. A huge tent is currently blocking their view of the dragons being kept within. “Harry is involved. The very first thing he’s going to do is break the rules. Or at least bend them beyond all recognition.”

He has a feeling that she’s really going to like his plan. Or start complaining about him giving her gray hairs. Maybe a bit of both.

“Mr. Bagman will be telling you all the procedure. Good luck, and be careful.”

“Ve vill be,” Viktor reassures her with a faint grimace that is probably meant to be a smile. “And ve vill ensure Harry is fine. Damn the rules.”

McGonagall’s eyes are faintly misty when she leaves them. Harry exchanges a nervous glance and a nod with each of the champions before they enter the tent as one. “Ah, there you are!” Bagman cheers good-naturedly as soon as he sees them. Harry still wants to punch him. He is so obnoxiously cheerful about sending them to their potential deaths. “Come in, come in, make yourself at home!”

They all take a seat, quirking an eyebrow in eerie synchrony as if to say, ‘Well, go on then.’ Bagman stutters slightly as he continues, “W-Well, now that you’re all here, I suppose I should fill you in! Once our audience has arrived, I’m going to be offering each of you this bag,” he holds up a small, purple bag and shakes it around idly, “From which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are, er, different varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too... What was it again? Ah, yes! Your primary task is to collect the golden egg!”

This is stupid. This is so stupid, and he’s going to cry. Cedric looks like he’s going to be sick, Fleur’s fingers are twitching in barely restrained fury, and Viktor’s eyes are glinting with something dark and immensely displeased. It doesn’t make this situation any better—it doesn’t make it any less of the literal worst-case scenario— but it makes him feel a bit less alone nonetheless. At least they have a plan. He may have actually keeled over on the spot if this was dropped on him unexpectedly.

There is something immensely disconcerting to hear so many people walking past their tent laughing and talking like this is just another day. His brain just can’t quite connect that image with the fact that he’s going to stare death in the face today. He just can’t understand why anyone would be happy about that.

It hardly feels like any time at all before Bagman opens the bag. “Ladies first,” he says while holding it out to Fleur. Her hand is trembling slightly as she reaches inside, pulling out a tiny, perfect model of a Welsh Green with the number two hanging around its neck. She immediately grimaces, casting a glance back in Harry’s direction. Despite Viktor’s belief that he would have the best luck talking to one of the two more dangerous dragons, it’s clear that she was hoping he’d get that one. Cedric doesn’t look very happy about it either.

Fleur's eyes sharpen as she asks Bagman, "Are we allowed to trade with other champions?"

"I'm afraid not, my girl! Whichever one you draw is the one you go against; that's part of the rules. Though really, you certainly won't find an easier dragon to face than this one... Ah, perhaps that's it! You wish to have a better chance to prove yourself? This will still be plenty impressive, and there are always the other tasks!" Bagman reassures her, and Fleur's face grows more sour by the second. It's obvious that she doesn't think much of his intelligence, but honestly, neither does Harry.

Bagman lifts the bag toward Viktor, but he shakes his head and says, "I will go last. Harry should draw next." Bagman looks vaguely confused by that – and Harry is so appreciative of Viktor giving him even a few moments of extra time to fine-tune his plan based on what dragon he picks– but he obliges him easily enough, holding the bag out to Harry instead.

He barely reaches his hand in there before something sharp pierces his finger, and he yelps as he draws his hand back out. His startled expression swiftly shifts into one of resignation when he sees the model of a Hungarian Horntail latched onto his finger, the number four swinging tauntingly from its neck.

Viktor grimaces, Cedric curses under his breath, and Fleur looks like she's about to set this whole tent on fire. Harry just steps back with a sigh. "Why is my luck so awful? Why?" he whispers despairingly.

"Bad luck there, Harry!" Bagman pats him on the shoulder in a poor attempt at consolation. It's rather undermined by the excited glint in his eyes anyway. "But what a wonderful show that will be!"

"Are you out of your mind?!" Fleur snaps. And woah, are her fingernails getting sharper, or is he just imagining things? "'E is only fourteen, and 'e didn't choose to be part of zis! Zere is nothing entertaining about it! 'Orntails are deadly, and dangerous, and 'e is only a child! You will let us trade!'"

Bagman pales slightly, taking a step back with his hands raised in surrender. "I really can't let you! The goblet will bind both your magic and his if you try. The lottery aspect is part of the original tournament rules, so it's not flexible. Besides, he's the Boy-Who-Lived! He'll be fine." Bagman waves his hand dismissively, and that has Viktor scowling even deeper. Fleur looks like she's about to march forward and snap Bagman's neck, but Cedric manages to hold her back. Barely. A quiet screech escapes her throat.

Viktor ends up drawing the Chinese Fireball, with the number three hanging around its neck, while Cedric draws the Short-Snout, giving him the dubious pleasure of going first. Bagman keeps a safe distance from Fleur at all times, and his eyes never quite leave her trembling form.

Bagman isn't particularly bright, but even he can see that she's shaking with rage, not fear. "W-Well, there you are! You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, you see?" No shit. They're not stupid. "Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment. Because I'm commentating. Mr.

Diggory, you're first, so just go out there when you hear a whistle, alright? Now... Harry? Could I have a quick word? Outside?"

"I'll pass." He stares Bagman down until he finally gets the hint and leaves, running faster when the first whistle blows well before he's rejoined the crowd.

"Well, that's me then, isn't it?" Cedric shakes his head with a nervous laugh. "Just gotta make sure I don't get burned. Thanks for letting me borrow your broom, Harry."

"Anytime! Good luck out there."

"Old on a moment!" Fleur says before silently casting a spell on Cedric with a wink.

"Flame-Freezing Charm. The rules say we cannot bring anything but our wands with us, but zere is nothing saying we cannot apply spells before zhe task. Or zat we 'ave to cast it ourself. It won't make you immune to a dragon's fire, but," Fleur shrugs with a smile. "It should 'elp."

"Thanks, Fleur!" Cedric calls out as he runs out of the tent, knowing that people will start asking questions if he takes too long. Fleur then applies the spell to herself, Viktor, and Harry with a smug, satisfied grin.

"Are you sure?" Viktor questions quietly. "Vat are you going to do if you get vorn out during the task?"

"Fire-related spells are easy for me," Fleur explains with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"You know zat. The Flame-Freezing Charm is included in zat category, and I 'ave a natural resistance anyway. I was able to go light on myself. 'Ypnotising the Welsh Green should not be 'ard, and I won't get zhe chance to come back and apply it after I go."

"Thanks, Fleur," Harry murmurs with a faint smile. Viktor only grunts, but he's got a grin tugging at his lips too. What's Harry so nervous about? He's not facing this alone at all, really, and he's survived every other encounter that's been thrown at him so far with just a bit of help.

Then again, a nesting Horntail isn't exactly an easy thing to handle, but neither was the basilisk. He's going to ignore the fact that he almost died in the Chamber of Secrets. It's best not to think about that.

Just sitting and waiting while his friends are in danger is the worst feeling. Every scream and cheer of the crowd has him tensing, and Bagman's commentary certainly does not help. He tries to tune it out, but he's not very successful. Finally, about ten minutes later, he hears the deafening roar of an enraged dragon.

"Very good indeed!" Bagman cheers. "You can see the Seeker in him! That flying... And now, the marks from the judges!"

Harry supposes that they must be holding up scorecards when nothing but silence follows, then the cheering of the crowd. A whistle comes shortly after. "Miss Delacour, if you please!"

Fleur marches out of the tent with her head held high and a fist clenched around her wand. He really hopes that the Welsh Green is easy to hypnotise, for the dragon's sake. Fleur's scary when she's angry. He's just glad that she's angry for him, not at him.

It's barely three minutes later when the whistle blows again. Bagman is still spluttering in shock when Viktor walks out of the tent. From the sounds of it, Viktor has a much harder time, but that's to be expected when he's up against a Chinese Fireball. The Firebolt is fast, but the Fireball is faster, and he can hear the 'oohs' and 'aahs' of the crowd that follow several close calls. But fifteen minutes later, Viktor has the egg and the whistle blows one final time.

He expects to feel panic then, but the lingering nerves that have been haunting his every step ever since his name came out of the Goblet of Fire are nowhere to be found. He just feels... Numb. He's not sure that it's a good thing.

Harry walks out of the tent. His hand is oddly steady as he walks forward, staring at the behemoth of a dragon before him with grim concentration. He tunes out the crowd as he strains his ears, listening to her rumbling growls and, if he focuses hard enough, the hissing that underlies them. It's very difficult for him to understand her. It sounds like she's saying words he should know the meaning of with such a heavy accent that he can't understand her anyway. But he can pick up a few words.

"Eggs... Kill...! Away!!"

He keeps a safe distance between himself and the dragon, eyeing the chains that tether her to the earth with no small amount of relief. This is doable. He has to stay far, far away from her to stay out of the range of her fire, but this should work. He takes a deep breath, raises his wand to his throat, and says, "Sonus!"

The crowd watches on, curious about what he's planning to do, and a small smirk tugs at his lips as he says, ***"Forgive me, Great Mother. I don't want to be here any more than you do."*** The crowd gasps sharply, but he tunes out their muttering and surprised shouts as he locks eyes with the dragon standing before him. ***"The wizards have placed a false egg in your nest. I need only retrieve it before I can leave. I can stay far away from you and your eggs, and you can check them to make sure I'm telling the truth. Is this acceptable to you?"***

Giant, yellow eyes even bigger than his head stare him down. The dragon seems to understand something of what he's saying, but... ***"Protect eggs! Away! Away!!"*** Not enough to understand that he isn't threatening her. He sighs.

"Quietus," he murmurs, rubbing the back of his neck with a groan. He was really hoping that he wouldn't have to do this, but needs must and all of that. "Dobby!"

And the sweet, rabidly protective house elf that is his best friend does not even blink at the sight of the Horntail. He merely looks at Harry, ignoring the outraged shouts just as easily as he is, and asks, "What does my greatest friend Harry be needing me to do?"

"I have to get the fake, golden egg that they hid with all her real ones. Do you think you can do that?" Dobby nods enthusiastically, ears flapping in the wind. "Thank you. Just be careful,

okay? Do whatever you need to do to make it safe for yourself.”

“I can be putting mama dragon to sleep,” Dobby says, and with a snap of his fingers, the Horntail begins swaying in place. It doesn’t take very long for her to close her eyes, rumbling snores escaping her throat with puffs of smoke and flame. “I is being right back!” And in the blink of an eye, Dobby disappears and reappears with a golden egg nearly as large as he is cradled in his hands. “Here you be going!”

Harry accepts the egg with a grateful smile. He hasn’t even been standing here for two minutes. “You’re the best, Dobby.”

Dobby shuffles back and forth shyly. “So is you, Harry!”

“This is an outrage!” Karkaroff yells so loudly that he has to be using the Amplifying Charm. Harry refuses to believe otherwise. “Using his house elf in the tournament is against the rules! He’s only allowed his wand and what he can get with it!”

“Dobby is being a free elf!” his friend declares, loud and proud for the whole stadium to hear. “And Harry is being my friend! There is no rules saying he cannot be asking for help from friends, only teachers! I be checking! He be breaking no rules because I is not being a thing!!”

Karkaroff’s face steadily grows redder and redder as Dobby scolds him, standing defiantly at Harry’s side. Bagman clears his throat, stuttering, “W-Well, it’s certainly unconventional, but so long as he still has access to his magic, it’s not against the rules...”

He thinks of the feeling of absolute joy and longing he felt when Sirius offered him a home. He thinks of Fleur’s dedicated training and how she never gives up on him, working with him until they figured out the best way to help the information stick. He thinks of Viktor promising to make sure he got out of this, and he thinks of the risk he took in teaching him a few dubiously legal curses, at least in Britain, to ensure that outcome. He thinks of Cedric’s staunch defense of him to his own housemates, refusing to let up until they agreed to let things go back to normal, even if they do still believe Harry entered himself in the tournament.

“Expecto Patronum!”

A brilliant, white stag leaps from his wand, cantering around him in wide circles as he tosses his head about. He pauses once he’s certain that there’s no danger to be found, pausing and tilting his head at Harry in a silent question. “No danger, sorry, Prongs. Just proving a point.”

Prongs snorts –he might not be able to hear it, but he can certainly see it– and dips into a regal bow before disappearing entirely. Dumbledore looks torn between pleased and worried, and the rest of the judges look utterly dumbfounded as he quirks an eyebrow at them and says, “That proof enough for you?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer. He promptly turns around, not caring one whit about Bagman crying out about the scores, and walks over to the first-aid tent as Dobby waves farewell and

pops away. Fleur and Cedric are both shockingly okay, but Viktor does have a nasty gash on his side.

“You vere a huge help,” Viktor murmurs as Madam Pomfrey flutters around him, muttering about dragons beneath her breath. “Thank you, Fleur. I vould have been toast without you.”

“Of course! We’re friends, non? We should all ‘elp each other where we can.”

“Harry!” Cedric cries out when he finally spots him, checking him over for injuries before Madam Pomfrey even gets the chance. He can’t help laughing. “Are you okay? We heard a lot of yelling.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he promises. “Didn’t even get a scratch. Everyone was freaked out about me talking to her, and then they got pissed about Dobby helping me. Karkaroff tried to say I broke the rules, but I summoned my patronus and shut them all up about that. It was really funny.”

“I am so glad zat you are alright!” Fleur cries out, pressing a kiss against each of his cheeks before wrapping her arms around him in a hug. “I was so worried when you pulled out zat awful ‘Orntail. I cannot believe—!”

Bagman bursts into the tent, red-faced and panting as he says, “Harry, your score...!”

“I don’t give a toss about my score. I’m not trying to win. The task is over, so leave me alone.”

Madam Pomfrey scowls fiercely before ushering Bagman back outside. “I will not have you disturbing my patients!”

“The boy is fine!”

“He said no! And I have half a mind to rip into you myself for this. Dragons, of all things...! And nesting mothers, no less! Of all the hare-brained, idiotic—!” Bagman beats a very swift retreat after that, and the anger practically melts off of Madam Pomfrey’s face as soon as he’s gone. She barely stifles a laugh at their dumbfounded expressions before shooting them a wink. “I was opposed to having this tournament at all. More ego than common sense, the whole lot of them. It was cancelled for a reason, and it should have stayed that way.”

Madam Pomfrey’s smile softens as she looks at Viktor and says, “You should be just fine if you allow yourself a couple of days of rest. Dragon claws are nothing to be trifled with, so don’t push it before then, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” Madam Pomfrey nods, looking Harry over and murmuring, “And Mr. Potter? I do hope that I don’t have to see you in my wing this year. You’re there entirely too often for my liking.”

“I’ll do my best,” he murmurs.

Harry feels like he could sleep for a solid week. Unfortunately, Madam Pomfrey is only able to hold Bagman off for so long before he insists on having a conversation with all four of the champions back in the original tent. The four of them make their way towards it together, and Harry notices Hermione and Ron standing to the side, looking proud and hesitant and so many emotions that he can't be bothered to keep sifting through. He looks away. Maybe, just maybe, if he gets an apology from them both, he'll be able to forgive them, but he'll never be able to forget how they abandoned him when he needed them most. He'll never be able to trust them again, not like he used to. It's a bit sad, but...

He looks around him, and the champions are shielding him from everyone's view again. They instinctively slow their pace to make it easy for him to match it, and he has never felt more valued or respected by anyone in his life. He's never felt like this with Ron and Hermione. Certainly not when Ron and his fits of jealousy always made Harry feel so guilty about having money –money that he regularly offered him, to no avail– that he kept wearing Dudley's old cast-offs beneath his robes during the school year. Certainly not when Hermione bulldozed over his efforts to study in his own way –by focusing on the practical part and working his way back to the theory, since that's what usually works best for him– and insisted that she knew what was best for him.

They're not bad people. He knows that. They've both been there for him through some truly terrible things, and they're keeping secrets for him, even now, that could easily get him in a lot of trouble. Ron is still the person who asked his brothers to help save Harry from the Dursleys. He's still the person who stood by his side when everyone discovered that Harry is a Parselmouth, even though he hates snakes. Hermione is still the person who lied to protect them when they saved her from a troll in first year. She's still the person who set Snape's robes on fire to save Harry when Quirrel was jinxing him. They're both still the people who sent him food over the breaks and made sure he didn't starve.

But they're both still so... Childish. Sheltered, in a way. Ron goes home to a family that loves and cares for him so much that it hurts Harry's heart to even watch it. To see how much he takes it for granted. It's hard to believe that Ron is jealous of Harry when he has everything that Harry ever could have wished for. Hermione's trust in authority figures is steadfast and unwavering despite how many times the adults at Hogwarts have proven untrustworthy. She's naive.

And Harry has never had that luxury. He's always been painfully, painfully aware of just how cruel the world could be, and he's always known that those with power are likely to abuse it. Dumbledore is his magical guardian. He keeps sending him back to the Dursleys even though– *'Don't think about it. Don't think about it. There's nothing you can do.'*

Ron and Hermione aren't bad people. They aren't even bad friends, really. But... Maybe they've never really been all that similar after all. Maybe they all just... Latched onto each other to deal with terrible circumstances that no one else understood. Maybe they were shaped by blood and tears and fear that eventually crumbled away beneath the pressure of it all.

'One time too many, huh...?' Maybe Hermione has a point.

Maybe their friendship has always been meant to fall apart.

Harry is jolted back into the present when Bagman starts speaking, startled to realize that they'd walked all the way back to the champions' tent without him realizing. "Well done, all of you! Now, just a quick few words. We've got a nice, long break before the second task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth, but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're holding there, you'll see that they open. See the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg! That will tell you what the second task is and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go then!"

They barely make it five steps away from the tent before Skeeter is crowding around them. Her eyes have locked onto Harry, as if the other champions aren't right there, as she says, "Congratulations, Harry! I wonder if you could give me a quick word? How you felt facing that dragon? How you feel now, about the fairness of the scoring? How you feel about having the same gift as You-Know-Who?"

None of them stop moving, but Harry can't quite resist the urge to look over his shoulder and toss back, "Yeah, you can have a word. Goodbye! Feel free to quote me on that."

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! We're back with another chapter, and this is the beginning of a bunch of original scenes between the first and second task that I am utterly thrilled about. I hope you all enjoy this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Harry is pleasantly surprised when he returns to the Gryffindor common room –having snuck off for a moment to write a letter to Sirius reassuring him that he’s fine– and finds it nearly absent of any of his housemates. There is no raging party or loud cheers waiting to greet him, only Fred and George, and the smile he had plastered on his face slowly softens into something more genuine. “Fred! George!”

“Hello, ickle Harrikins,” Fred teases with a jaunty wave, chuckling as George’s eyes search for any hint of injury on him. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Why, you’re hardly ever in the dorms anymore–”

“Not that we can blame you, of course! Everyone’s been right berks about this whole thing–”

“Including us, so we wanted to say sorry–”

“And made sure everyone buggered off so you could relax in peace–”

“Because we really should’ve known that you wouldn’t have wanted a party after your name came out of the goblet–”

“And we definitely should’ve noticed how unhappy you were–”

“But we didn’t, and we’re really sorry about it. We’ll do better, and–”

“For the record, we totally believed you about not putting your name in. We just–”

“Wanted to try and help you forget about it for a bit, hence the party. But we really just–”

“Made everything worse so... Sorry, mate,” Fred finishes. Most people would probably have a hard time following that, but it’s pretty easy for Harry to tell the difference between Fred and George. Fred is more outgoing, and he’s a better liar than George. They’re both plenty sneaky, of course, but George is a bit more anxious about it, a bit more cautious, and a bit less reckless.

“It’s fine,” Harry reassures them. He was never really mad at them anyway. “I appreciate that you tried to help, even if it didn’t turn out how you wanted it to.”

George opens and closes his mouth a couple of times before saying, “We also wanted to apologize about Ron being a bit of a berk.”

“He’s always been a jealous one, our brother, but—”

“We were stunned speechless when he just up and ditched you like that. We wanted to let you know that—”

“We’ll always be your friends, even if he isn’t—”

“And that you don’t have to forgive him for it if you don’t want to. He’s being a right ass—”

“Who hasn’t even tried to apologize for it so—”

George shrugs and says, “It’s his loss, really.”

And oh. He really doesn’t know what to say to that. Words struggle to get past the lump in his throat, and Harry swipes at his eyes as he finally murmurs, “Thanks. Really. It means... A lot to me.”

Twin smiles greet him as freckled hands reach down to ruffle his hair. “Of course, of course! And hey, if you ever need us to jinx your cousin again—”

“Then you just let us know,” Fred snickers. “It was a pleasure.”

“Or if you need help with anything else! Like the next task—”

“I reckon that egg has something to do with it?” Fred leans in close, tilting his head curiously. “Don’t see why they’d have you keep it otherwise.”

“Yeah, it’s supposed to be some sort of hint. Bagman said to open it, but I haven’t gotten around to it yet. Figured I might do it with the champions later, but...” He takes one look at the eager, curious expressions on the twins’ faces and says, “I could always do it now and tell them about it later.”

The words barely pass through his lips before he’s prying the heavy thing open, and he nearly drops it when the most grating, shrill shrieking that he’s ever heard in his life burts free from it. George snaps it shut with a grimace. “Well, that doesn’t seem particularly helpful.”

“Some sort of creature, maybe? But would they really do that when—”

“They just had a task involving dragons? Maybe, could be why they’re waiting so long in between tasks. We can always—”

“Dig into some research on creatures that screech like that. Harpies, veelas—”

“That sort of thing, you know? We have to know a fair bit about—”

“Magical creatures for inventing our products—”

“Since so many of them involve parts from them,” George finishes with a contemplative hum. “And you’re already bending all the rules you can get away with so—”

“I don’t really see why it’d hurt for us to help out. We’ll let you know if we find anything!”

“In the meantime, you should get some rest.” George pats the top of his head with a fond smile, and he’s comfortable enough with the twins that the action doesn’t startle him anymore. “You’ve had a terribly long day.”

He goes to deny it, but a yawn so large that it brings tears to his eyes escapes his mouth before any words can. “That’s probably a good idea,” he admits sheepishly. “Goodnight. And thanks, again.”

Harry wakes up in an incredibly good mood the next morning. Cedric is going to be showing them to the kitchens after classes today, and that way, they’ll be able to have their own little private celebration of surviving the first task and talk about their next move. His mood sours slightly when the morning owls bring another wave of the Daily Prophet, primarily because Hannah Abbott grimaces as soon as her copy lands in front of her, passes it over to Harry, and says, “You’re probably going to want to read this, Harry.”

The Boy-Who-Lived Going Dark?

Rita Skeeter

As you all know, the Triwizard Tournament’s first task was completed yesterday afternoon, and what a task it was! Dragons, fake eggs, and acts of daring that had everyone sitting at the edge of their seats... Especially Harry Potter’s performance.

The Boy-Who-Lived completed his task in the shortest amount of time among all four champions, followed closely by Beauxbaton’s champion who appears to have taken him under her wing. But I must express some concern regarding what, exactly, she was teaching him given the events of yesterday afternoon.

Parseltongue has long since been regarded as a Dark ability, used most prominently by You-Know-Who himself, and it seems the strangest sort of irony that the Boy-Who-Lived is also capable of it. Could he be a ray of hope for all Parselmouths everywhere? Or could this ability be a sign of Dark leanings in our very savior himself?

When asked for further comment, Harry Potter only said, “Yeah, you can have a word. Goodbye! Feel free to quote me on that.”

Rest assured, dear readers. I intend to get to the bottom of this.

For a play-by-play of yesterday’s task and the final scores, read pg. 3. For further history on Parseltongue and its association with Dark wizards and witches, read pg. 4.

He passes the paper back to Hannah with a confused look. He’s not exactly happy about what Skeeter is implying about Fleur there, but this is pretty tame, all things considered. Speculation isn’t grounds for libel, and at least she actually quoted him correctly. “I’m not

seeing why this is a big deal?" he asks with a quiet hum. "I mean, everyone already knows that I'm a Parselmouth."

"Most of the school knows," Susan Bones corrects him. "Most of Wizarding Britain does not."

"... Oh." Well, that's mildly inconvenient, but there's nothing for it now. "Oh well. Not much I can do about that, really. No point in dwelling on it."

"I don't see what the big deal is," Viktor grumbles. "It was very clever to try talking to the dragon."

"You keep forgetting that Britain is full of narrow-minded bigots, Viktor." Fleur's tone of voice is clearly meant to be insulting, and it probably would be if it wasn't also true. "Zey are going to balk at the thought of 'Arry being anything less than a perfect angel."

Cedric snorts loudly at that. "They'd have a heart attack if they knew half of what he got up to at Hogwarts."

"Hey!" he protests, unable to quite repress his laughter. "Most of that isn't even my fault!"

"Most is the operative word here," Fleur teases him fondly. "You are a bit of an 'ellion, non?"

"I'm feeling very ganged up on right now," he huffs indignantly. "You're all just as bad as me and you know it. People just aren't watching you as closely."

"... What is a good point," Viktor admits.

The vast majority of the Hufflepuffs are laughing under their breaths, but they're laughing with him, not at him, and that makes a world of difference. "Good luck with classes today!" Cedric calls out when they have to part ways. "And remember, meet us near the Hufflepuff dorms after fourth period!"

It feels strange to be back to lessons as normal the very day after he faced a dragon. There's a sort of mental disconnect there that he can't quite make sense of, but he shrugs it off and does his best to focus anyway. Who knows what could be useful for the next task? Well, he rather doubts that History of Magic will be, but there's always the slightest chance...

"Harry!" Hermione's voice stops him on the way to lunch, and he looks back with a quiet hum. Ron is standing by her side, and the paleness of his face throws his freckles into stark contrast. He can hear the murmuring around them as the students of their year linger nearby. "Wait up a minute!"

He quirks an eyebrow as the pair catch up to him, and Ron stutters, "Harry... Whoever put your name in the goblet, I... I reckon they're really trying to do you in!"

"Finally caught on, have you? Took you long enough." Hermione looks between him and Ron nervously, chewing on her lip as they have something of a staring contest. He's waiting.

Ron opens his mouth uncertainly. He closes it. Harry starts tapping his foot. “I have somewhere to be, so if we could hurry this along—”

“Forget it,” Ron snaps with shoulders hunched up to his ears. His face burns a ruddy red with embarrassment and indignation. “Go spend time with your new friends. Who cares about us, right?”

“Ron!” Hermione gasps, scandalized as the whispers around them grow even louder.

“I wasn’t the one who walked away.” A heavy sigh spills from his lips, weighing down his shoulders and making him feel quite small. “I needed you, and you walked away. I can’t forget that. I don’t know if I can even forgive it.”

“Oh, so all the other times we’ve been there for you mean nothing now, huh? Awfully convenient, innit? You’ve suddenly got friends just as famous as you, and you’re leaving us in the dirt!” Part of him knows that Ron doesn’t really mean this. He’s just angry and jealous that Harry has been spending so much time with other people, but that... That’s no one’s fault but Ron’s. Harry doesn’t have to apologize for making new friends, and it’s not fair for Ron to expect him to. Has he always been like this? Has Harry just been blind to it, too happy to finally have a friend to care, or is this something new, brought on by his friend’s jealousy left unchecked?

“I’m grateful for all that you and Hermione have done for me. I’ll never forget that either, and honestly? I can’t blame you for wanting nothing to do with this. Year after year of being in mortal danger... I can’t expect you to stick around for that. It’d make me as much of a raging hypocrite as you.” Hermione opens her mouth to protest, but he continues, “But... This happens every year, one way or another, and you’ve already left once. You’ll leave again. Whenever it gets too tough, too scary, too much... You’ll leave. And I have to protect myself from that, Ron! I can’t afford it. Something dangerous is coming, and I can’t have fairweather friends when the storm hits!”

“W-What are you saying, Harry?” Hermione stammers with wide, watery eyes.

“I’m saying,” he murmurs. “That maybe we shouldn’t be friends anymore.”

Ron scoffs and stomps off, and Hermione just stares at him, looking betrayed. “But... I believed you! You know I believed you, I just—”

“You chose Ron! You expected me to apologize for something that wasn’t my fault when he was the one being an ass. You made your choice. It’s not my fault if you regret it now.”

He really wishes they could’ve had this conversation privately, but there’s nothing for it now. The whole school will be raving about the Golden Trio splitting up by the end of the day.

Harry decides against going to the Great Hall. He’s thankful that no one tries to follow him – too shocked by what they just witnessed to try, probably– as he ducks through the hallways and slips beneath the Invisibility Cloak as soon as he’s sure no one can see him. His feet end up taking him straight up to the seventh floor without even thinking about it, and he begins pacing back and forth.

'I want somewhere safe that I can hide away in for a while. Somewhere that no one can find me.'

A familiar entrance opens across from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, and Harry steps through it without hesitation. His breath catches in his throat when he sees what the room has given him.

Cobwebs hang in every corner. A thin layer of dust and grime coats everything, including the tiny, threadbare mattress and ratty blanket laying on the floor. An old scrap of paper that's tinged yellow around the edges has scratchy, shaking handwriting in purple crayon that declares this 'Harry's Room'. He remembers writing it after his first day of primary school, determined to never forget that his name was Harry, not Boy or Freak.

Harry collapses onto the mattress that doesn't even support anything below his knees anymore as his shoulders start to shake. A hysterical laugh bursts free from his lips. Then they just don't stop coming. He laughs and laughs and laughs until a laugh cracks and shatters into a sob. He throws an arm over his teary eyes as he heaves for breath, trembling and sniffing louder than he ever dared to while in the real version of this room.

The most terribly ironic part of it all is that he truly cannot remember a time he's felt safer than he did while tucked away in the cupboard beneath the stairs. His cupboard is the one place that Dursleys never set foot in. Uncle Vernon and Dudley because they couldn't fit more than an arm inside of it, and Aunt Petunia because she turned up her nose at the grime that coated both him and the cupboard no matter how hard he tried to keep it clean.

This is... This is the safest he's felt in a long time.

It's very difficult to force himself to go back to classes after that realization. Harry walks through the rest of the day in a bleary haze, but thankfully, everyone seems to assume that it has to do with the Ron and Hermione situation, not the fact that he accidentally threw himself headfirst into a bit of a crisis.

He's pathetically grateful that they're visiting the kitchens today. He's not sure he could stomach being stared at by everyone in the Great Hall right now. Harry ignores the beginning of Hermione's desperate plea as he practically sprints through the halls, slipping any potential tails before sliding underneath his cloak again. He has a feeling that he'll be spending most of his time outside of classes like this for the foreseeable future.

Cedric startles violently when Harry suddenly appears by his side. Both Fleur and Viktor look mildly confused, but neither of them flinch either. "Where did you-?! A Gryffindor has no right being so sneaky...!" Cedric mutters playfully, ruffling his hair with a grin. It takes everything Harry has to not flinch back from it. He's a little too raw for this right now, and Cedric must have noticed it if the way he withdrew his hand far sooner than he usually would is any indication. "Come on, follow me."

Since everyone else is either at dinner or on their way to it right now, the corridors are completely empty of anyone but them. Cedric only takes a couple of turns before he leads them straight to a portrait of a fruit bowl, stopping in front of it and leaning forward to brush his finger back and forth against the pear. It seems utterly absurd, but given how he gets into

the Room of Requirement, he isn't nearly as bewildered as Fleur and Viktor are when the portrait swings open and reveals the bustling activity of hundreds of house elves within.

"Welcome to the kitchens," Cedric says with a pleased smile. "We'll have to wait a bit until the worst of the dinner rush is over, but the house elves don't mind taking personal requests if you come to ask them in person."

As if to immediately disprove Cedric's statement, Dobby pops right in front of them with a giant smile. "Harry and his friends be visiting Dobby? I be getting them food right away! What do you be wanting?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, could I get some bouillabaisse?" Fleur asks with a gentle smile. "I've been missing 'ome somezing fierce."

"I can be doing that!" Dobby agrees with a vigorous nod. "We be making it again anyway."

"I'll just go with a shepherd's pie," Cedric murmurs dreamily.

"Would it be possible to get moussaka?" Viktor asks with a quiet hum, and Dobby sways back and forth in silent contemplation.

"You be talking about the Bulgarian version, right?" Viktor nods. "I be thinking that Winky knows to make that! I be asking her."

Harry perks up at that, sitting up straighter. "Winky? She works here now?"

"Yes, I do be." Wide, watery eyes look up at him from across the room. Winky still seems unhappy, but considering what happened the last time he saw her... She's doing surprisingly well. "Hogwarts being generous enough to take in a bad elf like me. Though they also be taking in Dobby, so..."

Dobby rolls his eyes and asks, "Do you be knowing how to make Bulgarian moussaka? Dobby only knows the Greek recipe."

Winky looks at him as if he's an insult to all house elves when she answers, "Yes, I can be making that for our guests. Do you be needing anything else?"

Dobby turns to Harry in silent question. "I'll just get a shepherd's pie too. Ooh, and treacle tart, if that's alright?"

"I can be doing that myself," Dobby says with a proud smile. "Winky only need be helping with the one dish."

Winky mutters something that is most likely derisive under her breath, but she seems pretty pleased to help them, regardless. Just a bit exasperated with Dobby. "So, have any of you figured anything out about the egg yet?"

"I 'aven't even 'ad the opportunity to open it yet," Fleur says with a shake of her head. "I fell asleep almost as soon as I got back to zhe carriage last night."

"I wouldn't recommend it," Viktor says dryly. "Screeches like a banshee. My classmates looked ready to throw me overboard."

"Yeah. It has to be some sort of creature, right?" Cedric's eyebrows furrow in contemplation. "The question is what. There aren't a whole lot of them that scream like that."

"Fred and George thought it might be harpies or veelas, but that's just what came to mind first. They promised to look into it."

"Hm... I will 'ave to listen to it first, but I'll be able to tell if zey are veelas, at least."

"I don't think they will be," Viktor muses with a quiet hum. "Two fire creatures in a row would be boring. They've got to change it up a little."

"You've probably got a point," Harry agrees with a nod. "So we'll focus on creatures that don't have especially powerful fire magic? And maybe just glance over those to make sure we don't miss something obvious?"

"That sounds like a plan to me." Cedric looks over him then, asking, "Are you alright, Harry? I've been meaning to ask. I heard that..."

Ah. He can't say he's especially surprised that those rumors have already reached his ears. "I'm fine," he murmurs. "I... Part of me is always going to miss them, I think, but... It's for the best. We're growing apart. Better to cut it off now than to cling onto it and hurt everyone worse when we eventually break, you know?"

"Zat is vairy mature of you, 'Arry," Fleur murmurs. "And I cannot say zat I blame you. Zere is something bigger 'appenning with you being put in this tournament, and if zey left you again..."

"It puts them in danger too," he murmurs. "And I don't want that. I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me. I'm used to fighting alone, in the end."

"Vell, you von't have to anymore." Dobby returns with their dinner shortly after Viktor says that, and Harry is trying very hard not to burst into tears again. "Ve vill be fighting right by your side. So don't vorry too much. The four of us can handle vwhatever comes our vay."

"Five," Dobby says sternly. "You will be calling on Dobby if you be getting into any trouble. You be promising."

"I promise," he sniffles over his pie. There are tissues by his side before the first tear can even fall. He loves house elves. "Thank you. All of you."

"Of course!" Cedric reassures him with a beaming grin. Harry can see why Cho fell for him. "What're friends for?"

They all enjoy their dinner in the peace and relative quiet of the kitchens, laughing and smiling. Dobby joins them once the other students leave the Great Hall, and it's only with great reluctance that Harry agrees to head back to Gryffindor Tower before curfew creeps up on them. Viktor discreetly passes him a roll of parchment just before they part ways, levelling

him with a look that has Harry reading it beneath his Invisibility Cloak as soon as he can slip away.

Potter,

I see you've managed to survive the first task. I hate to admit it, but utilizing Parseltongue was clever, even if it didn't work. I should have thought of that. And the thing with Dobby? Truly inspired. Everyone was so outraged about it; it was hilarious. Though I do wonder how you came to be friends with one of our old house elves in the first place...

But I'm not just writing you for fun, Potter. Slytherins do not do favors for free, and I intend to collect. Meet me in the corridor to the left of the Slytherin common rooms after curfew. And don't try to say that you don't know where it is; you're not that subtle. Crabbe and Goyle aren't nearly as stupid as they pretend to be.

Did you really ditch Granger and Weasley? It's about time. I told you that you'd find out that some wizards are better than others. Better late than never, I suppose.

Bet you're wishing you shook my hand now, huh?

'Prat.' Harry scoffs under his breath, but he shrugs his shoulders and makes his way to the Dungeons regardless. He can just stay under the Invisibility Cloak until he's sure that this isn't some kind of trap. Malfoy's reasoning seems solid enough, but he's learned his lesson from first year.

The Dungeons always give him the creeps. Something about the dark atmosphere and winding hallways that seem to go on forever makes him uneasy, and he'd be worried about getting lost if he didn't always keep the Marauder's Map on him. He warily eyes the names of several Slytherins nearby, Snape included, but Malfoy is the only one to slip out of the common room entrance. Filch and Mrs. Norris are all the way across the castle. It doesn't seem like this is meant to be any sort of ambush.

"I swear to Merlin, if Potter doesn't show up..."

"Beat you here, Malfoy." He has the rare pleasure of watching Malfoy visibly startle, and he nearly laughs at the look on his face when Harry shrugs the Invisibility Cloak off. Maybe it isn't the brightest idea for him to reveal that he has it, but considering what he already knows about Harry—which definitely hasn't made its way around the school; he would have noticed that—and the fact that Ron knows about it too... Well, he's more worried about one of them spilling that secret than the other, and it isn't Malfoy. "Just wanted to make sure I didn't get seen."

"You have an Invisibility Cloak?!" Malfoy whispers sharply. "Merlin, that explains so much."

"Yep!" he answers with a cheeky smile. "It's gotten me both into and out of a lot of trouble, but that's beside the point. Thank you for helping us. What did you want in return?"

Malfoy seems just as thrown by his easy gratitude as he was last time, eyes narrowed in suspicion as he murmurs, “The Patronus Charm. I’m easily the best in our year at Charms, and it’s a travesty that I don’t know how to cast it when you do. I want you to teach me. Then we’ll be even.”

‘Huh. That’s... A pretty easy request, actually, even if it might take a while to fulfill. I expected a lot worse.’ Harry shrugs his shoulders and says, “Sure. I’m assuming you want to keep this a secret?”

“Obviously, Potter.”

“Okay. Well, I can think of somewhere for us to practice, but you’ll owe me a favor if we use it.” He could tell him about the Room of Requirement, but he’s going to keep that one to himself for a bit longer. He has something else in mind for this.

Malfoy narrows his eyes. “That’s not part of the deal, Potter.”

“We haven’t made the deal yet, Malfoy,” he snipes back with a pleasant smile. Fleur taught him this one. “And I don’t care if other people find out. You do. But if you want to risk just using one of the abandoned classrooms and also never get the chance to see the Chamber of Secrets, then that’s up to you.”

Silvery-blue eyes glint with intrigue, and he knows that he’s got him then. “... Fine. But I want to know the terms of your favor before I agree to it. I’m not foolish enough to agree to anything without knowing the details.” The ‘unlike you’ goes unvoiced but not unheard. Harry snorts.

“Help me become an Animagus.”

“... Come again?”

It’s more of an expression of disbelief than a genuine question, but Harry answers it anyway. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since that lesson in Transfiguration last year, but it’s a really fiddly, annoying process and the supplies I need are hard to come by. Shouldn’t be hard for you to get ahold of, though, right? I just keep thinking that it could be useful for one of the tasks –or just in general, really– and this might be the only chance I get to learn it beforehand. The full moon’s next week, so if you can get ahold of a mandrake leaf by then, I’ll have a couple of chances to get it right before the second task.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrow in consideration as he dips his head in a nod. “I’ll do it, but only if I become one alongside you. I may as well if I’m going through all the hassle anyway. How do you plan on teaching me the Patronus Charm while we hold a mandrake leaf under our tongues, though?”

“I was going to ask Fleur to use a Sticking Charm to attach it to the bottom of my tongue,” he admits with a chuckle. “She’s really good at them. It’s how I’ve held onto this badge for so long.” He taps the badge that is still affixed to his robes with a wry grin, utterly unphased when it shifts to ‘Potter Stinks’. He only wishes that he’d been allowed to wear it during the first task, but since they could only bring their wands, it had been prohibited. “That way we

don't have to worry about talking or eating without messing everything up. We can just ask her to undo it on the next full moon."

"Clever," Malfoy admits begrudgingly. "Very well, then. You've got yourself a deal, Potter."

This time, when Malfoy extends his hand, Harry shakes it. "Meet me outside of Myrtle's bathroom after dinner tomorrow. We'll probably be down there until well after curfew, but I can sneak you back down to the Dungeons with the cloak."

"Awfully chivalrous of you," Malfoy drawls. "And here I was thinking that you sounded positively Slytherin while negotiating our deal."

"Well," he starts with a smirk tugging at his lips. "The Sorting Hat did want me in Slytherin, so that's not really a surprise."

"... Pardon?" Malfoy blinks rapidly, all but gaping in surprise. "I must have misheard you. Why on earth would you tell me this, Potter? Not worried about the rumors I could spread?"

"You could've spread far worse rumors that you still haven't," he points out, feeling a bit guilty for the way Malfoy grimaces in remembrance. "Besides," he teases, trying to lighten the mood a little. "Even if you did tell them, no one would ever believe you."

He can just barely make out a stifled chuckle before Malfoy smothers it into nonexistence and plasters on a sneer. "Get lost, Potter."

"Getting lost!" he ducks beneath his Invisibility Cloak and beats a hasty retreat, smiling the whole way. Not even a close call with Mrs. Norris on his way back to the tower makes that smile waver. He can hardly believe it, but he's actually excited about this.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Two chapters in a day? Two chapters in a day! I didn't have work today, so I just kept writing and the next thing I knew... Well, here we are! On to working on chapter seven X'D

Malfoy does not look particularly happy to be lingering near Myrtle's bathroom, but at least he has the excuse of the library being nearby if anyone asks questions. He can always claim that he was heading in that direction. "Took you long enough, Potter!" he hisses under his breath as Harry turns down the hallway.

"Did you want an audience?" he asks with a quirked eyebrow. "As it is, Cedric is the only reason I was able to slip Hermione. Now come on, let's get moving before anyone sees us." They could always start throwing hexes at each other if anyone catches them, but he would really rather not do that.

Malfoy balks when Harry walks straight into the girls' bathroom. He rolls his eyes and says, "No one ever uses this thing, Malfoy. Myrtle floods it all the time. Now come on, the entrance is this way."

He takes several quick steps toward the serpentine faucet adorning one of the sinks, hissing, "**Open.**" The passageway opens, and this time, Harry narrows his eyes in thought as he stares at the filthy slide into the chamber and hisses, "**Stairs.**" He's pleasantly surprised when the slick stone obliges his request and turns into a staircase. He wishes he had thought of that during second year, but then again, considering that Lockheart tried to Obliviate them, maybe it's for the best that he didn't. It would've been a bit too easy to shove them down the stairs. "Well?" he asks Malfoy with a quirked eyebrow. "Come along, then. This is something that even I don't want to explain."

They both step through the entrance, and it closes behind them with a hissed, "**Close.**" Malfoy lights the tip of his wand without saying a word, illuminating the darkness, and Harry leads the way, trying and failing not to be impressed by the casual display of nonverbal magic. He's definitely going to ask Fleur to help him learn how to do that. It might help his abysmal control some too. "Any luck finding what we'll need to become Animagi?"

"Don't underestimate me, Potter," Malfoy scoffs. "I've already ordered it. We'll have everything we need by dinner tomorrow, including the ingredients for later."

"Good."

"Are you sure we're going the right way? This isn't exactly what I imagined."

“Hence the name Chamber of Secrets,” Harry snickers under his breath as they pass by a massive clump of shed skin. He can just barely see Malfoy’s eyes widening out of the corner of his eye. “Doesn’t do anyone much good if it’s noticeable. Trust me, we’re heading the right way. It’s kind of hard to forget.” Once they reach the collapsed section, Harry just sighs and murmurs, “Reparo.” They have to wait for the stones to rearrange themselves, but it doesn’t appear like the ceiling will threaten to collapse on them again.

“... Do I even want to know what happened?”

“Probably not!” he answers cheerfully. “But you’re about to find out anyway.” He doubts that there’s much left of the basilisk beyond bones at this point, but her shape and size leave very little question about what she is. Or was, he supposes.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a bit mad, Potter?”

“Yep! I wonder what that makes you for following me down here anyway.”

Malfoy’s expression sours at that. “Too curious for my own good, apparently.”

Harry snickers under his breath as they venture deeper into the bowels of Hogwarts, finally emerging in the Chamber of Secrets. “Huh. I didn’t expect that.”

Black scales and wicked fangs with a pool of blood puddled beneath them, a body that’s easily sixty-five, maybe even seventy feet long, and dead, glossy eyes that can no longer petrify anyone stare back at him. The basilisk looks exactly the same as the day he left it. He supposes that there must be Preservation Charms of some sort over the chamber itself that preserved the corpse too, or there’s no way that she wouldn’t have decayed by now.

“Merlin and Morganna...!” Malfoy takes a shaky step forward, looking almost as frightened as he had up on the Astronomy Tower. “How—” A strained cough interrupts the question as Malfoy turns to him with shock written all over his face. “How did you survive this thing?! Never mind killing it!”

“Dumb luck, mostly,” he admits. “Fawkes. Gryffindor’s sword. I would’ve died anyway if Fawkes hadn’t cried on me.” He taps the faded scar on his forearm that will never completely go away. “The only way I could kill her was by stabbing the sword up through her mouth, so. A fang got me. It was not pleasant. Zero out of ten, would not recommend.”

“You’re mad. Absolutely, barking mad,” Malfoy mutters.

“She didn’t exactly give me much of a choice,” he deadpans. “I even tried to do the responsible thing and brought a professor along, but Lockheart just tried to Obliviate us and leave us to die. Luckily, Ron’s wand backfired on him.”

Malfoy scrunches his nose at that. “Why would you bring Lockheart, of all people?”

“We tried to get McGonagall involved the year before that, but she dismissed us out of hand. Also we were kind of on a time crunch, and he was closest.”

“... Fair enough, I suppose.” Malfoy pauses, getting a closer look at the fallen serpent before saying, “You do realize that there are literally tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Galleons’ worth of potions ingredients laying in this chamber, don’t you? Basilisks are extremely rare.”

He chuckles sheepishly. “... I had no idea. That makes sense, though. But I wouldn’t even know where to start with breaking this thing down, and who would we sell it to anyway?”

“The goblins, obviously,” Malfoy scoffs. “They’ll sell it for even more than they pay you, but it’ll prevent you from flooding the market all at once.”

“Us,” he corrects idly. “Because I still have no idea where to start with it, and I would’ve left it to rot if you hadn’t said anything. We can split it. You get half in exchange for helping and teaching me how to break it down?”

“I’ll make a proper Slytherin out of you yet, Potter. Though, maybe next time don’t be so quick to admit you don’t know what you’re doing.” Malfoy dips his head in agreement as a smirk tugs at his lips. “I’ll bring my silver harvesting knives next time. Though, really, we might be better off using a sword for something so large... No, that would risk compromising the quality. Best not.” Malfoy clears his throat, finally looking away from the basilisk as he says, “So, the Patronus Charm?”

“Right!” he nods, focusing on the task at hand. “The Patronus Charm is a really complicated spell that seems far easier than it is, so don’t get discouraged if it takes you a while to get it. It took me ages to manage even an Incorporeal Patronus.” Harry loops his wand in a single clockwise circle, focusing on the memory of all the champions and Dobby promising to fight by his side. “Expecto Patronum!” Prongs bursts forth from the tip of his wand, cantering around the chamber before coming to stand by Harry’s side. “To summon a Patronus, you have to focus on a single, happy memory. A time when you felt true joy. Don’t mistake simple contentment for an emotion strong enough to power this spell. Things like flying, a good score on a test, a birthday... They’re too simple. I’ve, uh, found that personally, my happiest memories are blended with a bit of pain or sorrow, something more bittersweet. It makes the happiness felt despite that seem more real. But I imagine it works differently depending on the person.”

He shrugs, chuckling as he says, “While you have to focus on one memory while casting the spell, I’ve also found that it helps to think of several different, happy memories building into the one you want to focus on. Especially if you’re already in a bad mood or afraid. It settles your magic and emotions enough to make casting it much easier once you’re ready. I had to do that after the first task.”

“Huh... Good to know.” Malfoy hums contemplatively. “Any other advice for me, or am I good to try casting? It’s just the one wand movement, correct?”

“Yeah, just a clockwise circle,” he confirms. “Though you want to cast just as you finish the loop. And the only other suggestion I can really give you is to remember that it’s a lot easier to cast a Patronus when there isn’t something like a Dementor around. It’s a lot harder to focus on the positive emotions needed for the spell if there’s something actively making you miserable.”

“Hm. So you’re feeling better then?”

“I’m not about to go throw myself off the Astronomy Tower, if that’s what you’re asking,” he answers dryly. “I’m sorry you had to see that. In my defense, I had just found out that I was about to face a dragon.” Malfoy looks pointedly at the dead basilisk that’s not even ten feet away from them. “That’s different. I had help then, and I still barely survived. Plus, it wasn’t in front of a crowd either.”

“Aww, do you get stage fright, Potter?”

He nearly snaps back at Malfoy before realizing that his voice sounds more playful than outright antagonizing. He still rolls his eyes and mutters, “Oh, bugger off, Malfoy. I hate dealing with crowds. And the press.” Though that’s a more recent discovery. “This tournament is practically my worst nightmare. Now are we going to keep gossiping, or do you want to actually try doing the spell?”

Malfoy chuckles quietly before he takes a deep breath, idly twirling his wand as he thinks of a memory. “I think I have something,” he murmurs. “Expecto Patronum!” Despite Harry’s warning, Malfoy still looks pretty upset when nothing happens.

“Your wand movements were fine, so it’s just the memory. Keep trying different ones. Seriously, it took me forever to figure out what worked for me. This isn’t even a spell that shows up on our NEWTs.”

“Right. Right...” Malfoy mutters as he narrows his eyes. He paces back and forth as he mulls things over, trying and failing to cast the spell several more times before he asks, “What memory do you use, Potter?”

“Um... It varies. Usually something that involves my friends, though.” Prongs has long since disappeared again, first fading into mist and then into nothing at all as he watches Malfoy agonize over the spell. It’s odd to see him struggling with anything. He’s always been like Hermione in the way that learning new spells never really seems to give him any trouble at all.

He bets that Malfoy would have a fit if he heard him making that comparison. Maybe he should tell him.

“Hm. Maybe if I...” Malfoy’s face hardens in determination, nose wrinkling slightly as he shouts, “Expecto Patronum!” This time, there is something. It’s only a flash of silver mist that disappears within seconds, but it’s something. Harry’s jaw may as well be on the floor. “You saw that, right, Potter?! You saw that!”

“Yeah, that’s... Bloody hell, maybe you’ll pick this up faster than I thought,” he murmurs, eyes wide with shock. “There are adult wizards who can’t manage an Incorporeal Patronus at all. And you figured it out in a few hours. I feel like I should be very cross right now.” He isn’t, though. He’s more impressed than anything else.

“As much as I hate to admit it, I feel like it says more about your teaching than my skill that I managed that so quickly.” Indeed, it looks like it physically pains Malfoy to even say it. “I

wasn't exactly getting anywhere on my own."

"Now who's admitting that they have no idea what they're doing?" he teases with a smug grin.

"Oh, sod off, Potter."

Malfoy makes a few more attempts at the spell before they call it a night. His mist shield doesn't get much larger—really, it's more of a thin veil than anything else— but it does seem a bit brighter the last time that he casts it. "Just keep thinking of different memories," he encourages. "You'll find what kind works best for you eventually. You're definitely on the right track or you wouldn't be producing mist at all."

"I gathered that, Potter." Malfoy scoffs before saying, "I'll think it over. We can't risk doing this too often—my housemates are nosier than yours— and you do still need to prepare for the second task... We'll meet up twice a week? How does Thursday sound?"

"Yeah, sounds good." It'll give them enough time for Malfoy's order to arrive, and they'll still have a couple of days left before the full moon. "Now be quiet," he whispers as they step out into Myrtle's bathroom, quickly ducking underneath the Invisibility Cloak together. "This thing doesn't muffle sound."

It's a bit awkward to move underneath the cloak with Malfoy. He's not nearly as used to matching Harry's steps as Ron and Hermione were, but by the time they make it down to the Dungeons, he seems to be getting used to it.

"... Thanks, Potter," he murmurs as he disappears into the Slytherin common room, and Harry is pleased as can be, barely stifling the urge to hum under his breath as he walks back up to Gryffindor Tower.

He had fun tonight. Maybe Malfoy isn't quite as bad as he thought...

Thursday arrives before he knows it. Fleur's been helping him practice a few nonverbal spells, and he has every intention of showing Malfoy that he can also cast 'Lumos' without an incantation tonight. Is it petty of him to intentionally show off like that? Probably. But it doesn't seem like Malfoy even meant to show off, and that bothers him, just a little. It's kind of embarrassing.

He's drawn out of his internal musing by McGonagall clearing her throat, calling the class's attention back to her now that each of their guinea pigs, previously guinea fowls, are sitting in individual cages on her desk. "I have an announcement for you all." The entire class straightens up at the tone in her voice, eager to see where this is going. "The Yule Ball is approaching, a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with our foreign guests. Now, the ball will only be open to fourth years and above, though you may invite a younger student as your partner if you wish."

A shrill giggle slips out of Lavender's lips. Parvati nudges her hard in the ribs, barely stifling her own laughter. McGonagall continues as if they haven't done anything at all, though he does notice a faint twitch in her eyebrow. "Dress robes will be worn, and the ball will start at

eight o'clock on Christmas day, finishing at midnight in the Great Hall. Now then—" McGonagall deliberately gives a hard stare to the entire class. "The Yule Ball is, of course, a chance for us all to, er, let our hair down," she says, sounding thoroughly disapproving of the idea.

Lavender laughs outright at that, and it isn't hard to understand why. McGonagall, with her hair done up in a tight bun and a severe expression on her face, looks like she's never relaxed or 'let her hair down' a day in her life.

"But that does not mean that we will be relaxing the standards of behavior we expect from Hogwarts students. I will be most seriously displeased if a Gryffindor embarrasses the school in any way." The bell rings as if to punctuate her final words, and Harry wonders if she timed it like that on purpose. It wouldn't surprise him. There's a flurry of rustling as everyone packs their bags and slings them over their shoulders, slipping out of the classroom as quickly as possible. "Mr. Potter, a word, if you please?"

His shoulders slump as he walks over to McGonagall's desk. He doesn't even know what he did this time, honest. He's been pretty well-behaved, all things considered. She waits until the class has finished filing out of the classroom before saying, "Potter, the champions and their partners—"

"What partners?" Harry asks with a furrowed eyebrow. McGonagall studies him suspiciously, as if she thinks he's trying to be funny. He really has no clue what she's talking about.

"Your partners for the Yule Ball, Potter," McGonagall continues coldly, sounding very unamused. "Your dance partners."

Oh hell no. "I don't dance."

"Oh yes you do," McGonagall snaps irritably. "That's what I'm telling you. Traditionally, the champions and their partners open the ball."

Why the hell would he care about tradition? When has he ever cared about tradition? He's not even supposed to be part of this tournament. This isn't one of the tasks. He's not going to lose his magic for having no part in it. "I'm not dancing."

"It is traditional," McGonagall repeats firmly, proving that she doesn't know him very well at all. "You are a Hogwarts champion, and you will do what is expected of you as a representative of the school. So make sure you get yourself a partner, Potter."

Well, now he's not going at all. "But— I don't—"

"You heard me, Potter," McGonagall says with a tone of absolute finality. He is going to get so many detentions when he doesn't show up. It'll be worth it, though.

He's sick of these people demanding so much from him. It's not like he entered this tournament willingly, and McGonagall knows that. Like hell is he bending to their every whim; doing the interview was bad enough. He'll compete in the tasks, as he's required, and not a single thing more.

Harry is still fuming by the time he meets up with Malfoy. By the way Malfoy quirks his eyebrow the second he sees him, it must be written all over his face. “Who hexed you this morning?”

“McGonagall...!” he snarls under his breath before levelling a glare at the sink and hissing, “**Open!!**” Malfoy follows after him with a quiet air of contemplation, not even flinching when Harry sharply hisses for the entrance to close behind him. The stone screeches as it slams shut.

“And what did Professor McGonagall do to piss you off, exactly?”

“Order me to find a date for the Yule Ball. She said that it’s traditional for the champions to open it.”

Malfoy’s eyebrow lifts even higher. “It is.”

“I don’t dance,” he repeats emphatically. “I wouldn’t even know where to start. And even if I did, I’m not going. It’s bad enough that they roped me into that stupid interview. I’m not a real champion. I’m not even supposed to be in this tournament! I will do the tasks so I can keep my magic and not a damn thing more!”

Malfoy’s eyebrows disappear beneath his hairline. His shoulders start shaking. A quiet snort escapes his lips, and that quickly devolves into genuine, tear-jerking laughter. Harry blinks, caught so off-guard that his anger abandons him for a moment. “Oh, this is going to be a riot!” Malfoy snickers. “It’s an absolute travesty that you can’t dance –and believe me, we will be correcting that; you can’t avoid political balls forever, even if you can get away with avoiding this one as a form of protest– but the looks on their faces when you don’t show up...!” Malfoy starts laughing again. “Oh, just the thought of it...!”

No sooner than they enter the chamber, Malfoy shouts, “Expecto Patronum!” The mist is much brighter this time. Larger too. It’s beginning to look like a proper shield.

“What memory did you use?” he asks curiously, tilting his head as the shield lingers far longer this time.

“I was imagining the look of appalled horror on Professor McGonagall’s face when you never show up,” Malfoy answers with another snicker. “I guess imagined scenarios work too. That’s good to know... I’ll try it a few more times before we start working on breaking down the basilisk. The last thing we need is for you to butcher the thing in your anger.” Malfoy waves him off and says, “Go meditate or something. I’ve got this.”

It’s a bit infuriating that Malfoy’s suggestion actually helps. It’s even more so when he realizes that he never even got the chance to show off his recent bit of exploration in nonverbal magic. Harry takes several deep breaths, trying to amuse himself with the thought of the entire school realizing that he hasn’t shown up to the ball. McGonagall will probably just think he’s running late at first, tapping her foot impatiently and vowing to give him detention for it. Then it gets closer and closer to eight o’clock, and she starts getting worried. She’ll want to send other professors out to look for him. Dumbledore will be displeased, but Harry can’t bring himself to care about that too much anymore. Snape will have an even

fiercer scowl than usual, and if he catches him, he'll give him detention for the rest of the school year. But he won't be able to find him. None of them will be able to find him because he'll be in the Room of Requirement, having specifically asked it to hide him from everyone else. Or maybe he'll allow his friends to stumble across him if they can find the room. He can always have Dobby bring them to the room after the ball is over... Or maybe they leave the ball early because they'd rather spend time with him than dance at some stuffy ball anyway, and then they can all laugh and have fun and be themselves without staring eyes and whispers trailing their every step. That sounds nice.

"Expecto Patronum," he murmurs. Prongs greets him like an old friend, though for just a second, he could've sworn that he saw the echo of something else, something with wings, hidden within the mist. He's probably imagining things. "Hey, Prongs!" The stag huffs quietly before laying down next to him, and the sensation of magic gently pressing against his skin is a warm, comforting feeling, like curling up in front of the fireplace during the worst parts of winter. He brushes his hand against a lightly glowing ear, and he can almost imagine the sensation of fur beneath his fingertips before it fades into that pleasant buzzing again.

When he glances up, Malfoy has stopped trying to cast the spell, watching Harry with a strange look in his eyes. "... Do you mind if I...?" He holds up a hand in silent question, and Harry nods.

"Go say hello, Prongs." The stag walks forward, and Malfoy doesn't even get the chance to reach out for him before the Patronus does something neither of them was expecting.

"Hello," Prongs echoes in an eerily perfect replica of Harry's voice. Draco blinks. He blinks. They both look at each other and then back at Prongs.

"... Did you know they could do that?"

"No," he admits. "That's new to me too."

"How strange... The applications alone...!" Malfoy sounds even more excited about learning the Patronus Charm than he was before, and that's saying something. "This could be a completely new discovery, do you understand that, Potter?! I've been reading up on this, and I never saw any mention of a Patronus being used for anything beyond warding off Dark creatures, like Dementors or Lethifolds. They have unique forms! Forms that are utterly unable to be tampered with or hidden unless someone only uses the Incorporeal Form. This could be a way of private communication that runs no risk of being intercepted or tampered with like owl mail does!"

He shuffles his feet as heat tinges his face red. "I didn't even mean to discover it, though."

"But you did! Half of our greatest discoveries were either by complete accident or by trying to accomplish something else. This is still huge, Potter!" Malfoy is smiling. His eyes are glittering with joy that makes them look like they contain small oceans within them, reflecting the sun's rays as light dances on their surface. He looks genuinely, truly happy. Malfoy seems to have the same realization that he does at the same exact moment. "Expecto Patronum!"

It's not a fully Corporeal Patronus, but it's incredibly close to one. He can see a flash of cloven feet and curly fur before the blue mist fades back into a shield. "A sheep...?" he murmurs hesitantly.

"Or something similar, probably," Malfoy agrees. He hasn't stopped grinning. "It looked a bit small for that though. A lamb, maybe?"

"I feel like I should be pissed that you're figuring this out so quickly," he repeats with great emphasis.

"I told you that I'm good at Charms," Malfoy says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Besides, I can tell you're not angry." He's about to ask what makes him so sure of that when he continues, "You're smiling, Potter."

Huh. He hadn't even noticed. Malfoy laughs when he tries and fails to wipe the expression off his face. "Shut up, Malfoy," he grumbles with absolutely no heat.

"I don't think I will. Today is wonderful, an amazing day, and I'm going to bask in it for a while longer before we're elbow deep in basilisk guts." Malfoy is positively gleeful despite not managing to create anything more powerful than a shield again that night. He maintains that almost disturbingly cheery attitude as he instructs Harry on the best ways to dissect a serpent, and he's almost certain that he's doing it on purpose when he starts laughing at the faces Harry is making all throughout.

"Tippy!" A uniformed house elf appears before them, eyes widening in distress when she sees the gore covering them head to toe. That is, it appears, the price of carving into something so much larger than them.

"Master Draco! You is being filthy!!" A single snap of her fingers is all it takes for Malfoy to look pristine again, and she gives Harry a look of careful consideration before doing the same for him. "What do Master Draco and his friend be doing?!" she squeaks when she registers the very dead basilisk that's just behind them.

"Harvesting potions ingredients," Malfoy answers very casually, as if this is an everyday occurrence. It's only Tippy's stare of abject horror that tells Harry this isn't something he regularly does. "Could you do us a favor and take these to Gringotts?" Malfoy gestures to a carefully separated pile of fangs, scales, and a giant brain. "And tell them to split the profit evenly between the Potter and Malfoy Heir vaults. I'm sure they'll also be happy to hear that there is plenty more where that comes from, and that we'll be interested in commissioning battle robes made of basilisk scales once we've reached maturity. It'd be a waste of materials if we had them made before we finished growing..."

"We?" he asks in a clearly amused tone.

"We," Malfoy repeats snobbily. "Because I wouldn't be able to get a set at all if you hadn't killed the thing. Favors for favors, Potter. Do keep up."

"Right," he agrees with an easy laugh.

“Tippy can be doing that!” the small house elf agrees, even if she does still look vaguely nervous. “Is there anything else Master Draco be needing?”

“... Do keep this a secret from Mother and Father, for now. That’s an order. They can’t know that...” Malfoy glances in his direction.

Tippy nods rapidly. “Yes, Master Draco!” She pops away as quickly as she arrived, the efforts of their labor in hand, and Malfoy huffs out a quiet sigh of relief.

“That was risky, but there was really no other way for us to transport that,” he murmurs. “Imagine trying to send basilisk parts through the mail...!”

“If only Patronuses could deliver things too,” Harry snorts. Malfoy gets a carefully considering look on his face at that, and he shakes his head even as a smile tugs at his lips. “They can’t. At least not at the level I can make them. They’re not solid enough for that.”

“Blast. Maybe someday...” Draco hums, and it isn’t until they’re about to leave for the night that he presses something into his hand. It’s a single, pristine, green leaf. “The mandrake leaf,” he explains. “Don’t forget about the full moon, Potter. I’ve got a few extras just in case we have to do this again, but I’d like to avoid it.”

“Me too,” he agrees. “We could always give the extras to the other champions if we don’t need them... In exchange for a favor, of course,” he continues seeing the unimpressed glare that Malfoy levels him with. “They’ve been training me for the tournament already. I doubt they’d mind teaching you a few things if you asked.”

“Perhaps,” he allows. “Let’s get through the transformation ourselves before we start thinking about others, though.”

‘Ah, Slytherins.’

Funny how that’s a thought that sounds decidedly fond instead of annoyed now. Oh, how things change.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I have been looking forward to this chapter for so, *so* long. I hope you all enjoy! :3

“Hey, Fleur? Would you mind helping me with something?”

“Of course! What do you need, ‘Arry?”

They’re all enjoying breakfast in the privacy of the kitchens this morning, and that’s the main reason he’s asking her now instead of later. “It’s a full moon tomorrow, and I was wondering if—”

“Do you have a furry little secret ve should know about?” Viktor asks with an almost perfectly deadpan expression. It’s only the faint smile twitching at his lips that gives away the fact that he’s joking.

“No,” Harry snorts, pulling out the mandrake leaf with an eager gleam in his eyes. “I was wondering if you could use a Sticking Charm to stick this to the bottom of my tongue tomorrow night? That way I don’t have to worry about messing it up.”

“You’re going to become an Animagus?” Cedric asks with a wide smile. “That’s a brilliant idea, Harry! Especially since we still have no idea what the next task is... It’s something that could help, at the very least.”

“Of course I can!” Fleur agrees with a delighted clap of her hands. “Zat really is a wonderful idea. I may just ‘ave to start getting the materials togezzer myself... Zere’s always the next full moon, non? We may not get so much time between zhe second and third task.”

“The last task vill probably be close to the end of the year,” Viktor murmurs. “Ve wouldn’t be exempt from our tests, otherwise. Ve still have to do the homework.”

“Not that it helps much when we still have to take our NEWTs,” Cedric groans. “But you have a point. Still, that just gives us more chances to get it right if the conditions are off or we mess up at any point.”

“So... All in favor of becoming Animagi?” Fleur asks before raising her hand. Three more immediately join hers in the air. “Wonderful! Zis should be fun. ‘As anyone got any further with zere eggs? All I’ve been able to confirm is zat zey are not veela.”

“Fred and George have been able to rule out harpies and banshees too, but they’re still brainstorming what else they could be. It’s been a bit slow going, but they’re busy with personal projects too.”

“They are the ones who make all the pranks, yes?” Viktor asks with a contemplative hum. “Very inspired. We don’t see products like that in Bulgaria.”

Cedric snorts at that. “The Weasley twins are one of a kind here too, so don’t feel too left out.”

“I’m sure they’d be very happy to send you whatever you want through owl order,” Harry reassures him, and he almost regrets it when he sees the glint of excitement in Viktor’s eyes. He doesn’t want to know. “... Do you guys know what you’re going to do about the Yule Ball?”

“Cho and I are going together,” Cedric says with a beaming smile. “We’ve already coordinated our robes and everything.”

“... I was planning on asking one of the twins, actually.” Harry blinks at the almost shy hesitation in Viktor’s voice. He doesn’t sound like that often anymore, at least not around them. “... The quieter one? George? Any advice?”

“If you can tell them apart, then you’ve already got a lot going for you,” he answers honestly. “Not many people can. I know Fred’s going with Angelina, but as far as I know, George hasn’t asked anyone yet. Just go for it.” Viktor nods seriously, appearing deep in thought.

“I ‘aven’t asked anyone yet. And everyone zat ‘as asked me ‘asn’t been able to look me in zhe eye while doing it,” Fleur huffs. “Do you want to go as friends, ‘Arry? Or ‘ave you got someone else in mind?”

“... Do you promise not to tell anyone?” All three of them perk up at that, and he tries not to laugh at the way a few house elves hover closely too. “That goes for you guys as well,” he addresses the house elves at large. “I could get into a lot of trouble if someone finds out before I can go through with it.”

“We not be saying anything, Mr. Harry Potter,” Winky promises as she refills their tea. “Because you be asking us not to, and we be good elves.” She glances pointedly at Dobby. “And Dobby never be betraying your secrets anyway.”

“Dumbledore be saying we can even call him a barmy old codger if we want!” Dobby exclaims with great excitement. “He not be demanding us to spill secrets. And I not be telling even if he asks because Harry is being my friend.”

“I’m not going.” He flinches slightly at the sound of a shattering dish and a quiet gasp, though the mess is cleaned up before he can even get a good look at it. “Mostly because McGonagall got all in my face about it and demanded that I do it as ‘one of the champions’, like that’s something I asked for. I’m only obligated to do the tasks, and I feel like a lot of people are a bit too keen to forget that I’ve been dragged into this kicking and screaming. I’m going to remind them.”

Viktor snorts loudly, Fleur tries and fails to stifle her laughter behind her hand, and Cedric gapes at him in shock. “Besides, I don’t dance. Asking me to open for the ball is just asking for a disaster, and I’d like to spare myself the embarrassment.”

"I am not very good either," Viktor admits sheepishly. "I am... Very clumsy off of a broom. But I still want to go. You shouldn't if you don't want to, though."

"I'll find someone else," Fleur reassures him with a smile. "Don't let them get away with bullying you into going if you don't want to. You would just be miserable. Do you have a plan to avoid it?"

He glances at Cedric who just chuckles before saying, "I guess there's a reason you're in Gryffindor, huh?" This is really more of a petty Slytherin move, but he's not going to even try explaining that one. "I won't say anything, Harry. I can't blame you for being mad about it. I would be too; it's not fair."

"Dobby showed me a secret room," he starts hesitantly, smiling at the happy squeak that comes from his left. "I'm still figuring out the ins and outs of it, but I'll probably show you guys where it is before too much longer. I can make myself impossible to find in there, even if someone knows where the room is, or allow only a select few people entrance if I want. I figure that I'll hide out in there all night. Maybe we could hang out after you guys leave the Yule Ball? Have a sleepover or something?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Fleur murmurs fondly. "I will look forward to it."

"Do you mind if I bring Cho along?"

"That's fine."

"Then sure! Thanks, Harry."

"I will come," Viktor promises. "It is bound to be... Crazy. I don't want to be stuck at the ball too long anyway."

"And I am bringing hot chocolate and dinner and snacks!" Dobby promises with a beaming smile. "If that is being okay?"

"Of course, Dobby," he murmurs. "You could come with nothing at all, and I'd just be happy that you were there."

The overjoyed hug he receives from Dobby cements yet another memory that he's sure to use for his Patronus someday. He seems to be making an awful lot of those these days.

It feels very strange to have a leaf stuck to the bottom of his tongue. He can still talk normally and avoid accidentally biting into it, though, so he's taking that as a win. He and Malfoy won't have a chance to talk until tomorrow, but a single nod from across the Great Hall tells him that they're both in the same boat right now. They just have to hope that the next full moon is visible.

'I wonder who did the charm for Malfoy? Or was he able to do it himself? I guess I can always ask him later...'

While the two of them are walking down to the Chamber of Secrets again, Harry finds himself asking, "Do you have any plans for the Yule Ball?"

“I’ll have to make an appearance, of course. I’ve been attending these parties for far too long to get away with doing anything else. Besides, I absolutely cannot miss the looks on all of their faces when you don’t show. Unless you changed your mind...?”

“Nope.”

“That’s what I figured. Why do you ask, then?”

“Um, well, Viktor, Fleur, Cedric, and Cho were all going to come hang out with me and Dobby after they leave the ball. There’s this hidden room, and it can keep out everyone that I don’t want to find me. It’s where I’m going to hide out during this whole mess. I was just wondering if... Maybe you wanted to come too? It really is a cool room.”

“Hm... Pansy and I are just going as friends anyway, so I don’t see why not. I can get a good laugh, do a few dances with her, and then slip out. Are you certain your friends will be able to keep a secret?” he asks with a quirked eyebrow.

“Yeah. Viktor hasn’t even mentioned you to me once, and you’re the one that keeps using him to pass along messages,” he deadpans. “No one is going to say anything about us being friends.”

“Oh, so we’re friends now, are we, Potter?”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” he grumbles as they get back to work at steadily breaking up the basilisk into parts.

“... Draco.” He blinks in shock, not quite sure that he’s hearing this right. “My friends call me Draco.”

“Harry, then,” he mumbles before devoting his focus to the giant corpse laying in front of them. It’s easier to think about that than the heat in his cheeks and the weird, fluttering sensation in his stomach.

It’s strange to see so many students staying for Christmas break. He knows that it’s just because of the Yule Ball, but it’s making his typical sneaking around quite difficult. Not that he really has to sneak into the library, per se, but it’s more fun to do it this way. Besides, he really doesn’t want anyone to see him researching Patronuses.

The more he thinks about it, the more certain he becomes that he saw Prongs with wings, if only for a second, and he wants to figure out what’s happening there. Plus, even if he’s pretty sure that Draco has already scoured every book in this library that so much as mentions Patronuses for any sign that they’re used for messages, it doesn’t hurt to double-check.

Corporeal Patronus Forms: Explained

Often, a Patronus represents a hidden element of the caster’s personality. An element of themselves that was previously unknown until a time of great need brought it to the light. This often results in Patronuses taking the form of animals that one may not expect to represent themselves.

It is rare that a witch or wizard's favorite animal is the one to represent them, and when it does, it is often an indication of a self-absorbed or obsessive nature. They are often unable to hide their core self in day-to-day life, even in situations where doing so is recommended. It is advised to give such witches and wizards your respect, and in some circumstances, your caution as well.

Harry sits up straighter when he skims the next line, doubling back to reread it as the information sinks in.

Though rare, it is possible for a Patronus to change forms, but only ever once. If the caster goes through an emotional upheaval of some sort, whether that be good or bad, then it is possible for their Patronus to become another animal entirely. There are very few records of such an event occurring, but those who do prove that such a change can be something as simple as shifting from a Golden Retriever to a Doberman or something as vastly different as a bear becoming a finch.

Huh. That makes sense, actually. The Triwizard Tournament is very stressful, and if almost killing himself because of it didn't count as an emotional upheaval, then Harry wasn't sure what would. *'So is Prongs becoming some sort of bird? I guess that wouldn't be too bad. Or maybe there's just the chance of him becoming a bird if I spiral again, and he'll remain a stag otherwise. There really isn't any specific information on what causes a Patronus to change.'*

Harry skims the rest of the book, but he neither finds any more information regarding that subject nor any hint that Patronuses have been used as messengers at any point in history. The fact that he might have made some sort of magical discovery is genuinely baffling to him.

"... Harry?" he jolts, snapping the book shut as Hermione hesitantly approaches his table. "Can we, um... Can we talk for a moment?"

He really doesn't want to, but he just heaves out a sigh, puts the book back on the shelf, and says, "Sure. Want to go out to the lake?" It's a bit cold for that, but Hermione nods rapidly anyway, too relieved that he's agreeing at all to put up a protest about it. "So..." he murmurs once they're out on the grounds. "How're you doing?"

This is so painfully awkward. It only gets more so when Hermione snuffles. Her face is red from either the cold, embarrassment, or both. "I've been better," she admits. "I just feel so stupid...!"

"You're not stupid."

"But I handled the Ron situation terribly, and now I've lost both of my best friends for it!" Huh? That's news to him. "You were right," she snuffles. "He's so upset about you being friends with the other champions, and he's been in such a sour mood lately... And he's so shallow, ugh! I overheard him talking with Seamus about how they needed to hurry up and ask a girl to the ball before they wound up being forced to go with trolls, and then he started making fun of Eloise. And even when I called him out on it, he wasn't ashamed at all. Then he had the nerve to ask me to go with him right after, but I already agreed to go with Neville. I just... I really messed up, didn't I, Harry? I'm sorry."

"I accept your apology." He smiles as she rubs at her eyes. "I don't mind talking with you or anything. I just... It won't be the same as before. You have to know that."

"Yeah, I do," she murmurs. "I won't ask that of you. Just... You're not lonely, are you? I'm worried about you, especially after this year is over."

"I'm fine," he promises her. "I've still got the twins, and Cho will still be here next year too." And Draco, though he's certainly not mentioning him. "Though I will miss the rest of them... Are you? Lonely, that is."

"Neville's very nice," she murmurs. "And I've been spending a lot of time with Ginny lately. She's got a very strange friend in Ravenclaw, Luna, but she's not bad either..."

"I'm glad," he murmurs. "I should probably get going, but it was nice catching up with you."

"... Yeah. Be careful, Harry."

"I will be."

Christmas –and by extension, the Yule Ball– is almost upon them before he knows it. He finally finishes buying gifts for all of his friends on the Hogsmeade weekend before the ball, so now all that's left to do is wait. Both for the inevitable fallout of his little rebellion and for the next step in becoming an Animagus. The next full moon is only a few days after Christmas, and that knowledge is making him even giddier than he usually is about the holiday.

Hedwig returns with a letter from Sirius on the day before Christmas, puffed up proudly as she passes the letter over to him directly. "Thanks, girl," he coos softly. She very happily accepts a link of sausage as a treat before flying back to the Owlery for some well-deserved rest. "And thank you, Cedric, for that Colour Change Charm."

"Of course! She is a bit distinctive, so I can understand why you'd want to hide her." Hedwig hadn't exactly been happy to have her brilliant, snow-white feathers charmed a muddy brown, but when he told her that it was that or him using another owl, she took the letter without further protest. He's not willing to risk Sirius for anything, and she knows it. "Though I'm sorry it didn't last the whole trip."

"That's fine," he murmurs. "If anything, it'll just make it harder for anyone to track her."

He doesn't get the chance to open his letter until he's curled up in his bed later that evening, curtains drawn shut tight around him.

Dear Harry,

Congratulations on getting past the Horntail! Whoever put your name in that goblet shouldn't be feeling too happy right now! I was going to suggest a Conjunctivitis Curse since a dragon's eyes are its weakest point, but your way was better. And way funnier. People are still throwing fits about it. I could not be prouder of the chaos you're sowing, pup.

Don't let yourself get complacent, though, Harry. You've only completed one task, and whoever is trying to kill you still has plenty of opportunities to do so. Keep your eyes open – especially around Karkaroff, even if you are friends with Krum– and concentrate on keeping yourself out of trouble.

Keep in touch. I still want to hear about anything unusual.

Sirius

Christmas dawns bright and early, and he's pleasantly surprised by the pile of presents at the end of his bed. It's a part of his new reality that he doesn't think he'll ever quite get used to. Dobby materializes next to him just after he puts on his glasses and finishes dragging all his gifts inside the barrier of his curtains, rocking back and forth with a smile as he says, "Dobby be wanting to wish Harry a Merry Christmas and bring him a present. And one from all the other house elves too! We is being enjoying your company very much."

"Thanks, Dobby," he whispers, not wanting to wake his dormmates. "I've got a gift for you too, actually." He knows that the other house elves would rebel against getting a present – he'll wear them down eventually– but he'd have to be blind to miss how much Dobby loves wearing socks in all sorts of different colors and patterns that clash horribly with the tea towel uniform that he now wears alongside all the other house elves. Dobby is positively delighted when he opens the small, wrapped package containing a pair of mismatched socks. One is a bright, neon green that hurts to even look at with tiny cauldrons that are in the process of bubbling over scattered across the fabric, and the other is bubblegum pink and covered in flowers that sway gently in an imaginary breeze.

"Dobby be loving them!" his friend squeaks with teary eyes as he passes over a pair of packages. "This one is being from Dobby, and the other is being from all the elves." Harry opens Dobby's present first, smiling fondly when it reveals a pair of mismatched socks as well. "Dobby is making them himself! He is buying the wool with his wages!" And oh. Now he's got tears in his eyes too. Even for something as small as socks, buying so many different colors of wool with a wage of only one Galleon a week is... Dobby's been saving up for this for at least a month, if not longer. He immediately puts on the bright red sock with racing brooms stitched into the fabric and the equally bright green one with snitches all over it. They're delightfully warm and comfortable, and he loves them.

"Thank you, Dobby. These are brilliant!" Dobby wiggles in place, sniffing quietly as a tear slips down his face. He looks like he's about to shake out of his skin with excitement, so Harry chuckles fondly and opens the next present without much further ado. It's a badge, reminiscent of the 'Support Cedric Diggory' badge that has quickly become a permanent part of his wardrobe, charmed to say 'Elves' Best Helper'. Harry tilts his head in silent question, and Dobby begins to explain.

"You is be saying that you miss cooking, so Dobby be talking to the other elves! They is being scandalized by the words, but they is being agreeing to let you help if you be wearing it into the kitchen."

"You are the best friend, Dobby," he says emphatically, bringing him in for a hug that has Dobby squeaking in surprise. The action still makes his skin crawl slightly, but he's so

touched by the gesture that he forces the reaction down. Dobby doesn't deserve that. "Thank you."

"Of course! I is being needing to go –we already be working on Christmas dinner– but I be seeing you later! Dobby be bringing dishes for Harry and his friends to the Come and Go room tonight. Do you be wanting me to show them the way there?"

"Yes, please. And if you see him slip away from the crowd... Will you show Draco the room too?"

Dobby blinks in shock, nodding hesitantly. "You is being friends with Ex-Master Draco...?"

"Yeah," he murmurs, suddenly feeling quite nervous. Maybe he should've just asked Winky to do this, given Dobby's history with the Malfoys. "I am."

"Good," Dobby says with a nod of his head. "I can be doing that. Ex-Master Draco has always been much nicer to Dobby than his cruel, nasty father. Dobby be glad that you is being friends." Dobby disappears with an inaudible pop, and Harry gently runs his finger over his new badge one more time before he begins tearing into his other presents.

Sirius's gift is a handy penknife with attachments to unlock any lock and undo any knot, and he silently vows that he'll always keep it close. Hagrid sends him a massive box of all of Harry's favorite sweets –Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, Chocolate Frogs, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, and Fizzing Whizbees– that he couldn't hope to eat all by himself if he tried. He's definitely bringing those with him to the Room of Requirement tonight; he can share them with the others. Mrs. Weasley sends her usual package as well, and that soothes a knot of anxiety that had settled in his chest without even realizing it. His sweater is an emerald green again this year, but this one has a dragon stitched into its center. He slips it on immediately. Fred and George give him several Canary Creams and Ton-Tongue Toffees –"To prank your cousin with, even if we don't get the chance to"– and a free pass for them to prank Ron into oblivion, no questions asked. He can't help snickering at the thought.

And then he gets to the presents from his new friends. Viktor gifts him an autographed Quidditch robe for the national Bulgarian team –one of his old sets, in fact– with a note promising to take him up on a Seeker's Match at some point in the near future to see if Harry is as good as the rumors claim. He's absolutely thrilled about it. Fleur's present is a hand-carved runic necklace. The pendant is engraved with Sowilo –a rune that looks eerily like his scar, and he can't help wondering whether or not that's a coincidence–, Uruz, and Thurisaz, and together, they should shield him from most minor jinxes and hexes, reflecting them back on the caster without any effort on his part. Fleur is awesome and also a bit terrifying. He puts the necklace on immediately, and he intends to always wear it. He can always tuck it beneath his tie while wearing his school robes.

Cedric gifts him a wand polishing kit –reminding Harry that it's very important to keep his wand in the best condition possible both in general and for the tasks to come– and, to Harry's surprise, Cho sends him a broom servicing kit. He'll have to get her something later and apologize; they aren't especially close, so he hadn't expected anything from her. Then he gets to the final present. It's clearly from Draco. The quality of the wrapping paper alone is proof enough of that, never mind the silver and green coloration. He carefully unwraps the gift,

gently folding the nice wrapping paper and setting it to the side for the moment. He blinks in shock at what he sees within the box.

Dozens, if not hundreds, of individually charmed buttons that say ‘Support Harry Potter, the Fourth Champion’. He taps one of the badges, trying and failing to ignore the lump that forms in his throat when the golden text shifts into a gentle, glowing silver that declares, ‘Strength in Unity.’ He suddenly feels like an annotated, secondhand copy of an advanced Charms book with several theories and experiments written down in its margins was not a nearly good enough gift for Draco. It’s hard to think of a gift for someone who can buy anything he wants, and the theories do seem interesting but... Well, it was better than anything else Harry could come up with. He’ll have to do better next year.

Harry,

Feel free to distribute these as you please, though no one can know that I made them, obviously. I know that you weren’t bothered by the original badges either way, but... Regardless. I do hope you like them.

Blessed Yule,

Draco

The castle is positively buzzing with energy all day. Harry enjoys lunch with the other champions and Cho, who he thanks profusely for the gift and apologizes for not sending one in return, but she waves him off with a smile. “Don’t worry about it, Harry. It’s the least I can do after you let Cedric borrow your broom for the first task. I quite like him in one piece, you know?” And, well, that’s that, it would seem. He’s just relieved that she isn’t angry.

He gets brought into a snowball fight with the Weasley twins, but George ends up stepping out of the game at about half past six. “He’s nervous,” Fred confides in him as he redirects a snowball that almost pelts Harry in the face. He’s pretty sure that he didn’t even use a wand for that. “He wasn’t expecting Viktor to ask him, but he’s been pretty pleased about it.”

The rest of the boys start heading back to their dorms about an hour before the ball begins, and after a moment of careful consideration, Harry puts on the dress robes that Mrs. Weasley got for him. *‘Huh. She was right. Emerald green really does bring out my eyes.’*

It may be a bit silly to dress up if he’s not going to the ball, but it’s better if no one catches on to his plan before it’s too late to do anything about it. Rumors have already been flying about his mystery partner since he’s refused to name any names, simply saying that he already has a date any time someone asked him if they could go with him. Besides, it feels like a shame to never wear something so nice, and he is hoping that he’ll outgrow his current robes within a year or two...

Harry slips out of his dormitory just before everyone begins heading for the Great Hall, ducking out of sight and beneath his Invisibility Cloak as soon as he’s out of their sights. He keeps a close eye on the map as he walks up to the seventh floor, but almost everyone is either in their common rooms or gathered by the Great Hall. Once he finds himself standing in front of the tapestry, he paces back and forth, thinking *‘I need a place for me and my*

friends to relax and have fun. Somewhere that only we can find and that we can spend the night in if we want. No one but me, Dobby, Fleur, Viktor, Cedric, Cho, and Draco should have access to the room. No one else should be able to find us.'

The house elves had advised him to be very careful with the wording of his request for the Room of Requirement today, knowing that they could be ordered to find him if a professor thought of doing so. It's the only reason that he isn't letting any other house elf but Dobby have access to the room tonight.

He's never seen the Room of Requirement look so beautiful. Twinkling, crystalline icicles dangle from the ceiling, reflecting tiny rainbows as they glimmer in the candlelight. A gentle melody plays in the background, soothing and slow, with words that he is unfamiliar with but finds himself enraptured by nonetheless. The fireplace crackles. A comforting warmth fills the room, chasing out the cold of winter and the lingering chill of melted snow that still clung to his skin. There's an empty banquet table against the far wall, just waiting for Dobby to fill it with dishes and snacks once he gets the chance to join him. There are a few other, smaller tables for them to sit and eat at, and chairs that look more like giant, plush pillows than seats. There are also several mattresses propped against a far corner and a veritable mountain of blankets to match. It's absolutely perfect.

"Thank you," he whispers, settling onto one of the cushions with a fond smile. It's surprisingly comfortable.

He hopes that the others are having a good time.

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There's a restless, anxious energy in the air that's only increasing the closer it gets to eight o'clock, and Draco has to force himself to remain composed. Everyone is starting to realize that they have not seen Harry in quite some time, and Professor McGonagall has a pinched expression on her face as she calls out, "Champions over here, please!"

Delacour looks as elegant and graceful as ever, adorned in robes of silvery-gray that should diminish her colouration but somehow enhances it instead. He'll have to ask her for any advice she can give there. It drives him mad that silver washes him out. Despite the air of grace to her, there's an edge of feralness that she can never quite completely mask, so it comes as no real surprise at all to see Blaise hanging off her arm. He knows full well that she only accepted his offer because he actually looked her in the eye when he asked, but Blaise has been unbearably smug about it nonetheless.

Diggory and Chang are no surprise. Everyone knows that they're gone on each other, and there have been talks of a bonding contract for quite some time now. Chang is in a stunning, navy cheongsam decorated with a floral pattern—specifically, yellow chrysanthemums—that matches the yellow accents on Diggory's robes. They manage to make something that should look quite gaudy endearing, somehow.

Viktor and Weasley, on the other hand, are definitely a surprise. He hadn't known that the two even knew each other before this, but they're speaking comfortably and seem quite pleased

with each other's company. Weasley has cleaned up nicely, and Krum notices if the way his eyes linger on his frame are any indication.

"Careful, Draco dear," Pansy teases with a delicate laugh. "I might start getting jealous."

He rolls his eyes, redirecting his attention back to Professor McGonagall with a barely repressed smirk. She's starting to look genuinely panicked now. "Mr. Potter!" she barks. There is no response. "Has anyone seen Mr. Potter? His date?" He barely stifles a snicker.

Pansy quirks an eyebrow at him. "You didn't leave him stunned in a hallway or something, did you?" she murmurs.

"No, no, this has nothing to do with me," he reassures her. "I just... Know what he's up to, is all." His friends understand the meaning of discretion, and really, it's about time he told them about his and Harry's secret training sessions anyway. "I'll explain later."

"You better," Pansy grumbles. "You know I hate being left out of the loop."

"Mr. Potter!!"

"Um, Professor...?" Granger hedges uncertainly. He's surprised to see her hanging off of Longbottom's arm, and he's even more surprised to see that she actually cleans up nicely when she puts in the effort. First a Weasley and now Granger; what is this world coming to? "I can't remember seeing Harry any time recently."

Then the murmuring starts. Whispers between friends, acquaintances, and complete strangers as they try to figure out when anyone last saw the Boy-Who-Lived. Delacour's voice cuts through them all with all the surgical precision of a good Severing Charm. "'E's not coming."

Professor McGonagall looks like she's about to have a stroke. "Pardon?"

"'E's not coming," Delacour repeats, quirking an eyebrow as if to imply that she believes their professor is quite slow. "You all seem quite content to forget zat 'e did not ask for zis. 'Arry is only required to participate in the tasks, so 'e is not coming."

"And you knew about this, Miss Delacour?" Hogwarts professors aren't allowed to give detentions to foreign students –only their headmasters have that privilege– but Professor McGonagall looks like she sorely wishes that she could right now.

"Ve all did," Viktor mutters under his breath. "Vat is the big deal? This is the Triwizard Tournament. There have always been three champions opening the dance." It's the most that he's ever heard Vitkor say. He usually just grunts and nods when he agrees to take something to Harry. Draco wonders how talkative he is when he isn't standing under the scrutiny of a whole crowd of people that makes him shift uncomfortably.

"Isn't it almost eight?" Diggory asks with wide, innocent –too innocent to be genuine– eyes. "We should probably head out there before long. I don't want anyone to get antsy..." Chang stifles a giggle behind her hand.

Professor McGonagall is subtly twitching with rage. This is the best thing he's ever seen. "I cannot believe that you would—!"

"We French are quite fond of our protests," Delacour cuts her off with a smirk. "I don't know why this is a surprise to you. We will support 'Arry, even when none of you will."

'Strength in unity indeed...'

Professor McGonagall doesn't get the chance to argue any further. It's time for the ball to begin, and the last thing she wants is to be running behind in addition to being down a champion. The opening dance is something to behold. Blaise and Delacour spin around elegantly on the dance floor, looking for all the world as if they were born to do so. Diggory and Chang are utterly, sickeningly enamored with one another, hardly looking away from each other's eyes for a single moment. They dance with the ease of people who know every possible move and reaction from their partner, and he suspects that they'll continue doing so for many years to come. Viktor and Weasley are both clumsy—though surprisingly, Weasley is less so—but they're both smiling from ear to ear and seem to be having a genuinely good time.

Cheers ring out once the first dance concludes, and several pairs make their way to the dance floor immediately after, himself and Pansy included. They flit around this way and that, far too used to such events to hesitate for a single step, swapping partners and taking the opportunity to network in a more relaxed environment. A ball like this is one of the few events that can ease the tensions between houses, if only for a single night, and it feels like a terrible waste to neglect that opportunity. Even still, he finds himself antsy barely more than an hour into the ball, and he locks eyes with Pansy who nods and gestures for him to go ahead.

She likely suspects that his previous arrangements for tonight have something to do with Harry now. He's going to be grilled for details later, but he can't much bring himself to care about that. It's not particularly difficult to avoid the gazes of the professors chaperoning the event, but he does have years of practice tailing after Harry while avoiding detection. It's far easier to melt into a crowd than it is to remain unseen in a dark, still castle.

He's only just left the Great Hall when a familiar face appears before him, wringing his ears anxiously. "Dobby be taking Ex-Master Draco to the Come and Go room," his once personal house elf murmurs. "If that is being okay?"

Draco holds out his hand with a small grin tugging at his lips. "That's just fine, Dobby. And... I'm glad to see that you're doing well." Dobby beams. He never thought that he'd say this, but freedom seems to suit him.

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Harry blinks in surprise when Dobby shows up with Draco in tow. He hasn't been here that long, has he? He wasn't expecting anyone to start showing up until nearly midnight... Draco's shoulders are shaking with repressed laughter, and a snort escapes him before it gives way to outright laughter.

“Oh, that was beautiful,” he murmurs as he wipes a tear from his eye. “I’ve never seen Professor McGonagall so enraged in my life. I didn’t expect the other champions to tell her outright that you weren’t showing up...!”

“They what?”

“Delacour stared her in the eye and said you weren’t showing up! And Viktor and Diggory both backed her; it was wonderful. A memory for my Patronus, for sure.” Draco shook his head slightly, recomposing himself as he says, “But for now, I do believe I said that I’d teach you how to dance.”

“I really don’t know how. Like, at all!” he protests.

“And you won’t be able to get away with that forever. It’s only me and you here, Harry. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. I’ve seen you do far worse than stumble midstep or step on my toes.”

“... Well, when you put it like that.”

Draco is a really, really good dancer. He leads Harry around the room as easy as breathing, and he doesn’t flinch at all the one time that he really does step on his toes. “There you are,” Draco murmurs. “See? You’re not half bad at this. Certainly more graceful than Viktor, at any rate.”

He snorts at that. “He’s that bad, huh? He did say as much.”

“At least he’s aware.” Draco’s smile makes that strange, fluttering feeling come back again. Is it... Warm in here? Maybe he should ask Dobby to put out the fireplace. “So... How does this room work, exactly?” Harry explains, and that glittering light returns to Draco’s eyes. “And you were willing to tell me about it? Thank you, Harry.”

“Thank Dobby,” he deflects, feeling strangely shy all of a sudden. “He’s the one that showed me.”

Draco hums at that. “I will.” They continue spinning around the room, and it’s as if the whole world around them has disappeared. There is no Room of Requirement, there is no castle full of students, there is no Triwizard Tournament, and there is no Voldemort. It’s just him and Draco. “Today was a wonderful day,” Draco murmurs. “I quite liked that book. The previous owner was a spellcrafter, did you know? There are some original spells in there, or at least the theory for them. I look forward to seeing if they’re viable.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he murmurs. “The badges were... Really sweet, Draco. Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

“Of course. It’s the least you deserve.” The two of them slowly, reluctantly step apart as the music shifts into something faster. Harry is not up to dancing such a fast waltz, and they both know it. Draco idly twirls his wand in his hand, repeating, “Today was a wonderful day.” His wand loops in a perfect circle before he says, “Expecto Patronum!”

A glowing, blue lamb leaps out of Draco's wand. There are tiny horns curling behind its ears, the beginning of something that will grow much larger with time, and its wool seems oddly curly, almost unruly, even for a sheep.

"A ram...!" Draco cries out, eyes absolutely glowing with excitement. "I did it, Harry! I did it! Come on, let's see if Patronuses can interact with each other. That's the first step to finding out if we can make them solid enough to deliver things! We can..."

A smile stretches across his lips as Draco rambles on and on in joy, making his Patronus glow even brighter. He finds that he's not thinking of much of anything at all when he whispers, "Expecto Patronum."

Prongs is not what comes from his wand. A gigantic, brilliant dragon fills the space between them, flapping its wings as it soars around the room. He and Draco both watch, utterly awestruck, as it lands behind him, curling its tail around his legs as its head hovers over his shoulder. The magic is still pleasantly warm to the touch, but it feels more smooth than it did with Prongs, more like a river caressing his skin than a field of grass brushing against it.

"It... It changed," Draco whispers. "Do you realize how rare that is, Harry? And magical creatures are exceptionally rare Patronus forms too... An Antipodean Opaleye. Has to be, with that head shape and size. They're the only dragons that get even larger than Horntails."

"They're beautiful..." The question is, why now? Things have been tentatively looking up regarding the tournament, so why would his Patronus change if it was the stress of that causing it?

"I know a lot about dragons." Wait. "If the caster goes through an emotional upheaval of some sort, whether that be good or bad, then it is possible for their Patronus to become another animal entirely." Hold on a moment.

'I... I didn't think of a memory when I cast. I was just looking at...' Draco.

Oh. Oh.

"They really are...!" Draco steps forward with a grin from ear to ear, the most unrestrained that he's ever seen him, as he reaches forward to brush his hand against the dragon. Harry's new Patronus leans into his touch. Draco's lamb brushes against his leg, tail flicking happily as Harry pats the top of its head. It feels like sunshine and warmth, rolling pastures and contentment, and the buzzing of that magic eases the realization somewhat.

Prongs was his dad. His new Patronus is Draco.

Harry's face burns a bright red, and he's immensely relieved that Draco is too caught up in admiring Harry's Patronus and basking in the pride of producing his own to notice it. He, himself, is so caught up in watching the boy that he fell in love with without even realizing it that he doesn't notice when Dobby rejoins them with the rest of Harry's friends.

They all gape at the scene before them, looking between themselves before deciding that it's really none of their business as they grab refreshments and settle in for the night.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Somehow, Harry doesn't end up with detention for the rest of the term after his stunt with the Yule Ball. He's not entirely sure how he managed to get so lucky, but he's pretty sure that Fleur, Viktor, and Cedric's very public show of support has a lot to do with it. McGonagall is still pretty pissed at him, though. It's probably because it makes the Gryffindors look bad, but he honestly can't bring himself to care about that. Between the champions and their dates, they wound up having representation for each house in Hogwarts anyway. Anything more would've been excessive, in his opinion.

"Are you excited?" Cedric asks with a wide grin. "I know I am!"

The skies are beautifully clear today, and that is very fortunate since tonight is the long-awaited full moon. He and Draco will be able to take the next step in becoming Animagi, and Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor will be starting their month with the mandrake leaf.

"Yeah! We'll have to head pretty deep into the Forbidden Forest to get ahold of dew that hasn't seen sunlight or been touched by human feet for at least a week, but we've got the silver teaspoons for that ready and waiting. And Draco bought the Death's-head Hawk Moth chrysalises ages ago, so we're covered on that too. I just hope it doesn't take too long for us to get a thunderstorm..."

"And where are you planning on storing the mixture until then?" Viktor seems genuinely curious about that, eyebrows furrowed slightly in contemplation. "It is the one step I am worried about."

"Oh, we're just gonna have Dobby put it down in the Chamber of Secrets," he says dismissively, waving his hand. "Now that Draco knows about the Room of Requirement, there's no real reason for us to keep meeting down there. Well, except for breaking down the basilisk, but we've gotten pretty far with that already. She's kept for over a year anyway, so I doubt that we'll run into too much trouble waiting a few more weeks or months."

"... I 'ave so many concerns zat I do not even know where to start," Fleur murmurs with a helpless laugh.

"Wait, you really found the Chamber of Secrets? I thought that was just another wild rumor."

Harry quirks an eyebrow at Cedric. "These past few years have been very strange for me. I wouldn't mind confirming or denying anything that you've heard."

Viktor and Fleur seem utterly enraptured as Cedric rattles off a long list of rumors he's heard over the years that stuck out to him—the list is scarily long, and he's honestly surprised that Hufflepuffs are such gossips—and Harry nods along until he's done. Then he starts answering.

“Yes, Hermione, Ron, and I did face the troll in first year. It was dealt with before the professors got there. Ron used the Levitation Charm to drop its club on its head. It was brilliant, really.” And the fact that they aren’t friends anymore doesn’t change that. “I also totally killed Quirrel, though in my defense, it was in self-defense and he was being possessed by Voldemort, so.”

Cedric looks like he’s not quite sure if he wants the answers to his questions anymore, but he doesn’t ask Harry to stop so... “I’m sure you already know the answer to this one, but I didn’t try to send that snake after Justin in second year. I was asking it to stop before his panicking got him bit. Slytherin’s monster was a basilisk –everyone just got lucky enough to look into her eyes through reflections instead of directly– and I was forced to kill her in second year because she wouldn’t listen to me at all, actually. Because she was being ordered to kill me by a shade of Voldemort. I also wasn’t the one to Obliviate Lockheart. He wound up accidentally wiping his own memory because he tried to Obliviate me and Ron with Ron’s broken wand.”

“You weren’t kidding,” Viktor grumbles. “Every single year...”

“Third year was pretty decent, all things considered?” he hedges uncertainly.

“On what planet is Sirius Black breaking free of Azkaban and gunning for your life part of a decent year?” Cedric asks incredulously. “I mean, Professor Lupin is definitely the best Defense professor we’ve had in a while, but even still...”

“I am still stuck on the fact that ‘e was forced to kill a man at eleven.” Fleur’s wide-eyed shock is swiftly melting into molten fury that extends the claws at her fingertips. “Eleven. Merlin and Morganna, ‘e was still a baby.”

Now is probably not a good time to mention that he had to wrap his hands around Quirrel’s throat and watch him start to crumble beneath his fingertips. He still hears those screams in his nightmares sometimes. Instead, he decides to let them all in on a secret that ought to thoroughly change the subject. Partially because Fleur might just murder Dumbledore if she gets too worked up and partially because they’re his friends. He doesn’t want them to think badly of his godfather, not when he’s the only adult that’s ever really tried. He messes up – who wouldn’t after spending so long locked up and surrounded by Dementors– but he tries.

“Sirius is innocent.” The only ones that don’t fall into dead silence at that bit of news are the house elves, but considering that Dumbledore orchestrated Sirius’s escape, it’s hardly any surprise that they know. “He was never a Death Eater. He wasn’t my parents’ secret keeper. That was Pettigrew.” A sneer tugs his lips downward then. “I still can’t believe that no one thought it was weird that the Weasleys had the same pet rat for twelve years. He’s been hiding in plain sight all this time...” He heaves out a sigh. “But he got away, so everyone still thinks that Sirius did it. I’ll catch that damn rat eventually.” He has to. In a way, he blames Pettigrew for his parents’ deaths even more than he does Voldemort. Pettigrew was their friend, and he betrayed them. He’s the only reason that Voldemort was able to find them in the first place. He as good as killed them himself, and all without the excuse of being on the opposite side of a war. At least not at first.

“That makes sense,” Viktor murmurs. “Karkaroff always seemed confused that...” Viktor pauses then, paling as he realizes what he’s accidentally revealed. “Forget that. Please.”

“I already knew, Viktor. It’s fine. I don’t hold it against you.” Viktor slumps with relief as soon as Harry says it, though he’s still warily watching Cedric and Fleur from the corner of his eye.

“Your ‘eadmaster is not a reflection of you,” Fleur declares firmly, as if daring anyone to disagree with her. “‘E could be zhe most terrible Dark Lord in zhe world and I would not care. You are you. Karkaroff is Karkaroff.”

“It’s not like Dumbledore is all sunshine and roses either.” Harry is thoroughly shocked to hear the words come out of Cedric’s mouth. “I mean, everything that’s happened these past few years alone... He’s always conveniently out of the picture when things get bad. And Harry is always conveniently right in the path of danger. I... I don’t like the picture that paints. I don’t like that it’s happening again. It almost feels like...”

“He’s doing it on purpose,” Harry whispers when Cedric cannot bring himself to utter the words. “I... I’ve been thinking that more and more lately. I didn’t even know he was my magical guardian, you know? I didn’t know that I was a wizard at all until I was eleven! I’m worried that he might be—”

“You is being careful about what you say in elves’ earshot,” Winky reprimands sharply. She looks more nervous than angry, though. “There is being the Come and Go room for conversations like this. Shoo!”

They don’t end up continuing that conversation after they’re ushered out of the kitchens by several anxious house elves, but the weight of the conversation weighs heavily on them all. “Be careful,” Fleur murmurs as they part ways. “I’ve ‘eard that forest can be quite dangerous.”

She doesn’t have to remind him, but he nods anyway. “I will.”

It’s become routine to meet up with Draco and walk through the school beneath the Invisibility Cloak, but this is the first time following his recent... Revelation that they have done so. It has his heart pounding in his chest every single time they brush against each other—which is inevitable when they’re both crowded beneath the fabric like this—and makes him feel quite ridiculous. It’s nice, though. Warm. He feels even more embarrassed for thinking that.

Once he and Draco are closer to the Forbidden Forest than the castle, they slip out from underneath the cloak, holding their crystal phials up to the sky as the moonlight illuminates them. Refractions of light dance on the grass beneath their feet, and a single glance is all they need to exchange before undoing the Sticking Charm and spitting the mandrake leaves into their phials. They quickly put their stoppers on it—Harry’s has a red dot on it and Draco’s has a green one, just to make sure that they don’t mix them up—and slide it into their pockets, unwilling to risk any sort of contamination before they gather their most difficult ingredient. The ingredients all need to be added in quick succession, so everything else has to wait until they gather the dew.

“Ready, Harry?”

“Yeah, let’s go.” It’s almost nostalgic for the two of them to be walking through the Forbidden Forest like this. Only this time, they’re relying on the light of Draco’s Patronus – his own would draw far too much attention– instead of lanterns, and they’re entering willingly instead of being all but dragged into it for detention. “If I didn’t know better, Draco, I’d say you were scared,” he teases lightly.

Draco scrunches his eyebrows in confusion for several long moments, but he snorts once he figures out what Harry’s talking about. “I’m not scared, Harry.” His voice doesn’t shake when he says it this time. “I won’t run away.”

They follow the gentle glow of Draco’s Patronus deeper and deeper into the forest. He isn’t sure if the lamb is warding off everything in the forest that might want to hurt them or if they’re just getting lucky, but either way, they’re making good progress.

Towering trees stretch above their heads, and interlocking foliage blankets the earth below them in darkness. “You reckon we’ve gone far enough?”

“Probably,” Draco hums. “But it’s better to be safe than sorry. The last thing we need is to get caught in some sort of half-transformed state because our dew wasn’t up to par.” They keep walking. It isn’t until they spot a small cavern off to the left that they pause, looking at each other with an eager gleam in their eyes.

“A cave should add extra protection from the moonlight, and it doesn’t look big enough for a person to even fit into. The forest is still really dense out here too...”

“It’s perfect...!” Draco whispers with a brilliant smile. Harry swallows harshly. Merlin, can he please stop noticing how pretty his friend is for five seconds? “Come on, Harry!”

They walk just close enough to confirm that dew clings to the walls of the cave before pausing, using the Levitation Charm to float just enough dewdrops to fill their silver teaspoons with, carefully pour said teaspoon into their phials, and quickly add both a single one of their hairs and the Death’s-head Hawk Moth chrysalis. A giddy rush of excitement washes over him as he stoppers his phial shut, and it’s contagious if the pleased laughter tumbling from Draco’s lips is any indication.

“Dobby!”

“Congratulations!” Dobby cheers as soon as he accepts the phials from them both. “Dobby will be putting these in the Chamber of Secrets now! Don’t be wandering in the forest for too long.” They don’t even get the chance to say a word before Dobby pops away again, but given how vital it is that those mixtures remain undisturbed, Harry has to appreciate it this time.

“He’s always been such a whirlwind,” Draco snickers. “Come on, Harry. Let’s get out of this forest before something really does try to eat us.”

If there's anything that Harry is grateful to the Dursleys for, then it's always forcing him to get up at the crack of dawn. It makes the next part of the transformation process far easier. He rests his wand just above his heart as he murmurs, "Amato Animo Animato Animagus." This will be part of his new routine, every sunrise and every sunset, until the next thunderstorm. Waking up early enough for the chant will be easy, but he'll have to be very careful to avoid any detentions if he wants to do so every sunset as well. He knows that he can do it in front of one of his professors and just explain why he's becoming an Animagus, but he doesn't want to unless he has no other choice.

Classes will be starting back up soon, and as Harry makes his way into the common room and sees the Creevey brothers still attempting to dismantle the charm on the 'Support Cedric Diggory' badges, an idea hits him. He quickly turns back around, grabs the badges Draco gifted him for Christmas, and places the box down in front of them. The most they've been able to do with the original badges is make them read 'Potter Really Stinks' instead of 'Potter Stinks' –Draco is infuriatingly good with Charms like that– and they look like they're about to cry with relief when they peer into the box and see the new badges.

"Hey Colin, Dennis! Would you two mind passing these out for me? I'll seem pretty full of myself if I do it, and everyone knows you've been messing around with the other badges..."

"Of course, Harry!" Colin cries out, pulling out a badge and immediately affixing it to his robes. Dennis does the same. After a moment of consideration, Harry grabs one as well, switching it to say 'Strength in Unity' before pinning it to his robe, right next to the original badge that he has no intention of giving up any time soon. "I can't believe we didn't think of making new ones from scratch..."

"Don't worry about it," he reassures them. "I couldn't even figure out how to make them myself. Someone else did it for me." Even if no one else can know that Draco made them, Harry has no intention of taking credit for it. There's a much more obvious conclusion for others to leap to anyway.

"One of the other champions?" Dennis asks with wide, curious eyes. Harry neither confirms nor denies, but the excitable first year takes it as a yes anyway. "That's so cool! I'm really glad that they're being nice."

"Me too, Dennis," he murmurs. "Me too. Make sure they get badges too, okay? I know they'll want them."

"Okay!"

"Oh, hey!" Colin calls out when he starts to head down for breakfast. "The twins were looking for you. They seemed pretty excited about it, so maybe keep an eye out?"

"Will do! Thanks, Colin."

He intends to search for Fred and George after getting something in his stomach, but they find him before he even steps foot into the Great Hall. "Mermish!" Fred cries out, looking quite frazzled. His hair is lightly singed around the edges, and he's got this wild look in his

eyes that practically screams an experiment either going disastrously wrong or disastrously right. It's hard to tell. "We can't be completely sure but—"

"We're pretty sure that it's not screaming at all, just Mermish."

"Mermish sounds like screeching whenever it's heard above water—"

"And we've got merpeople in the Black Lake, so it makes sense, really—"

"Anyway, you should try opening the egg underwater, see if it does anything."

"It's another possibility to rule out, if nothing else," George finishes with a shrug. "Sorry Harry, we really can't be staying long. We've gotta take advantage of not having classes while we still can, but we wanted to tell you as soon as we realized."

"It's no problem!" he shouts as they sprint off, blatantly ignoring the rule against running just like they do with every other rule in Hogwarts, really. "Thanks, you guys!"

He tells the other champions immediately. The Hufflepuffs sitting around them only speak louder, smiling as they cover their blatant cooperation from any professors' listening ears. "The twins seem pretty sure that the egg is speaking Mermish," he says, and Viktor looks very thoughtful at that. "Said we should try listening to it underwater."

"Now I wish my yearmates really had thrown me overboard," Viktor snorts. "We might have figured this out sooner."

"I have access to the Prefect's bathroom. I could bring my egg with me and try listening to it in the bath? It's absolutely freezing outside, and I don't want you guys getting sick by jumping into the Black Lake."

"Zat sounds like a wonderful idea, Cedric," Fleur agrees with a smile. "Zank you." She pauses, seeming to realize something before her face sets firmly into a scowl. "I almost hope zey are wrong. Swimming in February would be..." She shudders. Fleur is already forced to bundle up any time she sets foot outside, and even Harry dreads the idea of jumping into a freezing-cold lake in the winter.

That's when he realizes yet another problem that he'll be faced with if the second task is in the Black Lake. "Shit," he whispers. "I don't know how to swim."

"I will teach you," Viktor promises. "I am quite good. Up in the air and in the water are where I'm at my best."

Cedric takes a hard look at his housemates—who are doing their level best to pretend not to listen but definitely are—and says, "If the twins are right, I'll tell you two the password and show you where the Prefect's bathroom is. Just don't get caught."

Harry salutes him with a cheeky grin. "That's what I'm best at."

They all laugh at that, even a few of the Hufflepuffs that were pretending not to listen.

Cedric slaps down a piece of parchment in front of them the next morning. They're dining in the kitchens today –mostly because the other Hufflepuffs will be upset if they know too much about the next task before they're supposed to– so it's only him, Fleur, and Viktor craning forward to read what it says.

Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this:

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we've took,

But past an hour– the prospect's black,

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.

“The twins were right,” Cedric says, though he doesn't really need to. “It was Mermish. I honestly didn't expect such a huge hint, but I guess they want to give us a chance to actually prepare this time.” He pauses for a moment before chuckling. “Not that it stopped us last time, but still.”

“Ve vill definitely have to swim.” Fleur grimaces, and Harry isn't far behind her. “Though I vonder what they will take...”

“The professors have to be the one taking our stuff, right? I don't see how the merpeople would get ahold of it directly.” He might have to ask Draco to watch over a few things for him. The Invisibility Cloak, the Marauder's Map, and the photo album with pictures of his parents... Those are things that he would be utterly devastated if he lost forever, and no one would think to look for them with Draco. It's perfect, really.

“I imagine so.” Fleur narrows her eyes in thought. “But Viktor's right. What can zey take from us? It's not like I brought much from 'ome...”

“Our wands, maybe?” He hates to even suggest it, but it's a possibility. “Any witch or wizard would really miss that, right? And considering that they threw dragons at us right off the bat... I wouldn't put it above them to take our wands away when we get time to prepare in exchange.”

Cedric looks vaguely queasy at that. “Oh. Oh, I didn't even think about that, Merlin. It's probably best not to focus too much on spells then, at least not exclusively. I'll do some research on any potions that might be helpful. I think there might be some sort of plant as well...”

“I vill need that password if ve are going to teach Harry how to swim,” Viktor reminds him, and Cedric snaps back to the present with a sheepish smile.

“Right, right. It’s pine fresh right now. I’ll let you know whenever it changes.”

“An Invigoration Draught could ‘elp us keep our energy out in zhe cold...” Fleur muses with a hum. “It isn’t a difficult brew. I may borrow zhe Room of Requirement at some point to make it.”

They spend more of their breakfast planning than eating, much to the house elves’ dismay.

Something feels strange about the atmosphere of the first Care of Magical Creatures class they have after the break. He doesn’t realize what it is until he gets closer, doing a double take when he sees an elderly witch with cropped, silver hair standing in front of Hagrid’s door. “Um, who are you?” he asks with no small amount of trepidation.

“Professor Grubbly-Plank, your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher. Follow me, class will begin shortly.”

“But– Where’s Hagrid?” he asks, worry churning in his gut like magma in a volcano.

“He is indisposed.” Grubbly-Plank doesn’t seem to have any patience for his questions, and Harry trails behind her while his anxiety grows and grows. What could possibly hurt Hagrid enough that he couldn’t come to class? He’s never seen him be phased by anything before. Hell, he’s pretty sure that he’s never even seen him catch a cold.

The Slytherins, he notices, don’t seem very surprised to see their new professor. That almost worries him as much as the vaguely concerned expression that flits across Draco’s face before he forcefully schools it back into neutrality. He’s definitely missing something.

Their class follows Grubbly-Plank to the edge of the forest, where a single, blindingly white unicorn is tethered to a tree. He vaguely wonders how on earth their professor managed to catch one. Hagrid had told him that not even werewolves are fast enough to do that, and Grubbly-Plank isn’t exactly in her prime...

“Ooh!” several of the girls coo, eyes sparkling with delight.

“Oh, it’s so beautiful!” Lavender gasps. “I never thought I’d get to see one up close...”

The unicorn is so bright that it makes the snow all around them look dull and gray. It paws at the ground nervously with its gleaming, golden hooves, throwing its head back in warning. Its horn looks very sharp. He takes a cautious step forward.

“Boys, keep back!” Grubbly-Plank barks sharply, throwing her arm out and catching him hard across the chest. He flinches back violently at the blow, but she just keeps talking as if nothing happened at all. “They prefer a woman’s touch, unicorns. Girls to the front, and approach with care... Come on now, easy does it.”

But the unicorn seems quite cross when Grubbly-Plank leads the first girl toward it, whinnying as it rears up. When those golden hooves strike the snow beneath them, they send a plume of snow into the air, obscuring their vision for a scant few seconds. That’s all the time it takes for the unicorn to snap the rope tying it to the tree.

It doesn't run off. Grubbly-Plank looks quite nervous when it takes a few slow steps toward their group, but since it seems calmer now, almost curious, she doesn't attempt to stop it. Their professor gapes outright when the unicorn walks straight past the group of girls gathered up front and stops in front of him.

Harry's eyes are wide with shock and awe as the stunning creature dips its head, gently resting its horn against his chest as it pulses with warm, soothing magic. He can feel the dull ache from Grubbly-Plank's blow melt away, the pain fading before it ever has the chance to form a bruise. It likely would have, otherwise. "Thank you," he whispers as the unicorn lifts its head. "Can I...?" He lifts a single hand in question.

The unicorn presses its nose into it, nickering softly. He huffs a quiet laugh of disbelief. "Aren't you gorgeous?" he coos as his smile stretches from ear to ear. He doesn't care how much the other boys might tease him for it; this is one of the coolest things ever.

"Well, I'll be..." Grubbly-Plank murmurs softly. "In all my years, I've never... I've only seen this sort of trust in foals."

The unicorn does allow the other girls to approach it eventually, but any time Grubbly-Plank gets close, she receives a horn firmly pointed in her direction. She stops trying after the third attempt.

"I am so jealous," Draco admits to him later. They don't really have to meet up anymore—not when Draco can cast the Patronus charm as easy as breathing now—but neither of them pretend that they don't want to anyway. "I can't believe that you got to pet a unicorn. Like, it tolerated the girls, but that thing adored you."

"I bet Grubbly-Plank feels pretty dumb," he says with a snort, and Draco's answering laugh makes him feel just as warm and fuzzy as the unicorn's healing magic did. "I just have a way with creatures, I guess..."

"I'd say. First that hippogriff, and now—" Draco cuts off suddenly, looking like he quite regrets saying anything at all. The reason why hits him just a few moments later.

"Buckbeak is fine, don't worry! We helped him escape. Subtly, of course. The Ministry just didn't want to admit it and lose face, so they lied about it."

"I— Huh... That's... Good to hear, actually. I felt like a right awful prick after all of that. I was just..." They both know that he was playing up that injury to get his team out of playing Quidditch during that terrible storm. "I didn't want him to die."

"Well, he didn't, so you can stop fretting about it," he teases fondly.

"Is there no trouble that you won't stick your nose into?" Draco teases back. "Though I suppose it was a good thing, just this once..."

"I'll have you know that I only ever get into trouble for good reasons," he protests with a playful huff. "Seriously, I pretty much only get involved if someone will die if I don't. It's not

like the professors do anything if I try bringing it to them, so it's not worth wasting the time..."

Draco concedes his point with a faint grimace. "Fair enough... Hey, you wanted to know what's going on with Hagrid, right?"

"Yes!" he says, lurching up with desperation written all over his face. "Is he okay? Do you know what's going on?"

Draco passes over a copy of the Daily Prophet with a vaguely uncomfortable expression. "Read this."

Dumbledore's Giant Mistake

By Rita Skeeter

Albus Dumbledore, eccentric headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has never been afraid to make controversial staff appointments. In September of this year, he hired Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, the notoriously jinx-happy ex-Auror, to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. This is a decision that caused many raised eyebrows within the Ministry of Magic, given Moody's habit of attacking anyone who makes a sudden move in his presence. Mad-Eye Moody, however, looks responsible and kindly when set beside the part-human Dumbledore employs to teach Care of Magical Creatures.

Rubeus Hagrid, who admits to being expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, has enjoyed the position of gamekeeper ever since, a job secured for him by Dumbledore. Last year, however, Hagrid used his mysterious influence over the headmaster to secure the additional post of the Care of Magical Creatures professor, over the heads of several better-qualified candidates.

An alarmingly large and ferocious-looking man, Hagrid has been using his newfound authority to terrorize the students in his care with a succession of horrific creatures. While Dumbledore turns a blind eye, Hagrid has maimed several pupils during a series of lessons that many admit to be "very frightening."

"Malfoy got attacked by a hippogriff last year, and now the Blast-Ended Skrewts this year... I'm seriously considering dropping this class before I end up losing a limb," says Zacharias Smith, a fourth year Hufflepuff. "We all hate him. We're just too afraid to say anything."

Hagrid has no intention of ceasing his campaign of intimidation, however. In a previous conversation between myself and Hagrid, he admitted to breeding these "Blast-Ended Skrewts", highly dangerous hybrids of manticores and fire crabs. The creation of new breeds of magical creatures is, of course, an activity usually closely observed by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, however, considers himself to be above such petty restrictions.

"I was just having some fun," he says, before hastily changing the subject.

As if this wasn't enough, the Daily Prophet has now unearthed evidence is not –as he has always pretended– a pure-blood wizard. He is not, in fact, even pure human. His mother, we can exclusively reveal, is none other than the giantess Fridwulfa, whose whereabouts are currently unknown.

Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst themselves in the last century. The handful that remained joined the ranks of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and they were responsible for some of the worst mass muggle killings during his reign of terror.

While many of the giants who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were killed by Aurors working against the Dark side, Fridwulfa was not among them. It is possible that she escaped to one of the giant communities that still exist in foreign mountain ranges. If his antics during Care of Magical Creatures is any indication, Fridwulfa's son appears to have inherited her brutal nature.

In a bizarre twist, Hagrid is reported to have a close friendship with the Boy-Who-Lived, the very one responsible for sending those who supported He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's supporters, his own mother included, into hiding. Perhaps Harry Potter is unaware of the unpleasant truth about his large friend, but Albus Dumbledore surely has a responsibility to ensure that Harry, alongside his fellow students, is warned of the dangers of associating with part-giants.

The newspaper promptly catches fire. “Delacour is turning you into a bit of a pyromaniac, you know?” Draco hums idly. A whispered spell puts out the flames, preventing them from singeing Harry's hands as the paper crumbles to ashes and stains his hands black.

“I'm going to kill her.”

Draco snorts at that. “I'll pretend to be very shocked and concerned when Skeeter disappears.”

“Seriously, she can't just–! It's not right, Draco!”

There's that vaguely uncomfortable expression again. “Guess there really is a bit of Gryffindor in you after all.”

“What do you mean?” he whispers. “You don't... Agree with her, do you?”

“Not... Exactly,” Draco says hesitantly. “I do agree that his lessons are too dangerous for our year level, but–”

“I could say the same about Moody. And Snape, for that matter. It's not fair to single Hagrid out for it.”

“You won't hear me arguing about Moody,” Draco deadpans, and considering the ferret incident earlier this year, he's not surprised in the slightest by that. “But Professor Snape has the lowest injury rate of any Potions teacher in Hogwarts' history.”

“I feel like that’s not really saying much, considering what goes on around here,” he mutters under his breath. “My point is that this is an issue with Hogwarts in general, Draco, not that it doesn’t happen at all. Skeeter is just using Hagrid as a scapegoat because it’s easier than going after Dumbledore for it. And the fact that it’s done through a blatant veil of bigotry and hatred... Really, really pisses me off. Hagrid doesn’t deserve this. He’s a good person.”

“I didn’t say that he wasn’t,” Draco murmurs, averting his eyes. “Just that I can understand why she wrote it. This is more about the Board of Governors trying to have a bigger hand in the professors working at Hogwarts than it is about Hagrid himself.”

“That doesn’t stop it from ruining his life.” He clenches his fist as burning indignation rages through him. Hagrid is... He owes Hagrid everything. If someone like Snape had shown up at the Dursleys’ door, he quite imagines that they would’ve accepted their refusal and let him spend the rest of his life in abject misery. Well, maybe not, but only because he’s the “Boy-Who-Lived”. If he was just an ordinary boy... Harry doesn’t think Hagrid would’ve cared. He thinks Hagrid still would’ve made sure he had the chance to go to Hogwarts. He refuses to let Skeeter get away with this, especially since the one she really wants is... Hm. Now there’s an idea...

“... I suppose it doesn’t.” Draco worries at his lip, heaving out a sigh. His eyes narrow as soon as he sees the expression on Harry’s face. “What are you about to do? That’s your plotting look.”

“You’ll have to excuse me!” he throws over his shoulder. “I need to go write a letter!”

“I’m not going to cover for you if you actually kill her, Harry!”

He snorts at that. “Oh, I won’t. I’m planning something even better than that.”

There’s a Hogsmeade weekend in mid-January that perfectly suits his purposes. A letter is written, a deal is struck, and Harry begins to plan. There’s no way to retract that information now that it’s out there, but the best way to make people forget all about Hagrid is to give them an even bigger scandal to focus on.

And if that means airing out his own dirty laundry, then so be it. He’s angry enough –at Skeeter, at Dumbledore, and at all the injustices in the world– to do it anyway.

“Ah, Harry, there you are!” Skeeter croons in a sickly sweet tone. “I knew you’d come around eventually.”

“Let me make one thing perfectly clear to you,” he murmurs as Madam Rosmerta leads them into a private room, warding it so that no one can overhear them. “I am offering you the story of a lifetime. All the drama, heartache, and scandal that you can imagine. Your sales will be through the roof, and you’ll forever be known as the one who sought justice for the Boy-Who-Lived.” Skeeter is practically salivating at the mere thought. “But in exchange, you will tell this story exactly how I want you to. Feel free to add your own flair, but you will tell the truth and you will run the final story by me first. I will sue you into oblivion if you breach these terms, and you’ll be lucky if you even write for Witch Weekly after that. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Skeeter purrs, looking for all the world like the cat that got the canary. “Do go on.”

He takes a deep breath, gathers his thoughts together, and says, “I know that many of you have wondered about my life before Hogwarts...”

Chapter End Notes

And so the drama begins... And another bit of evidence for that self-sacrificial and self-destructive streak that Harry has going. Is it the best idea to throw this information out into the world? No, not really. But he wants to help Hagrid more than he cares about hurting himself in the process, and he also is getting increasingly frustrated with Dumbledore the longer that he's forced to linger on the fact that he *does* have the power to keep him from going back to the Dursleys and refuses to use it. So he's forcing his hand.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I did not think that I was going to end up finishing this chapter today, but once I got started I just kept going and going so! You get a double update again. I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry knows that it takes time to put an article like this together, but the anticipation is killing him. He's waiting on the first draft of Skeeter's article, waiting on a thunderstorm, waiting for the second task... It feels like that's all he's doing this year, waiting. And there's not much he can do in the meantime beyond taking swimming lessons from Viktor, getting tutored in Potions by Cedric, and learning a few more broadly useful spells from Fleur. They can't be completely certain that their wands will be taken, after all, and it doesn't hurt to be prepared. Not that they're likely to need anything else with the gillyweed...

Cedric is an angel for that one. Who knew that there was a plant out there that they could just eat to become able to breathe underwater? Certainly not Harry. He's almost excited for the second task now, if only because he's becoming a decent swimmer and is curious to see how having webbed hands and feet affects that.

The next full moon comes and goes with no sign of a thunderstorm, shining brightly in the sky and allowing Fleur, Cedric, and Viktor to join him and Draco in their eager waiting. Maybe it's better that way. It'll be pretty cool to see everyone transforming at once... He just hopes that a storm comes before the second task. That date is creeping closer and closer now.

It's during yet another mind-numbingly boring History of Magic class that he finally hears it: thunder. It takes every ounce of self-control that he has to not jolt out of his chair, but he exchanges a quick glance with Draco who subtly lifts his head. He heard it too. Parkinson and Zabini seem oddly interested in their little interaction, and Harry looks away, feeling a bit too seen.

They make a brief appearance in the Great Hall for dinner, and a single glance at the ceiling confirms that it is still pouring down rain, clouds dark and gray as lightning flickers between them and crashes down to the earth. It's not at all unusual for Harry, Fleur, Cedric, and Viktor to suddenly slip away from the table, though it is strange to be leading them toward the Chamber of Secrets. There's nothing for it, though. It's the best place for Draco to meet up with them without getting seen, and he doesn't want to risk disturbing the mixtures by bringing them out of the cool, dark chamber. It could wind up destabilizing the whole thing, and then they'd be forced to start all over.

He's pleasantly surprised that they don't have to wait very long. "Pansy and Blaise are covering for me," Draco explains with an eager grin. "Told everyone that I've been going a bit mental over a Charms essay, which isn't entirely uncommon. No one will think twice about it."

Cedric is the only one of them who looks a bit dubious about walking into Myrtle's bathroom, but when Harry marches right up to a sink and hisses at it, he understands why. "... I really hope that this room wasn't a bathroom when the chamber was first made. That would be... Really weird."

"I try not to think about it," he snorts. "At least it's out of the way... No one ever comes in here." They never would've gotten away with brewing Polyjuice in this bathroom otherwise. "But let's not linger and risk it."

Draco doesn't cast the Wand-Lighting Charm to illuminate the way this time. His Patronus hops and skips in front of them, illuminating the passage with a gentle glow and easing their nerves all at once. "Show-off," Harry murmurs fondly.

"I have you to thank for it. Besides, I rather suspect that your Patronus would blind us in such close quarters, so..."

"Fair enough."

"Zis is... So eerie," Fleur murmurs as they pass a pile of bones that Harry carefully looks past every time they go down here. He doesn't want to know.

"Vat do you know? Hogwarts can feel like home," Viktor says very dryly.

Their laughter echoes down the hallway. Harry honestly loves Viktor's sense of humor; he's so disarmingly funny while seeming like he doesn't mean to be. It's hardly any wonder that he and George are properly dating now.

"I should've started hanging out with you guys way sooner," Draco snickers under his breath. "This is fun."

"Speaking of, when did this," Cedric gestures vaguely between Harry and Draco, "Happen? You two have been at each other's throats since you set foot in Hogwarts. What changed?"

He and Draco exchange a weighted glance, and Harry rolls a shoulder, smiling as he says, "We grew up, I suppose."

"It started as an even exchange, of course," Draco sniffs haughtily, turning up his nose to hide the smile tugging at his lips. It doesn't work very well. "I wanted to learn the Patronus Charm, Harry wanted to become an Animagus, and both of us could help each other in a way that very few other people could. Then we kept making other deals, started really talking, and, well... We found out that we actually get along quite well when we're not slinging hexes and jinxes at each other."

“Thank Merlin for that,” Cedric snorts. “I feared the two of you would bring this castle down before you graduated. You know—”

Their conversation comes to an abrupt halt when the other champions see the basilisk’s corpse sprawled out within the chamber. Or what’s left of her, anyway. “Oh,” Cedric whimpers. “That’s lovely. I think that I’m gonna be sick...”

“If you are, then you should get it out of your system now. We don’t want you to throw up your potion,” Viktor suggests, not unkindly, as Fleur rubs Cedric’s back in sympathy. She’s looking a bit green herself.

“Here is beings your potions!” Dobby squeaks as he passes out the phials. “Dobby be staying just in case anything be going wrong. Or if anyone be needing taken to the Great Lake very quickly. We don’t be knowing if you all is being land creatures.”

“That’s really smart. Thank you, Dobby,” he praises. Then, as one, they all chant “Amato Animo Animato Animagus!” He knocks back his potion.

Harry closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, the world seems a lot bigger than it was before.

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Draco isn’t sure what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t this. He barely has the time to register that Viktor has turned into a bull shark before Dobby whisks him away, presumably dumping him in the Black Lake to adjust to his new form and not suffocate on air. Delacour is soaring through the air like she was born to fly, a peregrine falcon that swoops and dives so quickly that it’s dizzying to watch. She could probably outspeed the snitch, or at the very least give it a good run for its money. Diggory is, to absolutely no one’s surprise, a honey badger. He’s a Hufflepuff through and through, and this is just further proof of that.

When he sees Harry, it feels as if his heart has stopped beating in his chest. Curly, messy black wool that bounces as Harry takes a few unsteady steps on cloven feet; piercing green eyes that stand out even more starkly on a dark, furry face; the faint impression of a lightning bolt scar on his forehead... Harry’s Animagus form couldn’t be mistaken for anyone else, that’s for certain. It’s also disturbingly familiar, and he does not have to think on it long to uncover why.

His Patronus. Harry’s Animagus form is his Patronus, down to the very last detail. He’s so stunned by this realization that it takes him an embarrassingly long time to realize what he, himself, has transformed into.

Gleaming, white scales catch his eye first. A massive tail sweeps across the earth as he rises to his feet, ducking his neck to avoid hitting his head on the stone ceiling above. His claws dig into the earth as he stretches out, and he stretches his wings the best he can in such a confined space. It’s only once that action truly registers that he’s struck with an even more earth-shattering realization.

He's a dragon. An Antipodean Opaleye, if his coloration and size is any indication. The exact same species as Harry's... Oh. Oh, but Merlin, they're both oblivious fools, aren't they? Magic like this... It doesn't lie. It takes a long, hard look at the deepest depths of your soul and draws what it sees up to the surface. Draco is a dragon, and Harry's Patronus is the very same dragon. Harry is a lamb, a still-young ram with so much potential, and Draco's Patronus is the very same lamb. He's quite certain he can remember seeing a slightly dimmer spot on his Patronus's forehead the other day, actually, and he cannot believe that he dismissed it as a trick of the light.

They are, perhaps, the closest thing there is to soulmates. Their magics are so synergized that they reflect each other in emotion-based, instinctive magic that draws on positive feelings and the self.

He knows that it doesn't necessarily mean anything. Harry knows astonishingly little about the magical world, for one, so he doubts that he understands the full implications of this. Most witches and wizards don't even know about this. Draco only knows because he's always secretly been a bit of a hopeless romantic, and he's found the idea of such a thing enchanting since he was very small. Despite that, he knows that magical compatibility is just that: compatibility. It doesn't mean they're necessarily beholden to it. He doesn't have to spend an eternity with Harry Potter. That being said...

Draco imagines a future where he is allowed to stay by Harry's side, and he finds himself quite enamored by the idea of it. He wants to wake up to dark, messy hair and bright green eyes every morning. He wants to hear Harry's laughter—his wry chuckles, his amused laughs, and delighted snickers—and see his smiles, and he wants to hold him close when the weight of the world that rests upon his shoulders gets to be too much. He wants to brush away tears and promise that everything will be okay when Harry is standing on the edge of that metaphorical Astronomy Tower. Or the literal one. He wants... He wants to be there for him. Always. Damn the war and damn the consequences of it all. Gryffindors don't have a monopoly on being brave.

Merlin and Morganna, he has a crush on Harry Potter.

A tiny little snout presses against his leg, and he watches Harry's tail flick with excitement as a quiet "Baa...!" escapes his throat. Harry starts jumping around then, clearly excited for him, and a rumbling chuckle reverberates in his chest.

"This is... Strange." Very exciting, but strange. ***"I cannot wait to get the wind beneath my wings."***

"Draco...?" A lamb should not be able to hiss. It is extremely disconcerting that Harry still can, but he's trying to ignore that feeling of instinctive wrongness. ***"I can understand you! Better than I could the Horntail, anyway. Huh. This is so cool! I can't believe that you're a dragon!"***

"It's not nearly as stealthy a form as I had hoped," he admits. ***"But that was mostly because it's all but unheard of for Animagi to be magical creatures. I will never complain about being a dragon."***

“I’m not exactly unnoticeable either. At least I’ve got my size going for me... I can hide, if nothing else, but if someone spots me, that’s it. They’ll know who I am if they know me at all.”

“Indeed. You’re as recognizable now as ever,” he teases before shifting back with a quiet groan. “Sorry, I was getting cramped. Merlin, but it’s going to be difficult to shift anywhere but back at the Manor unless I want to register it... Which sounds like a very good way of getting a bunch of attention that I don’t want right now.”

“I’m going to pretend that I didn’t hear you say that,” Diggory says with a snort once he’s back in his human skin. “Did you notice anything different about my form? I’m trying to figure out what my distinctive marking is.”

“Your fur is dark brown where it should be black,” Fleur answers once she touches down on the ground, shifting with a satisfied smile. “Just as my feathers are lighter than usual. I do hope that Viktor is doing alright...”

“I’m sure he’s fine. Dobby’s looking after him.” Harry stretches his back with a quiet yawn, rubbing at his eyes as they start to water. It should not be half as adorable as it is. “A shark is pretty useful for the next task... Though it’s sad that he can’t run around with us.”

“It’s not like I can either,” he says with an idle hum. “Far too noticeable. But this form will be a fantastic scare tactic in battle, come to think of it...” He would say duel, but they all know that something far more serious is looming on the horizon. He won’t do them the disservice of suggesting that they’re too dull to know that.

When Dobby brings Viktor back, they are both wielding sharp, eerily similar grins. “That was fun. I am definitely using it for the task. I will have to register afterward, but...” Viktor shrugs helplessly. “It won’t be very useful to me in most situations anyway. But I am happy. It will be nice to swim so freely.”

He watches on with a fond smile as the four of them start discussing their group strategy for the second task. He’s not quite sure how his life turned out this way, but whatever caused it, he wouldn’t change it for the world.

Merlin, Pansy and Blaise are going to tease him for all of eternity once they hear about this.

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Harry is practically shaking out of his skin on the day that it finally happens, mere days before the second task. He’d sent out his approval for Skeeter’s article a week ago, and today is the day that it finally hits the papers.

It’s also the first time he’s ever willingly grabbed a copy of the Daily Prophet, and the Hufflepuffs surrounding him look quite nervous about that.

“What did you do now?” Viktor asks with a chuckle. “I wonder if—“

Fleur's sharp gasp cuts Viktor off, and he drops the teasing tone as he, too, picks up a copy. The Great Hall is deathly silent, and it's not hard to figure out why. Skeeter really doesn't pull her punches.

The Boy-Who-Lived: Abused by Muggles and Abandoned by the Ones He Saved

By Rita Skeeter

My dearest readers, today I bring to you a tale that is immensely difficult to hear, but it is for that reason that it is so important to tell it. Many of us have found ourselves wondering about the life of the Boy-Who-Lived after the tragic loss of James and Lily Potter, but despite many reporters and government officials searching for any scrap of information regarding what happened to young Harry Potter afterward, nothing could be found. Albus Dumbledore repeatedly assured us that the boy was safe and being well taken care of, that his location had to remain secret for security purposes, and today, I am here to tell you that was a lie.

How do I know? Why, the Boy-Who-Lived came to me and offered an exclusive interview. How could I ever refuse?

Petunia Dursley née Evans is the surviving, muggle sister of the late Lily Potter, and it is with her that our savior spent his formative years. But instead of receiving the love and respect that he –and indeed, all children– deserved, he was met with only hatred and scorn.

“She never let me forget it, you know? That I was dumped on her by those ‘freakish, no-good people’, left on her doorstep like garbage that even they didn’t know what to do with. I spent years believing that my father was a violent drunk and my mother a whore, killed in a drunken car crash,” said Harry Potter, face twisting with sorrow as he recounted his tale. “I believed it because that was what they told me. The Dursleys hate magic. They hate it with every fiber of their being, and they were determined to... Well, my uncle always said he’d beat it out of me eventually.”

Imagine my shock and horror. There were tears in my eyes as I listened to this boy –for that is what he is, truly, still just a boy– casually speak of horrors beyond my worst imagination. He said these things as if they were normal, and that is what is truly horrifying. Because, to him, they were. They still are.

“You know, I didn’t even know my own name until my first year of primary school,” he confessed to me with watery eyes. I can tell how difficult it is for him to hold back the tears, and I want to reassure him that it is okay to let them fall. But I cannot bring myself to interrupt this horrible story, and so he continues on. “I thought it was Freak or maybe Boy. Because that was all they ever called me. So when my teacher called out my name, I didn’t respond to it, and she thought I was causing trouble on purpose. That I was trying to be funny or something, I dunno. She told the Dursleys about it, and when I got home, my uncle beat me bloody with his belt and locked me in my cupboard. I wasn’t allowed any food for a week.”

“Cupboard?” I asked, trying not to allow myself to linger on the rest of that story. I really would start crying then.

“My cupboard,” Harry repeated, nodding with a look of, dare I call it nostalgia, on his face. “My first Hogwarts letter was addressed to the cupboard under the stairs, you know? It was my room. It was small, and cramped, and it always smelled strongly of chemicals, but... My uncle couldn’t fit in there, so I liked it anyway, I think.”

“Did your relatives not have any other rooms?” I found myself afraid of the answer, and I knew before he even uttered a word, just from the look on his face, that I was right to be afraid.

“We had four bedrooms. The master bedroom, a bedroom for my uncle’s sister to sleep in whenever she visited, and then Dudley –that’s my cousin– had two bedrooms. One for him to sleep in, and one for him to store all of his toys in. I got that bedroom eventually but... Is it horrible of me to say I wish I still had the cupboard? I felt some measure of safety there. That second bedroom... During my first year at Hogwarts, they bought and installed dozens of locks on my door. They put bars over my window to keep me from sending letters with Hedwig. They installed a cat flap on my door so they didn’t even have to look at me whenever they were generous enough to feed me. All of my things were locked up in my cupboard, so I couldn’t even do my summer homework until Ron, Fred, and George – Weasley, that is– came to save me. They had to pry the bars off my window to get me out of there, and honestly? I don’t know how much longer I would’ve lasted if they hadn’t shown up. I was lucky to get a few pieces of stale bread in a week, and I wasn’t lucky very often.”

“Why did you go back to them at all?” I asked, utterly heartbroken by each new piece of information I learned. “Surely you would have told someone!”

“I did. I...” Harry swallows harshly then, casting a furtive glance around the room. He seems so afraid of being overheard. “At the end of my first year, I asked if I could stay at Hogwarts over the summer. I offered to work, to help Hagrid with his duties since I’m quite good with landscaping after years of doing it anyway, but... Dumbledore said no.” I could hardly believe my own ears. “I begged him. I told him that the Dursleys were the worst sort of people, that I was afraid of going back, but he told me that it was for my own good. That it was for my protection. I didn’t feel very protected.”

“So, in your opinion, should Albus Dumbledore remain over Hogwarts?”

“I... I don’t want to talk about Dumbledore right now.”

“Okay. How about Hagrid, then? Were you aware of his secret?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter.” I find myself surprised by the conviction in his voice, and despite his slight form –a form that I now know was caused by chronic malnutrition and not a genetic anomaly, considering how tall both of his parents were– I feel quite small when faced with the fire in his eyes. “Hagrid is my friend. You called him violent and cruel, and I am still quite cross with you over it. I know violent and cruel. I lived with it every day of my life. I lived with belts and fists and hot frying pans thrown at my face, and I lived with words meant to rip and destroy the very spirit of the person who heard them. Hagrid is the opposite of that in every way.”

I listen, enraptured, as he tells me of their first meeting. “When my Hogwarts letter came, the Dursleys were terrified. Enraged and terrified. My uncle tossed it in the fireplace, and I thought that was the end of it but... I received hundreds of letters over the course of the next several days. It got to the point where the Dursleys packed their things and fled in an attempt to avoid them, so desperate to prevent me from knowing anything about magic that they would upend their entire lives to ensure it. Hagrid was the one who came for me. He was the one who didn’t even balk when my uncle pointed a shotgun –a deadly, incredibly powerful muggle weapon– at his face. They tried to refuse my admission to Hogwarts because as much as they hated me, they hated magic even more. Hagrid’s persistence, his dedication... He’s the only reason that I got to attend at all. Because honestly... If he left me that day, I’m not completely certain I would have survived it. My uncle was that angry.”

“So you don’t care that his mother was a giantess?”

“Why would I? Based on what I’ve told you, do you think I’m anything like the Dursleys?”

“Of course not!” I cried out, appalled that he would even suggest a thing.

“Then why do you assume that Hagrid is like his mother?” It was such a simple question –a question that only a child could ask– and yet... I found that I had no answer. “Hagrid gave me the single best birthday of my life. The first one that I was ever truly able to celebrate. He baked me my first-ever cake, bought me my first-ever gift, and quickly became the first adult that I ever trusted. I wouldn’t care for Hagrid any less if he was half-Dementor.”

And considering the Boy-Who-Lived’s experiences with Dementors last year, that is quite a statement indeed. “Then you don’t blame him for letting you go back to them? For not fighting harder to keep you at Hogwarts?”

“He doesn’t really have the power to go against that sort of decision, does he?” Despite the innocent tilt of his head, I know that Harry is not really asking a question. “Because Dumbledore is the only reason he has a job at all. He had his wand snapped when he was even younger than me, and even if he wanted to leave the magical world, he would stand out too much. He has no opportunities here or there. It’s a very unfair position to put him in, especially when he was punished for a crime that he didn’t even commit.”

“Oh? And what do you mean by that?”

“Hagrid was arrested for opening the Chamber of Secrets, but I know for a fact that he couldn’t have done that. Because he isn’t a Parselmouth, and the only way you can get into the Chamber of Secrets is by speaking Parseltongue. I would know. I’ve been down there.”

“Do tell.”

What followed was yet another harrowing story. The Hogwarts petrifications of both 1943 and 1992 were caused by none other than a basilisk, and we were simply fortunate that only one student stared directly into the beast’s eyes the first time. Wanting nothing more than to protect his friends, our young hero was forced to slay the serpent in a close battle, one that left him scarred and would have killed him had it not been for the timely intervention of Fawkes, Dumbledore’s phoenix.

“So Hagrid couldn’t have released Slytherin’s monster, you see? And it’s ridiculous that anyone ever thought an Acromantula was the monster to begin with. They can’t petrify people, they can’t kill without leaving traces of their venom behind, and if an Acromantula really had killed Myrtle, then they wouldn’t have been able to find her body. But the Board had to be seen doing something, so they snapped Hagrid’s wand and expelled him even though he didn’t do anything wrong. It’s cruel and unfair, and between that and my being forced into a tournament that I shouldn’t even qualify for, I’m really questioning the competence of our government officials. It seems to me that they have no idea what they’re doing. Refusing to even give proper trials... It sickens me.”

Upon doing further digging, I found that, indeed, Hagrid never received any sort of trial at all. It was believed at the time that it was to spare a thirteen-year-old boy that sort of public humiliation, but in light of these revelations, it is an especially horrifying miscarriage of justice. I intend to do more digging to discover if there are more cases such as this one.

And in light of what I have learned today, I would like to issue a formal apology to Rubeus Hagrid. I can admit when I am wrong, and this time, I could not have been much more so. I retract my previous statements, and I apologize for quoting a student who, to quote Harry Potter, “Must be projecting his own insecurities onto Hagrid. He’s such a pompous snob that even the other Hufflepuffs are getting sick of him.” Blood alone does not make up one’s character, and our savior has made it more than clear that yours is good beyond question. This humble reporter thanks you for bringing him back to us and for saving him from that hell.

Now it’s our turn. It’s our turn to make up for so utterly failing our savior. It’s our turn to make sure he never returns to that hell again.

“Checkmate,” he murmurs, eyes glinting with smug satisfaction at the looks of horrified shock all around him. He knows that, hidden away in his hut, Hagrid is currently reading a copy of this very article courtesy of Dobby. He doubts that there’s a single soul in Wizarding Britain that won’t have read it by the end of the day.

Fame is a double-edged sword. It’s about time he learns how to wield it.

He locks eyes with Dumbledore from across the Great Hall, a smirk tugging at his lips as he whispers, “Your move.”

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who may be wondering: Draco's identifying feature is that, instead of the typical rainbow eyes of an Antipodean Opaleye, his are a rainbow of blues and grays. Harry absolutely can and will wax poetic about seeing oceans and storms in his eyes at a later date X'D

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

And so we arrive at the second task... >:3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His copy of the Daily Prophet crinkles and threatens to tear beneath his grip. It's far from the most subtle of reactions, but the entire Great Hall is in such an uproar that it goes unnoticed by them. He rereads the article, committing every word to memory as deep-seated loathing burns in his chest.

Draco has never been particularly fond of the headmaster, but this? This inspires hatred.

"Throwing himself to the wolves like this for that half-breed's sake... It would be positively Gryffindorish if the way he went about it wasn't so Slytherin." Pansy is the queen of keeping her composure, second only to Daphne Greengrass, and even her eyebrows are steadily climbing her face. "Not to mention the angle he was working..."

"It was about helping both Hagrid and himself," Blaise murmurs, eyes gleaming with intrigue. That's a dangerous look on Blaise's face. "Solving a problem and twisting the situation to his benefit at the same time. Information like this was bound to get out eventually, so he's getting ahead of it and controlling the narrative. He's inspiring pity and outrage not because that's what he, personally, wants, but because it's what will force Dumbledore's hand. People will riot if he tries to send Potter back to them." The longer he talks, the more impressed Blaise sounds. "It's dreadfully clever. I'm beginning to understand what you see in him."

Those words wouldn't have made a faint blush rise to his cheeks before, but he also hadn't realized that he had a crush on Harry before. It's rather unfortunate that his friends are far too sharp to miss such a reaction.

"You like him!" Pansy accuses in a hissed whisper. "It's not just some mutually beneficial exchange thing, is it? You actually like him."

"Shut up, Pansy," he grumbles as his cheeks grow even warmer.

"About time you figured it out." Blaise only snickers when he levels him with an unimpressed glare. "You've only been absolutely obsessed with him since first year. This was inevitable, really."

His voice is bone-dry when he says, "Thank you, Blaise, for your all-knowing wisdom. It might have been useful three years ago."

“I aim to please.”

His friends are the worst. He loves them.

“Mr. Potter!” Professor McGonagall’s sharp voice rings across the Great Hall, plunging the rapidly heightening volume into a dead silence. “What is the meaning of this?!”

If he didn’t know Harry so well, then he might have fallen for the look of wide-eyed innocence he casually wields as he tilts his head just so and asks, “What do you mean by that, professor?” Harry never refers to Professor McGonagall as a professor –rarely grants any of them the title, though he’s uncertain on whether it’s an intentional snub or simply a sign of distrust– and she notices the change of address too if her souring expression is any indication.

“This article is–”

“The truth. Skeeter didn’t embellish anything thing I said, not this time.” Any other professor would have already given Harry detention for his cheek, and it’s likely only the haunted guilt in Professor McGonagall’s eyes that prevents even her from doing so now.

“Dumbledore–”

“Can defend himself, and this is hardly the first time that someone has attempted a smear campaign against him.” Harry would not have left an article like this up to chance, especially not when he doesn’t trust Rita Skeeter farther than he can throw her. It is not a coincidence that Dumbledore is being so blatantly slandered within it. Harry approved of it. He just also has to make a show of not doing that, hence why he refused to talk about Dumbledore any more than he did. It’s a bit brilliant, really. “That doesn’t make the rest of it any less true.”

Someone sneezes, and it breaks the weird, silent standoff between student and professor. Professor McGonagall hesitates, opens and closes her mouth before saying, “I am sorry that–”

Harry stands up abruptly, stalking away with a sharp, “I’m going to visit Hagrid!” No one stops him. No one dares. Not with fireballs hovering threateningly around Fleur, Viktor looking prepared to bodily block anyone who tries, and all of Hufflepuff –minus a pale and decidedly shaken Zacharias Smith– ready to stand up in his defense. They don’t want to cause a riot.

“My mother would like him,” Blaise decides.

She would. It’s a horrifying thought.

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“Harry!” He’s brought into a crushing hug before he can even knock on Hagrid’s door, and some of the tension thrumming in his every footstep instantly melts away. “I cannae believe ya would do somethin’ like that fer me.”

“Of course I would, Hagrid,” he murmurs. “You’re my friend.”

“Yeh would’ve made a fine Hufflepuff. Though maybe only a Gryffindor woulda had the courage to go through with publishin’ tha’...”

“The Sorting Hat said I had a bit of every house in me,” Harry admits with a sheepish smile. “It’s why my sorting took so long.”

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with tha’. Ya got the best o’ all of ‘em, I reckon.” Hagrid’s warm smile encourages one from Harry as well, and he allows himself to be herded inside the warm, cozy cabin. The ever-present smell of herbs and wet dog shouldn’t be a comforting thing, but it’s become one anyway. A kettle starts whistling from where it hangs over the crackling fire, and Hagrid says, “Go on then, take a seat. I’ll be right back.”

He does. Fang trots up to him with his tongue lolling out of his mouth, and Harry scratches behind his ear until his leg starts thumping against the solid, wooden floor. “Here you are, Harry.” He accepts the tea with a grateful smile. “I ain’t ashamed o’ what I am,” Hagrid says as he gazes into the fire. “Not the sort to lie an’ say I had some accident as a kid or just got big bones.” There’s a strange bitterness in Hagrid’s voice there, and Harry wonders what he missed. He reckons that it has something to do with Madame Maxime, who Hagrid has been quite cold to recently despite clearly liking her before. “But that didn’t make me any less afraid o’ what people would do when they found out. I’m sorry for not tellin’ ya myself.”

“It’s okay, Hagrid. I understand. I didn’t tell you about the Dursleys, so...”

“Why didn’t ya?” Hagrid whispers, not unkindly but with a voice full of pain. “I woulda done somethin’. I woulda made a case fer ya ta stay here, talked ta Dumbledore ‘bout it...”

Because he had just lost the last threads of trust he had for Dumbledore and was afraid of losing Hagrid too. “I couldn’t put you in that position,” he whispers. And that much is true, even if it wasn’t his reasoning at the time. Hagrid saved Harry, but Dumbledore saved Hagrid. He understands exactly the kind of loyalty that inspires, and Hagrid’s staunch defense of Dumbledore to the Dursleys was all the proof he needed to see that it runs deep in Hagrid too.

He doesn’t want to put Hagrid in a position where he has to choose between them because he’s afraid that, in the end, he won’t choose Harry.

“Yer a good kid, Harry.” Hagrid says as a giant hand rests gently atop his head. “But come ta me next time, alrigh’?”

“Alright,” he whispers.

The lie tastes like ash on his tongue.

Sirius writes him asking when the next Hogsmeade weekend is. Harry responds with an equally curt, The weekend after the next. He tries not to think about why Sirius might want to know that as he watches Hedwig fly off into the distance. He wonders if Sirius sent that letter before or after the article was released.

Whispers trail after him everywhere he goes now, but Harry squares his shoulders and refuses to let it affect him. Snape is just itching for the chance to slam him with detentions, but Harry is being unflinchingly, infuriatingly polite during classes. That paired with the Slytherins no longer tossing random ingredients into his cauldron makes for far easier classes, even if Harry will never love the subject.

Harry entrusts his Invisibility Cloak, the map, and his photo album to Draco, who promises to hide them within his trunk. Even if they're pretty sure that their wands are what's being taken, it's not something Harry wants to risk. He's pretty sure that Cedric is taking a similar precaution with a few of his things.

And then the morning of the second task is upon them. Draco is not sitting in the Great Hall. A sense of foreboding washes over him, and for the first time, Harry considers that it might not be a 'what' that they'll sorely miss but a 'who'.

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"Heir Malfoy."

"Warrington," he responds with a quirked brow. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" It's unusual for Warrington to actually fulfill his Prefect duties –not that sixth years have many of those anyway– so his sudden approach is quite strange.

"Professor Snape is asking for you. He seems quite cross about it, so I'd move quickly if I were you."

Try as he may, he cannot think of any reason for his godfather to be calling on him, much less while he's in a temper. Even still, he doesn't intend to make things worse by brushing him off. "I appreciate you informing me. Where did he ask to meet?"

"Dumbledore's office. The password is Fizzing Whizzbees." With his duty done, Warrington swiftly goes elsewhere as a frisson of dread crawls up Draco's spine. Whatever the reason, it cannot be a good thing that he's getting called to the headmaster's office.

'Did they find out about my Animagus form? Have they found out that Harry and I have been spending time together? Do they suspect that I've corrupted him in some way, for him to approve of an article like that?' A wide array of suspicions trail through his mind, but he keeps his face carefully blank as he stalks through the halls of Hogwarts, steadily making his way toward a room that he quite hoped he'd never have to see during his time here. *'This was inevitable, really,'* he thinks, echoing Blaise's words. *'It's a yearly tradition for Harry to end up in this office. It only figures that once we start spending time together I'd get dragged into it. There's nothing for it now.'*

"Fizzing Whizbees."

The worst of his fears are immediately allayed when he sees that he is not the only student in this office. And what an odd array of students they are. Himself, Cho Chang, and George Weasley in addition to a little girl who doesn't look as if she's even Hogwarts age yet. The

girl has familiar, silvery hair that marks her as a clear relative of Fleur's. A cousin? A sister, perhaps?

It is the adults that are currently present that truly clue him in on the situation, however. Dumbledore, Madame Maxime, Karkaroff, Ludo Bagman, Percy Weasley –presumably filling in for Barty Crouch as he did at the Yule Ball–, Professor Flitwick, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape. The only Head of House that isn't present is Professor Sprout. *'This has something to do with the second task,'* he realizes.

Bagman claps his hands together with an overexcited smile. He's the only person that looks particularly excited about this. "Brilliant, you've all arrived! Now, I'll have to explain the second task to you for this to make sense, so please give me a moment of your time." Bagman clears his throat. "For the second task, our champions are required to venture down into the Black Lake and reclaim something that has been taken from them by the merpeople who live there. Or someone, I should say! Indeed, when the Goblet of Fire was asked which person is most precious to our dear champions, it is you four whose names emerged in the flames."

Merlin, he can feel his godfather glaring daggers into the back of his head. He's never going to hear the end of this.

"Now, understand that you can say no, of course, you're not bound to this like the champions are, but we will have to keep cycling through names until someone agrees. Each champion must have a hostage to rescue, and we only have until tomorrow morning to secure them. So, what say you?"

"I'll do it," Chang says with easy confidence. Of course she does. She knows exactly how prepared Cedric and the others are, and she knows full well that the four of them aren't emerging from that lake until they've saved each of them. It's hard for her to be afraid in the face of that sort of preparation, even if they supposedly won't be given back after an hour passes. Heavy emphasis on supposedly. He rather doubts that they'd be able to get away with such a thing happening under their watch.

George looks strangely flustered as he echoes his agreement, a pleased smile tugging at his lips. It's strange to see him without Fred right by his side, but he's clearly happy about this. It's hardly any wonder. He must mean an awful lot to Viktor for his name to be the one who...

A blush burns bright on his cheeks. He knows that he and Harry have gotten quite close recently, but this is... His name came out of the goblet. Before Fred's, before Dobby's, and even before Hagrid's name did. His name.

"I... I'll do it," the faintly trembling little girl murmurs before clenching her fist in determination. He's leaning toward sister now. That action is all Fleur.

"Are you sure, Gabrielle? You do not 'ave to! We can always–"

"I'll do it," Gabrielle repeats more firmly, refusing to be swayed. Fleur is going to kill someone when she realizes they dragged her little sister into this. He's looking forward to the

show.

“And you, Heir Malfoy?”

He doesn't even get the chance to say anything before his godfather steps in. “As I said before, there has clearly been some kind of mistake. Mr. Malfoy and Potter have been openly antagonistic to one another for years, and it is absurd that you would drag him away from his studies for this.”

“The goblet doesn't lie,” Bagman says with absolute certainty. It doesn't, and that's terrifying. “He is free to say no, of course, but we will need to hear him say it before it tells us another name.”

“The Goblet of Fire has malfunctioned once already, or are we all so eager to forget that we have a fourth champion in a tournament meant for three? It has clearly done so again. There is no reason—”

“I'll do it.” His voice cuts through the tension like a knife, and he can feel a faint buzz of magic in his chest as the goblet accepts his words as truth. It's too late to back out now, not that he intends to. Even if he had refused, there's no changing the fact that his name was the first one to come out for Harry. Pretending that it didn't happen wouldn't do him any good. *‘Getting ahead of it and controlling the narrative... I hate that you give such good advice, Blaise, even if only inadvertently.’*

His godfather looks at him like he's just murdered a crup before his very eyes. He can see the flush on Draco's cheeks. There's no doubt that everyone in this room can, and he can't bring himself to care about it. “Potter, really?” he drawls.

“I don't recall asking for your opinion,” he sniffs. He'll catch hell for it later, but oh well.

“Brilliant!” Bagman cheers as he claps his hands together. “Then we'll be putting you into a temporary stasis—solving the little issue of breathing underwater and ensuring you don't get too cold—for the task now. We'll see you all tomorrow morning.”

The world around him becomes very fuzzy and strange after that.

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Harry isn't the only one positively seething as they walk out to the Black Lake. Viktor looks fit to kill, Cedric is clenching his fist so tightly that thin rivulets of blood well up beneath his fingernails, and the only reason that Fleur isn't already hurling fireballs at the judges' table is that she can't figure out who they've taken from her. Harry is sorely tempted to do so in her stead.

Bagman doesn't do a lot of explaining this time, simply waiting for the crowd to gather before he makes his announcement. Harry supposes it's because they were given some idea of what they were getting into this time. Once the low thrum of an audience is buzzing in their ears, Bagman points his wand to his throat and utters, “Sonus.” He clears his throat, and the sound booms across the dark, still water and up into the stands. “Well, our champions

are now ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely one hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One... Two... Three!”

The whistle echoes sharply through the chilled air, and warmth suffuses his bones as Fleur casts a Warming Charm on him. She reinforces her own and casts one on Cedric as well, throws back an Invigoration Draught, and then the three of them pull out balls of gillyweed in perfect unison. Viktor simply strides forward in his wetsuit, not nearly as affected by the cold as the rest of them and knowing that it wouldn't matter in a moment regardless. He's only half-submerged in the water when the transformation overtakes him, leaving an eight-foot shark in his place.

Cheers roar from the crowd. “I'll be!” Bagman cries out. “An Animagus transformation, at his age?! He must have just learned it, yet he moves in the water like he was born to swim. Look at him go!”

The three of them leap into the water after him, shoving the cold, slimy mass of plant matter down their throats and doing their best not to gag. Gillyweed is positively foul, but it's so dead useful that he can't bring himself to care.

Viktor is waiting for them beneath the water. They move as a group, firing off spells at any grindylows that grow too bold as they steadily make their way to the center of the lake. They swim deeper and deeper, and Viktor nudges Harry's hand as he finds himself falling behind slightly. He's a far better swimmer than he was before, but even gillyweed doesn't change the years of experience that he lacks in comparison to the others. He gently holds on to Viktor's side with a murmured, “Thank you.” His voice sounds strange and distorted beneath the water, and it's utterly bizarre that this is a turn his life has taken. Growing gills and breathing underwater... He hadn't even known that such a thing was possible. There is so much that he still needs to learn about the world he's been thrust into...

A large swarm of grindylows gathers together, and when they swim over a particularly large patch of weeds, they strike. Clawed hands snatch at their feet, but before they can do anything more than slow them down, Fleur strikes.

She looks like an avenging angel. Long, pale hair billows around her as a fierce snarl pulls at her lips, and a sharp jerk of her hands sends jets of boiling water straight for the grindylows. They screech in pain, and though many of them swiftly retreat, a few now bob motionlessly in the water. Fleur swims low, sharp eyes peeled for any hint of movement beneath them. The grindylows do not come back. They usually know when they're faced with a predator beyond their ability to handle, and when they do not know, they learn it swiftly.

They are not interrupted again on their journey toward the center of the lake, and once they hear the haunting siren call of the merpeople's melody, they immediately bank in that direction.

“An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took...”

Viktor jerks his tail sharply, and the three of them hold on as he races forward, cutting through the water as easily as he dives through the air in Quidditch. It's exhilarating. Harry can understand why he's still happy about his Animagus form, even if its practical uses are limited.

"... Your time's half-gone, so tarry not

Lest what you seek stays here to rot..."

That's new. Harry doesn't like the sound of that one bit. It's a good thing that they're swiftly approaching what must be the merpeople's village, passing by painted rocks that depict merpeople wielding their spears against the giant squid and several other battles against sea creatures. Sea serpents, whales, and, strangely enough, a pod of dolphins. He wonders if merpeople are capable of traveling between fresh and saltwater without issue or if these are simply stories that are passed down from merpeople that did live in the ocean.

He's not sure what he expected merpeople to look like, but it certainly wasn't this. Gleaming yellow eyes trail after their group's movements with open curiosity, and equally yellow teeth are bared in a poor approximation of a smile. They have ashy gray skin and long, green hair that could easily be mistaken for the weeds growing from the bottom of the lake. Maybe that's the point? A sort of camouflage... Their silver tails propel them through the water as swiftly as Viktor's does, and he warily eyes the spears that every merperson he sees wields as easily as breathing.

Harry really hopes that they don't have to fight. He is not nearly coordinated enough to do that underwater.

There's a whole crowd of merpeople now, watching as they approach what seems to be their village square. There's a giant statue of a merperson towering above them in the center of it, and four hostages are bound tightly to the tail of the statue, a steady stream of bubbles escaping their throats in their state of deep sleep. No one attempts to stop them as they surge closer, though he's unsure if that's because they're not to interfere with completing the task or if they don't want to risk losing a limb to a shark.

The weeds binding Draco, George, Cho, and a little girl that Harry doesn't recognize but who has to be related to Fleur are slimy and thick, and casting a Severing Charm risks harming the people bound with them. Luckily, Harry has just the tool for this.

He pulls the knife that Sirius gifted him out of his pocket, thankful now more than ever that he had elected to keep it on him instead of leaving it with Draco. He gambled on no one knowing about or being able to take the blade, and it's a gamble that's paying off now. He cuts Draco free, but when he moves to do the same for the others, a seven-foot-tall merman shakes his head firmly. "You take your own hostage. Leave the others..."

Harry gives him a long, hard look before pointedly passing his knife over to Fleur. The merpeople around them cackle as she cuts her... Little sister? Free, and it morphs into outright laughter as she passes the knife to Cedric and allows him to do the same for Cho.

It's a bit more difficult for Viktor to free George without harming him in the process, but the merpeople do not protest, merely looking amused, when Cedric pulls the weed out just far enough away from him that Viktor is able to bite cleanly through it. It's clear that this isn't how they expected them to go about this, but they seem pleased by it nonetheless.

Lighthearted laughter follows them as they slowly rise to the surface, and the merpeople swim in loose circles around them as if to guard their ascension now that they were weighed down by the people in their arms. Or in Viktor's case, draped over his back. The pitch black of the lake slowly lightens. The sun is shining high in the sky above them, and as they approach the water's surface, it steadily gets brighter. Harry can feel his hands slowly shifting back to normal, and it takes only a glance to know that Fleur and Cedric are experiencing the same. But they are mere feet away from the surface, and by the time their gills melt away and reform into ordinary skin, their heads are breaching the water.

The crowd roars. Viktor remains a shark to better support them as they swim toward the lake's edge, swimming beneath them with only his dorsal fin peeking through the water. Draco, George, Cho, and Fleur's little sister all start spluttering and gasping for air, expelling water from their lungs and trembling faintly from the cold. Fleur immediately casts warming charms over them as well, holding her sister close as she sobs, "Gabrielle!"

George is wide-eyed and awed as he clings onto the top of Viktor's powerful form, and considering the eager gleam in his eyes, Harry has a feeling that it won't be very long before he and Fred are working toward becoming Animagi as well.

And Draco... He almost expects Draco to be angry. They've been keeping their friendship a secret, and now the entire school –and likely all of Britain once Skeeter's next article comes out– knows about it. But... Draco has a smile on his face –small and fond and genuine– that makes Harry's heart race in a way that being faced with dozens of merpeople hadn't.

"I'm the person you'd miss most?"

Draco sounds breathless when he asks it, and Harry feels equally so when he answers, "Of course you are."

Steely-blue eyes flick down from his eyes to his lips and back again, and he feels his face burn a bright red. "Harry...?" It's a plea and a question all in one, and he's helpless to do anything but nod in answer.

Draco Malfoy cups his cheeks like he's the most precious thing in the entire world before kissing him in front of the entire school. The audience roars –this time in shock and confusion more so than celebration– but Harry doesn't care. How can he when Draco is right here? Alive and well and warm against him despite the chill of the lake that they're nearly out of.

Their group laughs when Viktor splashes them with his tail, and those who know them look fond but not at all surprised when they force themselves to part. Cho even pumps her fist with a cheer. "I won the bet! Pay up, suckers!" And really, they all ought to know better than to bet against a Ravenclaw.

A helpless little laugh bursts free from his throat as they return to the land, Viktor seamlessly returning to his human form behind them and surging forward to ruffle Harry's hair affectionately. He feels like he's on top of the world, and not even the wall of disbelieving stares facing them can temper that.

Dumbledore crouches before the waterfront, conversing with who appears to be the chief of the merpeople. She's even larger than the guard from before, easily nine feet tall with wickedly sharp teeth and wild, messy hair. He's mildly surprised when Dumbledore answers her screechy song with one of his own.

"Huh... I didn't realize you could learn Mermish." He might have to look into that. It doesn't sound very pleasant on the ears, but the usefulness alone...

"Of course you can," Draco murmurs quietly. "I can't speak it, but I can understand it well enough. The merchieftainess is telling him about how you fought together down there, working together as a single unit instead of competitors. She sounds quite impressed, actually."

The chief glances in their direction out of the corner of her eye, winking before disappearing beneath the water's surface. Dumbledore straightens up, turns to the other judges, and says, "We should have a conference before we give the marks, I think. There is much to take into consideration."

The judges huddle together, and he leans against Draco's side as he murmurs, "Are you sure about this?"

"It's a bit late now, Harry," Draco teases fondly. "But I'm sure. I'm throwing my lot in with you, for better or for worse. I don't think I could live with myself otherwise."

"Your parents..."

"Will either see sense or they won't." Draco swallows harshly, and though he keeps a straight face, it's clear to see that the idea of the latter frightens him. "Between your fortune and the basilisk, we'll hardly be destitute, even if they disowned me for it. Though I doubt they would..."

He's no fan of Lucius Malfoy, but he hopes that the man doesn't, for Draco's sake.

Bagman's magically amplified voice booms out as the judges come to a consensus. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows..."

"Cedric Diggory! Making clever use of the properties of gillyweed, he acted as the guiding eyes for what was truly a singular unit among the champions! He steadily led them toward the center of the lake, and for his cool head in a crisis, we award him forty-five points!"

The crowd cheers, and Cedric seems quite pleased with himself. "I figured I'd get a lower score than that, honestly. I didn't do much to stand out, but... There were more important

things to worry about.” Cho presses a kiss against his cheek, and Cedric’s smile becomes distinctly besotted.

“Harry Potter! Much like Diggory, he used gillyweed to enable himself to breathe under the water. He is also responsible for carrying the knife that allowed three of our four champions to safely free their hostages, and for this, we award him forty-six points!”

He really doesn’t care about his score, but, in a way, it’s nice to be recognized anyway. Draco must see the conflict dancing in his eyes because he scoffs and murmurs, “You did well. You’re allowed to be proud of it, you know?”

“Fleur Delacour! She is the last of our champions to utilize gillyweed, and it is her that enabled them to safely traverse to the merpeople’s village! She used wandless, wordless magic to send boiling water hurtling toward the grindylows that attempted to slow their progress with great efficiency! And for that, we award her forty-eight points!”

“Zey had better be grateful zat my sister is fine,” Fleur mutters darkly. “Else they’d be joining zhose grindylows in sinking to zhe bottom of zhe lake.”

“Last but certainly not least, Viktor Krum! In a shocking turn of events, it would seem that he has studied and completed the Animagus transformation in preparation for this task! His bull shark form was perfectly suited to the task, and he navigated the water and aided his fellow champions as if he, himself, was a merperson! Only needing assistance when it came to freeing his hostage safely, we award him with a nearly perfect score of forty-nine points!! Though he will need to stay for a moment to register with Mr. Weasley here, of course.”

Viktor flushes and shuffles back and forth on his feet. They had all agreed on this beforehand, so none of them are surprised when he clears his throat and says, “Ve vill all need to, actually.” The crowd’s cheers die down into a confused murmur. “Ve all became Animagi in preparation for this task, starting before ve had any clue vat vas waiting for us. Mine vas just the only one useful for it.”

The only one of them –not counting Draco, since no one has any reason to believe that he’s an Animagus to begin with– who initially considered not registering their form was Harry. But it’s not worth the risk or the legal trouble he could get into for not doing so, especially not when his form is so painfully and obviously him anyway. It’s not going to be especially useful for hiding or stealth, so he may as well.

“It was ‘Arry’s idea,” Fleur confirms when Bagman turns a dumbfounded gaze upon them all. “Do you want to see?”

The crowd cheers even louder. Between one moment and the next, Fleur shrinks and takes off into the air, doing wide circles around the stands as she lets out a self-satisfied screech. She swoops down to land on Gabrielle’s shoulder, gently flexing her talons and preening her little sister’s hair as her feathers puffed out in contentment. All of Hufflepuff jumps to their feet, cheering and screaming, when Cedric shifts into a honey badger. And Harry, well...

His world gets a lot bigger and he gets a lot smaller, gently butting his head against Draco’s knee. His ears flick at the cooing echoing in the stands. “Fine, fine,” Draco teases fondly as

he lifts him into his arms, running a gentle hand along his side. “You’re so needy.” Those words are spoken with nothing but the utmost fondness, and Harry lets out a quiet, pleased, “Baa.”

It takes ages for everyone to calm down after that, and Percy looks like he’s about to have a fit as he writes down their names, forms, and distinctive markings to pass along to the head of the Improper Use of Magic Office.

“Well, with that bit of excitement over!” Bagman cries out, calling order to the audience as they shift back into their human forms. Draco laces his fingers with his and doesn’t let go. “The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June! The champions will be notified of what’s coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of our champions!”

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY, they kissed. I have been so eager to write the second task for *ages* now, and I'm realizing that I say that a lot in regards to this story but it is still true. I'm having an absolute blast with it.

Draco making his first kiss a political statement will never not be funny to me.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Well, I got to work writing this chapter while ao3 was down, so now here it is! I hope you all enjoy it.

Everyone is so eager to hear about the specifics of the second task and how the champions became Animagi that it's almost possible for Harry to forget about Skeeter and the article he used to shift focus off of Hagrid and onto himself. He can still catch glimpses of the aftermath of it here and there – pitying eyes that trail after his back and wonder at the scars hidden beneath his robes, a hesitation to grab onto him or shove themselves into his personal space when they wouldn't have thought twice about it before, and a newfound air of respect for Hagrid and distrust for Dumbledore; all net positives, really– but it falls to the wayside of a general hunger for knowledge that would do any Ravenclaw proud.

He thinks that it's more than a bit ridiculous that the judges didn't have some way of showing what was happening beneath the lake, both for safety reasons and for the entertainment of the crowd. Which is, he gathered, rather the point of the Triwizard Tournament. There's nothing particularly exciting about staring at still water for an hour.

There is also the matter of Draco, of course.

Half the school still looks at the pair of them like they expect hexes and jinxes to start flying at any moment, and the other half has a smug, self-satisfied air about them like they thought it was always only a matter of time before this happened. Maybe they're right. Harry isn't exactly an expert in the love department, and looking back on it, well...

Maybe hate and love aren't so different after all. He certainly can't tell when one began to shift into the other, but he doesn't think it started this year.

He wonders if Draco's name would have come out of the goblet even if they hadn't become friends this year. He honestly thinks it might have.

Harry is sitting among a sea of green and silver today, keeping a pleasant smile plastered on his face as the older Slytherins watch him with no small amount of disdain. At least Draco's yearmates mostly seem curious.

"I cannot tell you how glad I am that you two finally did something about that weird tension that always hung between you," Zabini says with a smile that only grows wider when faced with Draco's withering glare. "It's been all 'Potter this' and 'Potter that' since first year, and I thought I was going to go spare over it. I should've realized something was going on the instant he stopped whinging about you."

“Blaise!” Draco snaps with flushed cheeks. Parkinson barely stifles a giggle behind her hand, disguising it as a faint cough.

“To be fair, I’m sure that I wasn’t any better,” he admits sheepishly. “Hermione used to...” His voice cracks slightly, and he takes a deep breath before continuing. “She used to roll her eyes whenever she heard me and Ron complaining about Draco. She always looked pretty exasperated with me for it, so I think she knew.”

She’s even given them her approval, more or less. She’s threatened to punch Draco, again, if she ever hears that foul slur come out of his mouth again, but she’s generally inclined to believe that Harry is making him a better person, not the other way around. He doesn’t know how to explain to her that they both make each other better in different ways, but despite their strained friendship, her acceptance still means a lot.

“How did that happen, by the way?” Parkinson asks with sharp, curious eyes. “I thought you three would be attached at the hip forever. It’s bizarre to see you all so distant with each other.”

“I grew up,” he answers with a shrug. “Ron still hasn’t. Hermione did, but she did it too late. I’m not particularly inclined to give my trust again once someone has lost it, as I’m sure you might imagine.”

“Careful, Potter,” Greengrass cautions him with the faintest hint of a smile. “You’re beginning to sound more like a snake than a lion.”

“I feel like everyone forgets that I was nearly a hat stall.” The people around them go very quiet then, and he snorts when Draco snickers under his breath. “You didn’t tell them?”

“I thought it would be funnier if you did. And it’s like you said, who would ever believe me?”

It’s honestly really funny how hard the Slytherins try to hide their curiosity. They put so much effort into appearing cold and aloof that it almost feels more obvious when they are genuinely interested in something, assuming you know where to look for it. “The hat wanted me in Slytherin,” he says, relishing in the fact that doing so cracks a few of those prim and proper masks. “It said I could do well in any house, but it was trying to convince me to go to Slytherin, specifically.”

A sneer tugs at Parkinson’s lips. “And you chose Gryffindor?”

“I chose the house that would give me the fewest problems to be part of, given what little information I had at the time,” he corrects. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that my introduction to the magical world was filled with pro-Gryffindor, anti-Slytherin propaganda. There were expectations placed on me from the start, you know? Same as most of you, I imagine. I was expected to be brave and just like parents that I didn’t even know the names or faces of, much less remember in any meaningful way, and frankly, I was more afraid of being sent back for not living up to expectations than I was of going to a house that I might not have suited as well as... Any of the other three, to be quite honest.”

Zabini's smirk only grows wider at the dumbfounded silence that falls over their section of the table. "Oh yeah, you're a Slytherin, alright." There's a gleam of satisfaction in Zabini's eyes that makes him think he might have just passed a test of some sort. "Good enough for me. I suppose that I can permit you to steal Draco away sometimes."

Harry quirks an eyebrow, thoroughly amused as he says, "I rather think that I'd sneak around and do it anyway, but I appreciate the approval nonetheless."

"Definitely a Slytherin." Parkinson looks more approving now too, and he can't help feeling relieved by it. He wants Draco's friends to like him. "If an oddly honest one... But I've seen stranger, and you make it work."

They shift to lighter topics now that they've felt Harry out and decided he isn't a threat, and it's only the delivery of the morning mail that interrupts the flow of conversation. Draco's eyebrow quirks slightly at whatever headline he reads in the Daily Prophet. "Skeeter must really be trying to keep herself in your good graces. You've likely done more for my family's reputation with this one article than my father has managed in years."

"Huh? Give me that." Draco isn't talking like it's a bad thing, but he's wary of anything that Skeeter writes about him without his explicit approval, just on principle.

Harry Potter's Star-Crossed Romance

By Rita Skeeter

You read that right, dear readers! Our savior is officially off the market, and from the sounds of it, he has been for quite some time now. Those of you who were present at the second task of the Triwizard Tournament are already aware of this, but I imagine that it will come as quite a shock to the rest of you that Draco Malfoy, a fourth year Slytherin, is the person that the Boy-Who-Lived would miss most.

These two have had a rather infamous rivalry during their years at Hogwarts, but whether their relationship came about as a gradual shift from rivals to something more or is, in fact, something that has existed beneath the veil of a rivalry for years now is currently up in the air.

"I think it's sweet," said Hermione Granger, ex-best friend of Harry Potter and former member of what was commonly known as the Golden Trio. "It's clear that they've always... Revolved around each other, in some way, so I can admit that I'm not very surprised this happened. They seem good for each other. That's all that really matters."

"I started suspecting that something was up after the Yule Ball," said Colin Creevey, a third year Gryffindor. "My little brother, Dennis, and I had been trying to reverse engineer the badges Malfoy made to support Diggory for months, but we weren't having any luck with it. Then Harry gave us a box full of new badges that not only worked the same way but felt the same too, and I suspected... But I would've seemed barmy for saying it, wouldn't I? Draco Malfoy? Going out of his way to support Harry, no matter how subtly? It didn't make sense. But I just didn't have all the pieces of the puzzle, I guess..."

It is understandable that our young lovers would want to keep their relationship quiet, and it is only because they chose to reveal it to the world that this humble reporter is writing about it now. This goes farther than the house rivalry between Gryffindors and Slytherins. As many of you know, Lord Lucius Malfoy was the victim of the Imperius Curse during the war against You-Know-Who. He was found innocent of any wrongdoing by the Ministry of Magic, but those accusations have lingered and strained relations with the Malfoy family for many years now. There are some who claim that he has deceived the world at large, lying about being placed under such a curse to disguise his involvement with You-Know-Who's reign of terror.

I believe that this has finally put such suspicions to rest. The son of one of You-Know-Who's supporters certainly would not fall for the Boy-Who-Lived, nor would he declare that love to all of the world with such an adoring kiss. The way the two of them look at each other... Besotted is not a strong enough word, in my humble opinion.

So for those of you who have insisted upon the Malfoys' guilt for all these years, shame on you, I say. Shame on you for refusing to see what our savior so clearly does. Know that this reporter wishes the two of them nothing but the best.

"Well," he murmurs. "Maybe your father won't hate me quite as much as I expected." He's not holding his breath on that, but if nothing else, this should be convenient for him. He should probably feel a bit guilty that he's helping someone that really was a Death Eater, no matter how inadvertently, but it's Draco's father... So long as Voldemort remains out of the picture, it doesn't matter too much, he decides. At least this article isn't front-page news. That's reserved for a retelling of the second task and the fact that all four champions have become Animagi.

"Not exactly how I wanted to tell him," Draco says with a quiet snort. "But it'll do well enough, I suppose. I can make it work."

Draco starts wearing one of the 'Support Harry Potter' badges openly now that he can, and Harry can't deny how pleased he is every time that he sees it. It's written all over his face if the way Dean and Seamus mock gag at him for it is any indication. Draco never receives a howler in the wake of Skeeter's article, but he does receive a letter that leaves his face pinched with displeasure for several hours afterward.

Harry almost doesn't notice it in the wake of his own letter. Sirius is just as curt in this one as he was in the last, and a creeping sense of dread crawls down his spine as he reads it.

Meet me at the end of the road out of Hogsmeade (past Dervish and Banges) at two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. Bring as much food as you can.

His heart pangs. He thinks of the persistent, gnawing hunger that was all he ever knew before Hogwarts, leaving him dizzy with it and desperate enough to pluck worms from the earth just to get something, anything inside of his stomach. He remembers how it feels to be so hungry that his body stopped telling him that he was until, very suddenly, it reminded him with a vengeance that he might just die if he didn't eat soon.

Sirius is on the run. It's very likely that he's experiencing a similar hunger right now, and it just isn't fair. It isn't fair that he was imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit while Lucius Malfoy walks free despite the crime he did commit. Everything feels so terribly backward, and he just wishes that there was more he could do, something that could help Sirius without endangering him at the same time...

The realization hits him all at once. Oh, but he's been so stupid. He should've been doing this from the start. He is jittering with anticipation all day, eagerly awaiting an end to lessons so he can put his plan in motion, and it means that he turns out a potion that isn't nearly up to par with what he's been managing lately. He's more than a bit embarrassed by it, but surprisingly, Snape doesn't tear into him for it. Come to think of it, he's been less antagonistic than usual lately... That article is helping him in ways he didn't even expect it to.

He does not head toward the Great Hall after potions. He doesn't go to the kitchens either, and he's not surprised when Draco falls in step beside him as they make their way to the Room of Requirement. "Are you going to tell me what's been bothering you all day, or do I have to guess?"

"I could say the same to you, you know?" Except he doesn't really need to. He doesn't need to know the details to know that Draco's father isn't going to be anything but begrudgingly accepting of them, at best. "I'll tell you in just a minute," he promises when Draco scrunches up his nose in displeasure. "This isn't something I can risk anyone overhearing."

Harry paces back and forth in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, thinking, *'I need a safe place for Draco and I to have a conversation. A place that no one but Dobby can find us in.'* He's usually the one to dictate the rules of the room since he's the most familiar with it, but the others do practice doing so themselves when he isn't around.

He isn't remotely surprised when the entrance leads to a slightly larger version of his cupboard, made just large enough to comfortably fit two people and a house elf if they squeeze together. "Harry..." Draco murmurs as he takes a seat on the familiar, ratty mattress that he called his own for so many years. His fingers are twitching, and he seems to be trying very hard not to look anywhere but at Harry's face. Even still, his eyes linger on the piece of paper taped to the wall declaring this 'Harry's Room'. "If I ever meet your relatives, then I might just kill them."

It should probably concern him that his cheeks flush with contented pleasure upon hearing those words. It doesn't, not even remotely.

"You'll have to get in line," he quips with a snort. "I'm pretty sure Fred and George called dibs. You should've seen what they did when they came to pick me up last summer. If Mr. Weasley hadn't reversed it, my cousin probably would have suffocated on his tongue."

"Oh?" Draco's eyes glitter with intrigue. "And how did they get around the trace?"

"It was one of their joke products! Ton-Tongue Taffy, they called it. The two of them are brilliant, really, and Mr. Weasley couldn't even get too mad at them for it since Fred just

‘dropped’ the candies. My cousin was the one that rushed to shove one into his mouth as soon as they hit the floor. He did it to himself, really.”

“Interesting... Very interesting...” The look in Draco’s eyes would be terrifying if he didn’t know that he’s one of the very few people that doesn’t need to worry about being caught in the crossfire of whatever he’s plotting. “But I won’t let you distract me. What in Merlin’s name has made you so twitchy today?”

“Sirius wrote me,” he winds up blurting out, stumbling over his words a bit in the process. “Not that it’s the first time, just... He’s asking me to meet him on our Hogsmeade visit, and I’m afraid. Not of him but for him. That and he... He asked me to bring food. Which, of course I will, but it makes me feel awful that he got so desperate that he had to ask before I thought about doing that, especially when I could’ve at least sent a little something along with my letters.”

“Ah,” Draco hums. “I had wondered if the two of you were in contact. The circumstances around the end of last year were... Suspicious at best.” A smooth thumb brushes across his knuckles, and not for the first time, Harry wonders how on earth Draco could like someone like him. How someone so... Perfect could care for someone with cracked and calloused hands that never fully heal and more scars than he cares to count. “Do try not to beat yourself up for it too much, Harry. He could have asked you at any point and you would have sent food to him. He knows that. If my cousin allowed his pride to prevent him from asking for help when he needed it before, then he has no one to blame but himself. Though I find it more likely that he’s only recently struggling to find food, personally. From what my mother has told me, Sirius has always been the reckless, impulsive type. She wasn’t at all surprised when he sorted Gryffindor.”

That makes him feel a bit better, actually. “Thanks, Draco,” he murmurs, leaning against him with a sigh. “Will you come with me? To see him? Everyone will be expecting us to go together anyway, and... Sirius is the closest thing that I’ve ever had to a family. I... I want you to meet him.”

“Of course I will, Harry,” Draco promises without even pausing to think about it. Affection burns in his chest as he tries to swallow around the lump in his throat, so consumed by the feeling that it’s difficult to breathe.

Pale fingers work through his messy hair, somehow managing to make it even worse, and the sensation is so soothing that he nearly falls asleep then and there. He does manage to stay awake, though, if only just. Once he feels a bit more human and a bit less like a glacier on the verge of sinking down into the ocean’s depths, never to be seen again, he murmurs, “Dobby?”

Dobby pops into the cramped space, eyes wide with surprise as he glances around the cupboard. For the briefest of moments, something very dark and angry flashes in his eyes when he catches sight of the yellowed, crinkled paper plastered to the wall. “You be needing my help, Harry?”

“If you don’t mind...”

“Dobby never be minding! Ask.”

“I’m going to be meeting with Sirius tomorrow, and he asked me to bring him food. Could you help me put something together for him? A basket that’ll last as long as possible? And maybe, if you wouldn’t mind, you could visit him from time to time? Bring food with you when you do?”

“I can be doing that!” Dobby reassures him with a smile. “Though I think I be having an even better idea for making sure your dogfather stays fed, if you don’t be minding hearing it?”

Draco watches the two of them with a curious expression, but Harry doesn’t pay it much of any mind as he says, “Of course I don’t mind! If you’ve got any ideas, then I’d love to hear them.”

“Winky be missing being a personal elf. It is all she be knowing, and though she likes having work at Hogwarts, she likes having one master to serve even more.” Dobby looks more than a bit confused by the notion, but he cares enough to tell them anyway. “If she be offering, do you think your dogfather would be accepting a bond with her? He is also being disgraced by the wizards, and he be needing all the help he can get. Winky can help! And Dobby can be passing along food to her much easier than to your dogfather. House elves can always be finding each other, but we can only be finding specific people, our chosen people, no matter where they are being.”

“That’s a brilliant idea, Dobby!” he cries out, smiling from ear to ear. “I don’t see why he wouldn’t agree to it. Thank you. This is... This helps a lot, actually. I’ll feel a lot better knowing that she’s looking out for him.”

Dobby sways in excitement. “Then I be telling her! And I be going with you to meet your dogfather so Winky can find us. This is being very good news!”

“But wait,” he murmurs just before Dobby can pop away. A tilted head greets him. “What do you mean that house elves can only find certain people? You’ve always been able to find me.”

“Because Harry Potter is being one of Dobby’s people,” he says quite plainly, like it doesn’t make Harry’s eyes blur with tears. “He was always being such. It is how I be finding you with your nasty muggle relatives, and if I ever be seeing them again, then I may be shoving them down the stairs.” He can’t help his helpless, shocked laugh at that. “I can be making it look like an accident. But that is not being the point. I first be finding Harry because I want to be protecting him, and then I be finding Harry because he is being my friend. Our magic be bonded. It is why Dobby not be getting sick from a year of no work before coming to Hogwarts with Winky. Dobby is a free elf, but he is also being Harry’s elf.”

“Oh,” he whispers. “That’s... And you don’t mind? I know how much you value your freedom, and the last thing I want to do is take it from you.”

Dobby pats his hand with a small grin. “I be knowing that, Harry. You is making it clear that I can refuse you if I be wanting to, and I do not be forgetting it. I just not be wanting to yet.”

“That’s... That’s good,” he murmurs, still quite dumbstruck by the whole thing.

“It do be,” Dobby agrees with a nod. “Now I be going to tell Winky the good news and get food for your dogfather. Dumbledore be knowing about him, so I can even be asking the other elves if they be remembering any of his favorite foods.”

Dobby disappears with a quiet pop, and when he glances over at Draco, he sees the most wide-eyed, bewildered look that he has ever seen on his boyfriend’s face. “What is it?”

“You... You truly are friends with him, aren’t you? You don’t just say that to seem progressive or whatever.”

His eyebrows furrow. “Obviously? Why wouldn’t I be? Dobby is great.”

“But he’s a house elf.” Harry is suddenly and painfully reminded of Hermione and S.P.E.W. He never really thought about it before she brought it up, but the way house elves are treated... Dobby, Winky, and who knows how many others... It’s wrong. Just because he hasn’t been as vocal about it as she is doesn’t mean that he doesn’t see that. He just... Didn’t realize that other people couldn’t see it. It’s just common sense to him.

“So? Hagrid’s half-giant and Fleur is a quarter veela. That doesn’t make them any less my friends.” Draco’s eyebrows pinch together, and he can tell that he’s about to drop the subject entirely despite still being confused. He doesn’t like fighting with Harry anymore, at least not for real, and tries rather hard to avoid doing such a thing. “Think of it this way, okay? Dobby is just as sentient as you and I are. He has thoughts and feelings and dreams of his own. Being a house elf doesn’t make that any less true. So why wouldn’t I treat him like another person? He is a person. He doesn’t have to be human to be one.”

“I... Suppose?” Draco still sounds unsure, but Harry has one final ace up his sleeve.

“Hey, Draco? Where do house elves usually sleep?”

He seems quite confused by the sudden shift in conversation, but Draco humors him nonetheless. “Larger manors usually have a barracks of sorts, but those who only have two or three elves typically have them sleep in a closet or cupboard.”

“But you think it’s wrong that the Dursleys shoved me into one, right? I was a small kid. It’s not like I didn’t fit.”

“Of course it’s wrong! They—”

“What happens if a house elf disobeys orders?” He already knows the answer to this one, but he needs Draco to say it before he can even begin to understand.

“Well... Not that they usually do, mind you, but the most common punishment for minor to moderate offenses is sticking their hands in the oven or on a hot stovetop and leaving them there. For how long depends on the severity of their infraction.”

“Right,” he says slowly. “You know, one time, Aunt Petunia got so mad that I accidentally burned dinner that she shoved my hand down on a hot skillet and held it there for a whole

minute. I was six.”

“That’s outrageous! She never should have—”

“Then you do understand that it’s wrong. You just think that it isn’t wrong to do to house elves for some reason. Why?” he asks, tilting his head just so. “Because we’re wizards and they’re house elves? My relatives did it because I was a wizard and they were muggles. Because the house elf did something wrong? Could it not be argued that I did something wrong when I burned dinner? That I deserved it?”

“Of course you didn’t—!”

“Then neither do they.” He can see the moment that it truly sinks in for Draco, the realization and horror dancing in his eyes as he swallows harshly. “Because from where I’m sitting, I’ve always been a bit more of a house elf than a wizard, haven’t I? I spent most of my life living that way. And if I deserve compassion and care, then so do they. It doesn’t really matter if they’re different from us in some ways, does it? We’ve got plenty in common too, and... Even if we didn’t, sometimes having different perspectives is a good thing.”

“Yeah... I, yeah, I’m beginning to understand that...” Draco huffs, tugging at his own hair with a weary sigh. “You’ve given me... A lot to think about. Thank you. But can I just...”

“Take all the time you need,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss against Draco’s forehead before he stands up and leaves the room. Draco sits in that cupboard for hours. He doesn’t pop up on the Marauder’s Map until well after curfew, and when he does, he does not head for the Slytherin common room. He walks straight to the kitchens instead.

Harry drifts off into slumber well before Draco leaves the kitchens, simultaneously enlightened by the knowledge he has gained and weighed down by the heavy burden of guilt.

They leave for Hogsmeade bright and early the next morning. Draco looks exhausted –and Harry knows that he would probably have bags under his eyes if he hadn’t used some sort of charm to hide them– but the smile he has while lacing his fingers with Harry is no less genuine for it.

“I draw the line at going to Madam Puddifoot’s, just so you’re aware,” Draco drawls in a teasing tone. “I like you, but not that much.”

He barks out a sharp laugh at that. He’s not exactly a fan of the pink monstrosity that is Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop either, no matter how popular it is for couples to go there. “Duly noted.” They go to the Three Broomsticks instead. They’ve got to kill a bit of time before they can meet with Sirius anyway, and Draco seems to take a quiet sort of delight in the looks they get when they walk through the doors hand in hand.

Those looks only grow more baffled when Dobby joins them sometime around noon, sitting on the other side of their table and kicking his feet back and forth while he sips at a butterbeer. The three of them venture out into Hogsmeade once the staring gets to be a bit much, and they shop around for a while, stopping in Gladrags so that Dobby could buy a

couple of new pairs of socks that scream whenever they get dirty. He looks utterly delighted by them.

Winky joins them about half an hour before their meeting with Sirius, carrying a picnic basket that is absolutely full to bursting. Dobby takes one look at her before popping away and quickly returning with a picnic blanket in hand, and any questions about what they might be doing are silenced immediately. House elves are the best.

“Let us be going,” Winky says with a dip of her head, looking more animated than Harry has ever seen her. She’s actually smiling for once.

The four of them make for quite an odd picture, he’s sure. A Gryffindor and a Slytherin holding hands as they walk toward the edge of the village, flanked by a house elf on each side that matches their pace with ease... He half expects another article to be born of this.

Hogsmeade is its own kind of beautiful, but the countryside bordering it is even more so. There are rolling fields as far as the eye can see, and buried beneath his desire to shift forms and prance through those fields is a silent vow to himself to truly have a picnic out here one day. Maybe once the weather shifts from mild to genuinely warm.

They keep walking until they see a large, shaggy black dog waiting for them at the end of one of several dirt paths. Slightly soggy copies of the Daily Prophet are held in his jaws, and Harry smiles fondly even as Sirius tenses at the sight of Draco. “Hello, Snuffles. We brought you food.”

Sirius takes a wary step forward, sniffing at the basket and wagging his tail slowly. He looks between Harry and Draco with a disgruntled woof. “I’m not going to tell anyone, cousin.” After several long moments of deliberation, Sirius turns around and begins leading them up the craggy surface of the base of a mountain. Draco is thoroughly disgruntled when Harry transforms –making Sirius wag his tail and bark in excitement– so that he can more easily climb the rocky surface.

“The things I do for you, Harry...” he grumbles under his breath after Dobby prevents him from slipping. The spend nearly half an hour taking a winding, twisting path up the mountain, and while Harry is having fun with it, he does feel bad about how downright miserable Draco looks. Thankfully, it isn’t too much longer before Sirius hauls himself up to a level surface, disappearing into a narrow fissure within the mountain. The four of them follow without hesitation.

Draco freezes when he catches sight of Buckbeak tethered against the far back wall of the cavern, looking relieved and wary all at once. He bows low and murmurs, “I want to apologize for what I said last year. I did not truly mean it, but that does not excuse the fact that I said it.”

Harry shifts back into his human form and bows as well, and both Dobby and Winky follow suit. Buckbeak regards them imperiously for a moment, gleaming orange eyes evaluating them before he, too, dips his head in a bow. This is when Sirius shifts back, and Harry winces at the sight.

His godfather is thin. Painfully and dangerously so. He's still wearing the same raggedy gray robes that he was in when he escaped Azkaban, and his hair is longer than it was when they last spoke through the floo, tangled and matted. He looks awful.

"Chicken!" Sirius cheers after throwing the copies of the Daily Prophet to the floor. Winky looks terribly sad as she passes the basket full of food over to Sirius. "Oh, and these are under Preservation Charms, aren't they? They're still warm...! Thank you." Sirius's smile is so brilliantly bright for something so simple, and it makes Harry want to cry. "I've been living off of rats, mostly. Can't steal too much food from Hogsmeade; I'd draw too much attention to myself."

He would be a raging hypocrite if he asked Sirius why he hadn't asked for food sooner, so he doesn't. He really wants to, though. Draco is not nearly so reserved. "Merlin, look at you. How could you let it get this bad before asking for help?"

Sirius doesn't deign him with a response, leveling Harry with a disbelieving, faintly amused look. "Lucius's son, really?"

"Draco's really nice!" he protests. "He helped me with the first task, and he's the one who bought everything I needed to become an Animagus too..."

His godfather's gaze becomes more curious then, tilting his head in a distinctly dog-like manner before shrugging. "I'll reserve my judgement for now, then. He did follow you all the way up here, even if he was complaining the entire time..."

"I would have worn proper boots if I knew we were climbing," Draco grumbles. "But enough about that. There's absolutely no need for you to live like this, and we will not let you continue to do so."

Sirius cocks his eyebrow then. "I don't intend on leaving. I have a duty to fulfill as Harry's godfather, and things have been getting stranger and stranger lately. I don't trust it. The articles I've been reading lately... Something big is coming. I'm pretending to be a lovable stray, and the only ones who know that I'm an Animagus are you two, Dumbledore, Ron, and Hermione. It's a right shame that you've drifted apart..."

Harry quickly redirects the conversation. "That's not what we were talking about, Sirius. We want to introduce you to Winky."

"Winky... Winky, now where have I heard that name before?" Sirius hums. "Ah! Right, the house elf that got involved in the mess at the Quidditch World Cup, right?" Winky shrinks back at that, looking like she's about to cry. "Dumbledore took you in, then? Good on him."

"We were wondering if you might take her on." Sirius seems quite shocked by Draco's suggestion, blinking dumbly for several long moments. "You need regular access to food and care that you cannot get as a fugitive or a dog. She can help you. She wants to help you, asked to, even. And it would be a more secure method of communication anyway, wouldn't it? She and Dobby could exchange letters."

“That’s... Not a bad idea,” Sirius admits reluctantly. He turns to Winky with a curious look then. “You’re sure? I’ve never had the best experiences with house elves. Kreacher was always a right terrible grouch.”

“Then he is being a bad elf,” Winky declares firmly. “I... Mr. Crouch be thinking Winky is a bad elf. Maybe he is being right. But I be doing my best for you anyway.”

Sirius smiles then, something light and carefree that looks out of place on such a haggard face. “You know what? Why not. Everyone thinks I’m a bad wizard, so we can just be two peas in the same rotten pod.”

“... Winky not be minding that.” There’s a brief flare of magic that Harry now recognizes from when Dobby protected him from Lucius, and he laughs when he watches Winky immediately get to work detangling Sirius’s hair where she could and cutting what she could not. Sirius grumbles good-naturedly about it, but he seems quite relieved when the dead weight is no longer tugging at his scalp.

“Thank you. Both of you, really. This is far more than I...” Sirius heaves out a sigh. “I’m supposed to be the one protecting you, Harry.”

“You do more for me than any other adult I know,” he says, and Sirius gets a very dark look in his eyes then.

“Yeah, about that Harry... That article Skeeter wrote... Was it true? Did those muggles really do that to you?”

“... Yeah. I made her send me the article before she published it. It didn’t say anything that I didn’t want it to, or that I at least didn’t mind it saying. Nothing untrue.”

“I’ll kill them,” Sirius snarls, pacing back and forth like a lion trapped in a cage. “How dare they—”

“You’ll have to get in line, Black,” Draco drawls. “I’ve been informed that the Weasley twins are ahead of me in that regard, so you’ll be stuck behind all three of us.”

A sharp bark of laughter echoes throughout the cave, causing Buckbeak to shift uneasily. Several more follow it. “Maybe you’re not half bad after all, Malfoy,” his godfather rumbles.

“Besides, last summer really wasn’t that bad,” Harry interjected. “Because I told them about you –minus the part where you’re innocent, of course– and that you expected me to keep in touch. That if they laid a hand on me or if you didn’t hear from me for too long, you’d march up to their doorstep and kill them all. It kept them in line.”

Draco shudders. Harry isn’t really sure why; it’s not cold up here. “You blackmailed them? That is... Really hot, actually.”

Sirius snorts at that, sounding distinctly amused when he says, “You *would* think that, wouldn’t you?”

“And it’s not like they’ll be able to send me back without literal riots, so I’m not too worried about it anymore,” he says with a shrug, trying his best to sound like he really means it. He’s not so sure he succeeds. “It’s... It’s over. It haunts me, it’ll probably always haunt me, but it’s over. I don’t want you to risk getting caught.”

“... Alright. But only because you’re the one asking, pup. Or lamb, I suppose. Have I told you how proud I am of you for managing that? Because I am. So, so proud. You’ve done really well in the tasks so far. Just... Just don’t get complacent, okay? Promise me.”

“I promise,” he whispers.

“And if he starts to wander too close to that edge, then I’ll be there to talk some sense back into him and pull him away from it.” Only he and Draco understand the true depth of those words, but Sirius can hear how serious a promise it is, if nothing else.

“You look out for him.” It’s not a question. It’s a demand. Draco doesn’t balk at it.

“Always.”

Sirius claps Draco on the back and says, “You know what? I think you might just be my favorite cousin. Cissy did a good job with you. Merlin knows that none of this came from Lucius’s influence...”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Yesterday was quite a day, huh? But we all survived, and it's good to be back! The good news is that while I agonized over not being able to read anything on ao3, I wrote both this chapter and half of chapter 13 as well. I hope you all enjoy! You honestly might see another post later today for chapter 13, but if not, then it'll definitely be up tomorrow. We're getting close to the end (of the first book) folks ;3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There's something immensely satisfying about being able to use his own two hands, calloused and marred as they are, to create something for the ones he loves. He's currently wearing all three of his badges –Draco had called it tacky, but he said it so fondly that no one really believed him– as he putters around Hogwarts' kitchen. The house elves refuse to let him help with general dinner prep. They insist that they enjoy doing their jobs and don't want him to do so, but Dobby enthusiastically agrees to let him help make food specifically for himself and his group of friends.

That group has recently grown larger. Cho always joins them in the kitchens now, and Harry is rather surprised to find out that she and Cedric have been having dates here for a couple of years now, actually. "I know that the tournament is very stressful, and I was glad to see him making new friends. I didn't want to intrude or prevent you from focusing on the tasks ahead. I am glad to join you now, though."

Fred and George also frequently join them, and it's pure coincidence that they haven't been in the kitchens at the same time before now.

"Oh, yeah, we've known about the kitchens since–"

"Our second year. 'Course, we just tickled the pear as–"

"A laugh, really, so we were pretty shocked when the portrait opened." Fred barks out a sharp laugh, nudging his twin with a grin. George shifts his weight, glancing at Viktor as he murmurs, "I planned on showing you, but I figured you had already found it since you guys kept skipping meals all of a sudden. Should have known it was Diggory."

Angelina stops by sometimes too. Mostly just to sit with Fred, but also to talk Quidditch and generally bemoan that they're unable to play this year. Harry empathizes completely. He misses flying on his broom, and he makes a mental note to go flying sometime soon. Maybe he and Draco can have a seeker's match, just for fun...

"You'd better not go easy on the Slytherins just because you fancy Malfoy," Angelina warns him sternly. "We expect you at your best."

“Yes, ma’am!” he salutes her with a laugh, and Draco rolls his eyes at them both.

“Honestly, I don’t want to win if he’s not giving it his all anyway. What’s the point in that?”

“Careful, Draco dear,” Pansy teases with a snicker. “That sounded positively Gryffindorish.” Pansy is another recent addition, and Harry finds himself oddly unbothered by her. He feels like he should be jealous of how she speaks to Draco, but he just... Isn’t. She’s messing with him, and Harry knows that.

Draco levels her with a glare that is equal parts disgusted and betrayed. “Pansy, I think that is the meanest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“It’s true though, you’ve got to admit.” Blaise only laughs when Draco turns his scowl on him, holding his hands up in surrender. The amused glint in his eyes only proves that he would say it again, though. “He’s corrupted you. You’ve become positively nice. You even nodded at Granger the other day. Granger!”

“Do shut up, Blaise.” Harry’s not quite sure how Draco’s friendship with Pansy and Blaise works, but honestly, seeing the way he acts with them, he wonders if he was still trying to become Harry’s friend even after he refused him. There’s an awful lot of bullying involved here. “Granger is terrifying and you very well know it. I do not intend to give her reason to set me on fire.”

“Zat is vairy wise,” Fleur agrees with a nod. “She seems like she ’as a temper.”

“Most Gryffindors do,” Harry says very dryly. “Myself included. There had to be something there for her to avoid going straight to Ravenclaw. Can you pass me the garlic powder, Dobby?”

“I can be doing that!”

Harry often finds himself stunned that this has become such a regular part of his life. Smiling, laughing, and joking with what feels like a truly massive group of friends, boyfriend right by his side and watching on fondly as he stubbornly insists upon doing all of his cooking by hand, is like a dream come true. The only thing missing is Sirius. He wants so badly for his godfather to be part of this, but though he can’t have that, he is reassured by the fact that Winky is looking after him. She’s reassured him that Sirius is slowly putting on weight, and though she does not have a house to clean, she has him and Buckbeak to take care of. It’s enough for her, she’s reassured him, and she seems much lighter now than she ever has before, even back when she was still working for Crouch.

“Dinner is served,” he murmurs. They’re a strange group, he knows, but he wouldn’t change it for a thing. Not a single damn thing in the world.

Harry wonders if this is what being part of a family is meant to feel like.

“I’m so bored,” he groans, sulking as he slumps against Draco with a sigh. There’s nothing to do. There’s still a month before they’ll have any idea what the next task is, there’s nothing

left of the basilisk to break down and sell, the professors won't let them use the Quidditch pitch for some reason, and Harry is just... Bored. He's starting to get restless. "Draco..."

Draco heaves out a sigh, rolling his eyes as he mutters, "I am trying to do my Potions essay, Harry. Do cease being so distracting. My godfather gives me enough trouble now as it is." And that had been a shocking revelation. Snape is just so... Snape. It's hard to imagine anyone trusting him with their children, but then again, this is Lucius Malfoy... Maybe it's not so hard to imagine after all. "Have you even finished yours yet? Don't answer that, I know you haven't. You ought to."

"But that's boring," he whines. And it's not like he hasn't tried. He managed to fumble through his Defense and Charms homework before his brain just shut down on him, absolutely refusing to budge on the matter. He doesn't understand how Draco and Hermione can do this. "Please, Draco? I really want to go see if we can find that unicorn again..."

Hagrid has already told them that they'll be moving on from the unicorns in their next lesson, and as sad as that makes him, he is curious to see what's coming next. Nothing like the Blast-Ended Skrewts, he hopes.

"Oh, I suppose," Draco says with a sigh, trying and failing to sound very put out about it as he puts his essay away. "If you want to go prancing through the Forbidden Forest, then who am I to stop you? We are utilizing the cloak and map, though. It wouldn't do to get caught."

"You're the best, Draco!"

"Believe me, I am aware."

It's hard to believe that he and Draco ever used to struggle with this. Walking beneath the Invisibility Cloak with Draco at his side is as easy as it is for him to do it alone, and between the buzz of activity within a castle that has not yet turned in for the night and the map helping them avoid any wandering professors, they're out on the castle grounds just as the sun starts to set. It'll be interesting to see what the forest looks like during the daytime, actually. He's just now realizing that every other trip has been made under the cover of darkness.

The Forbidden Forest... Looks like any other forest during the day, really. Sure, there are some oddly colored plants that sway against the wind here and there and there are bizarre creatures that he catches glimpses of as they dart through the underbrush, but otherwise, it's just like any other forest. He doesn't know what he was expecting, really. But it always seems so... Otherworldly at night.

"Well, go on then" Draco encourages him. "I know you want to."

Harry shifts. His world tilts on its axis for just a moment before it recenters itself much closer to the ground, and his ears flick as he basks in the sound of life in this forest. Flies –or maybe fairies– buzzing in the distance, distant birdsong that sounds oddly mournful, and the slow drag of a smooth, scaled belly through the grass below. He supposes that snake doesn't have much to say, but it's fascinating that he can hear so well now. He's never really noticed it before. Maybe he's becoming more in tune with his alternate form, or maybe it's because every other time he's shifted it's either been very quiet or very loud already.

His tail flicks in alarm, and he turns his head toward a noise that sounds... Pained. Like there's some sort of struggle that he should probably leave well enough alone, but he already knows that he's not going to.

It doesn't take long for Draco to notice that they're headed in a specific direction. "Where are you leading me, Harry? Not straight into trouble, I hope."

He hesitates. He gives a feeble, hesitant "Baa" a few moments later. He's not sure that it'll be trouble, exactly, but it sounds like something could use their help...

Draco sighs. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I knew what I was signing up for. Alright, let's go."

For a moment, he fears that they're facing the same thing they had in the first year. Silvery blood pools in the grass beneath a struggling unicorn, but there's no obvious signs of injury at all beyond something coming out of... Oh.

"Merlin and Morganna," Draco whispers, wide-eyed, afraid, and looking more than a bit queasy. "She's giving birth. Harry, we should—"

"Baa!!" He stomps his hoof in protest, jerking his head sharply in the unicorn's direction. She doesn't look so good. He knows that this sort of thing is supposed to be really difficult, but there's a lot of blood...

"Harry, she won't even let me close to her. Not close enough to do the spells I'd need to help her. You can't save everyone. Sometimes these things just—" Draco falls abruptly silent when Harry takes a hesitant step forward. The unicorn jolts uneasily, watching him with fearful eyes.

"Baa..." He just wants to help. She's hurting, she needs help, and both her and her foal are going to die if they don't stop this bleeding. *'Please, let us help you.'*

The unicorn goes very still, and for a moment, he fears the worst. But she huffs, very quietly and clearly exhausted, and does not protest when he takes another step closer. Then another, then another. Draco is looking at him like he's lost the plot, and maybe he has, just a little bit, but he can't just walk away and pretend that he didn't see this.

"Baa...!" Draco takes a single, hesitant step. The unicorn does not react. She tenses slightly once he gets close enough to kneel down next to her, but she does not buck or kick like either of them feared she might. Her foal is stuck. She's exhausted and only managed to get about halfway through before becoming unable to move much at all, and only the fact that the foal came out head first is saving them from suffocating. It's tried to free itself, but doing so has only injured its mother in the process, cutting her open and causing excessive bleeding.

"I am... Going to help you the best I can, okay?" Draco murmurs softly. "You don't have time for me to get anyone else, and even if I did, Hagrid is no less male than I am. I'm sorry." The unicorn exhales sharply, but she doesn't jerk beneath the tip of Draco's wand. In fact, she almost seems... Calmer? "Thank Merlin that Uncle Severus taught me this... Vulnera Sanentur. Vulnera Sanentur. Vulnera Sanentur."

The unicorn's wounds slowly stitch shut before his very eyes. Her eyes flutter with exhaustion and relief, and Harry finds himself pressing against her side before he can even begin to think about what a bad idea that might be. She seems to find comfort in it, though, so he stays right where he is. "Stabilitatem." The unicorn's hoof twitches as the Stamina Charm washes over her, eyes regaining a hint of light and fight in them that had gone out before.

Birth is a very messy, gross, and long process, but when a brilliant, golden foal stumbles to its feet and takes its first steps only a couple of hours later, it all feels worth it. Draco's eyes are as awestruck as they are exhausted, and the mother unicorn looks much the same.

Draco's wand is glowing. A faint, golden link tethers itself to the unicorn, and his boyfriend's eyes only grow wider. "Oh...! You... The unicorn hair is yours, isn't it? That makes sense, I suppose. This is one of the few forests in Britain where unicorns live..." That glowing light grows even brighter before melting away.

The unicorn lets out a soft, exhausted whinny as she slowly staggers to her feet. Harry hovers nearby as she does it—though he's not sure why, really, he couldn't catch her even in his human form— but she takes the next step on her own, nearly as unsteady as her foal. She looks Draco in the eye and bows to him, gently resting her horn against his chest. Draco blinks, startled, as she and her foal slowly walk away, seeking shelter before it becomes fully dark. They need time to rest if they have any hope of outrunning any creatures that might want to make an easy meal of them.

"That was..." Draco breathes out a puff of air. "Brilliant. Terrifying. I... Is it bad to say that I liked it, stressful as it was?"

"Baa." He shakes his head firmly. He's always known that Draco had this in him. Or, well, perhaps it's more accurate to say that he's known ever since they became friends. Draco can lie and bluff his way around caring all he wants, but that doesn't change the fact that he saw who was once his worst enemy lingering at the edge of the Astronomy Tower and stepped in anyway. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for him to look away, but he hadn't. He stepped forward and hauled Harry off that edge, and he's promised to do it again if necessary. Draco cares. He cares as much as Harry does, even if he shows it in different ways, and he's not the type to hesitate when it really matters.

It makes perfect sense that his wand's core is made from unicorn hair, really.

Harry shifts back, and he couldn't care less that silvery blood still stains Draco's hands. He fists his robe and pulls him in for a kiss because really, what else is he meant to do after watching him pull off something like that?

It is a very bemused Firenze who ends up sending them back to the castle long after the moon's light became the only thing illuminating the world around them. "This was not how I anticipated meeting you again, Harry Potter. But, hm... Mars is especially bright tonight, and so too are the stars. Great change comes soon. Only time will tell whether good or bad..."

"Er, right," Harry agrees hesitantly. He's more than a bit lost, but that isn't unusual for him when it comes to Divination. "We'll be on our way. Sorry for trespassing."

“It is of no concern to me. In fact...” Firenze’s piercing blue eyes pin him in place. “It is only because of you that two innocent lives were spared tonight. You and your... Mate. You are welcome to return whenever you should wish.”

And then he’s gone. Draco huffs out a quiet laugh and says, “Only you, Harry. My life wasn’t half as exciting before... Then again, I suppose that’s part of the draw, really.”

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“Mr. Malfoy, I need to speak with you.”

He halts in his tracks, grimacing faintly. He’s known that this conversation was coming for a long while now, but that doesn’t mean he’s any happier about being forced into it. The look in his godfather’s eyes is... He’s never been a particularly warm person, but he’s never looked quite so coolly detached as this, at least not to him.

“Follow me.” Uncle Severus –no, it’s still Professor Snape out here, even when they’re speaking about personal matters– turns without waiting on his response, knowing that Draco will follow. He does. The last thing he wants to do is have this conversation outside of the privacy of his godfather’s office.

He takes his usual seat as Professor Snape locks and wards the door shut behind them, looking incredibly weary all of a sudden. His mask always comes down when it’s just the two of them in here, but he’s never seen his godfather look so... Exhausted before.

“You have put me in a very difficult situation, Draco.” Uncle Severus’s voice is barely more than a whisper. “You do understand that your... Dalliance with Potter has consequences, do you not?”

He does. He understands perfectly well what it means and who it means he very well may have to stand up against. He does have hope, admittedly, that the Dark Lord may be persuaded to spare Harry. Harry who has never wanted to fight, who is so tired, and who is so weary of the world that he nearly... Spare the people he cares about, and Harry will not fight. Surely the Dark Lord will see the benefits of so thoroughly demoralizing the other side by allowing him to live and forcing them to reckon with the fact that Harry will not fight for them.

“I considered them extensively before making the choice that I did, Uncle Severus. I am aware.”

“So you’ve allied with Dumbledore, then?” his godfather asks idly, and perhaps he should feel intimidated by that question. He knows that Uncle Severus is marked, after all, but... It’s hard to feel afraid of the man who taught him so much about Potions, who started teaching him some of the spells that he created almost as soon as Draco picked up his first wand.

“No. I’ve allied with Harry.”

A dark eyebrow lifts in silent question, and Draco sits and waits, refusing to allow his godfather to make him feel stupid. “Their sides are one and the same, are they not?”

“Did you not read the article?” he asks incredulously. “They are not. Harry doesn’t trust Dumbledore any farther than he can throw him, Uncle Severus.”

“You, of all people, ought to know better than to believe everything you read. Especially when written by Rita Skeeter, of all the—”

“Harry directly oversaw that article.” His godfather gets very quiet then. “He had to approve it before she published it. Every single thing in it was something he allowed to be, something he wanted to be, including the parts that called Dumbledore’s actions into question. Maybe especially those parts. He was essentially blackmailing him into finding somewhere else for him to go this summer.”

“You seem awfully certain of this.”

“We’ve discussed it. He’s rather more clever than you give him credit for, Uncle Severus.” His godfather scoffs at that, and his eyes narrow in challenge. “He was meant to be one of us. He was meant to be a Slytherin, and despite knowing absolutely nothing of the magical world, he was able to piece together enough to know that everyone wanted and expected him to be Gryffindor and fight tooth and nail for that outcome anyway. To keep himself safe. You can disapprove of him all you want, but I’ll tell you the same thing that I told my father: I don’t care. You cannot change my mind, and any attempts to do so will only separate us, not me and Harry.”

“... You are serious then.” Uncle Severus heaves out a sigh. “I feared as much. Once you’ve set your eyes on something—or someone, I suppose—it is typically... Rather difficult to sway you from your path.” His godfather allows his sleeve to ride up, and Draco’s breath catches in his throat.

The Dark Mark is... Darker. It doesn’t look faded anymore. “You understand what this means, don’t you, Draco?” his godfather murmurs.

“Yes,” he whispers. The Dark Lord is coming back, and suddenly, he really, truly fears the reason that Harry may have been entered into the Triwizard Tournament. It’s just so unfair... “I understand.”

Something big is coming. He’d suspected as much after the events at the Quidditch World Cup, but this... This is not a vague hint or sign. It is a glaring warning. He needs to start preparing for the worst-case scenario.

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Nifflers are some of the cutest creatures that Harry has ever seen, and one of them snatching and breaking his glasses does not change that fact. He hopes that Hagrid has more lessons like these. It’s a nice change of pace to have cute, fuzzy creatures rooting around for golden coins instead of dealing with monstrosities like those Blast-Ended Skrewts. He feels a bit bad for being relieved that the last of them had died, but... He just is.

“Merlin, you’re such a mess, Harry,” Draco tsks playfully. “Blind as a bat, aren’t you?”

“It’s hardly my fault I can’t see.” The lenses in his old frames are well and truly shattered, and not even a Repairing Charm would’ve done any good. He’s not sure why his niffler was so fascinated by the dingy old things –maybe they’re just drawn to anything metallic– but at least he has an excuse to get a new pair. His vision has been getting a bit blurry around the edges lately anyway. “But thank you for guiding me anyway. Knowing my luck, I’d probably trip on a trick step and break my nose or something.”

Harry, Draco, and McGonagall are making a quick Hogsmeade run to get him new glasses. Since it’s not a Hogsmeade weekend, a professor has to go with them to ensure that they don’t dawdle around the village, and since McGonagall is his head of house... Well, it could be worse, he supposes. It could be Snape going with them.

An amused sound escapes a blurry blob of red that must be McGonagall as they approach her. “You boys doing alright?” Her voice is... Strangely gentle, more so than he’s ever heard it be, but maybe that’s just because he can’t see the stern expression that’s likely paired with it.

“We’re well, professor,” Draco answers, mostly because Harry is still quite cross with McGonagall for... Several reasons, really. “You’ll have to forgive him leaning on me like this, I’m afraid. I know that it’s improper, but he wouldn’t see a bludger hurtling toward his face right now.”

He can practically hear McGonagall lifting her eyebrow in her voice alone. “I rather think that your actions after the second task are proof that you care far less about what is proper than any of us thought you did, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco snickers under his breath. “I suppose you’re right, professor. I hope you don’t expect to hear me apologize for it. I’m not at all sorry.”

Is he hearing things, or did McGonagall actually just laugh? It was a quiet, forcefully stifled chuckle, but he’s almost certain that he heard it. “No, I wouldn’t expect you to be. Come along, then. We should ensure that Mr. Potter is able to see for his classes tomorrow. And knowing him, he almost certainly has homework that needs doing between now and then...”

Draco’s exasperated sigh answers that question without any words at all. His face flushes with heat. “He truly is trying, professor. We’re working out a work and study schedule that works better for him. He cannot... If he tries to do all of his work in one sitting, then not much of anything ends up getting done at all. It has to be broken up into chunks and done over time, usually just subject by subject unless there’s a particularly large essay due...”

“... You truly do care for him, don’t you?”

“Would I allow him to hang all over me like this if I did not?”

“Prat,” he scoffs fondly. “Don’t let him fool you. Draco cares a lot more than he lets on.”

“I have a reputation to maintain, Harry.”

“You’ve done this to yourself, Draco,” he teases. “You were the one that kissed me first. I probably would’ve quietly pined forever if you hadn’t.”

“I’m well aware. That’s half the reason I did it.”

“And the other half?”

“To make a statement, of course,” Draco sniffs haughtily. “The goblet spitting out my name meant that rumors were going to fly regardless, so it was best to give them an answer before they invented their own.”

McGonagall laughs. Bright and loud in a way that echoes through the passage to Hogsmeade, bouncing off the stone walls and reverberating in his ears. “Merlin, if your parents could see you now... The two of you are rather like James and Lily, you know? Still different, but the similarities...”

“Really?” he asks, eager as ever for any information about his family.

“Really. Your mother quite hated James for their first several years at Hogwarts, actually. Called him a bullying toerag and hexed him no few times. But... They grew up and found that once they actually started talking to one another, they rather had a lot in common. It did not take long for them to fall in love. Or, well, James was smitten with Lily almost as soon as he met her, but it did not take long for her to fall for him after that.” There is a smile in McGonagall’s voice that he may not be able to see, but he can certainly hear it. “It’s rather ironic, is all. I wonder if they would have known from the start...”

“Probably,” Draco says with a snort. “Blaise certainly did, and I doubt that I’ll ever hear the end of it.”

“... You are happy, Harry?”

“Yeah,” he whispers. “Happier than I’ve been in a really, really long time. Happier than I’ve ever been, I think.”

“Then that’s all that matters,” McGonagall says quite firmly. “And for what little it’s worth... I support you. And I am sorry that we did not see anything sooner in regards to your relatives. I should have known...”

“You should have,” he agrees, ignoring his pang of guilt when he feels her jerk beside him. “But it’s over now, regardless. As long as I don’t go back, it really doesn’t matter.”

“You can always come back to the manor with me,” Draco suggests with a hum. “If nothing else, my father will tolerate you for the boost in reputation. And I know my mother genuinely wants to meet you. She seems pretty excited about all of this, really.”

“That sounds nice,” he mumbles with a pleased flush to his cheeks. Draco’s father wouldn’t have any choice but to ensure nothing happens to Harry so long as everyone knows he’s there, so it’s as good a plan as any, really. It would be awkward to stay with the Weasleys

with how tense things are between him and Ron right now, and he'd feel guilty doing so nonetheless. It hardly matters if the Malfoys have to spend money on him. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'd quite enjoy spending the summer with you. There are so many things that I... Have you ever traveled outside of the country? Have you even been to see the ocean?"

"No..." His blush takes on a distinctly embarrassed tinge as Draco gently squeezes his hand. "I've never..."

"I want to show you," Draco says, and Harry's stomach twists like it does when he dives after the snitch. It's all giddy joy and a swooping sensation that has a smile tugging at his lips no matter how hard he tries to fight it. "I want to show you all the things you never got the chance to see. I want to show you all the beautiful things in the world, if only so I can see the way you smile when you see them."

"Sap," he chokes with a snuffle. His vision is already far too blurry right now for the tears gathering in his eyes to make any difference, but he can feel when one streaks down his cheek. "No one would ever believe me."

"Payback, then." Draco sounds so unbearably fond that he can barely stand to hear it, affection thrumming in his chest and gripping his heart like a vice. "For all the nonsense you drag me into that no one else would ever believe."

He barks out a laugh at that. "That's fair enough, I guess."

McGonagall clears her throat. "We're here, boys. Do attempt to compose yourselves." She doesn't sound nearly as stern as he's expecting her to, and despite everything that's gone on this year... He is happy that she seems to like Draco, if nothing else. He knows that she hadn't before, no matter how brilliant he is in classes.

Harry's new glasses have rectangular, black frames and a multitude of spells on them. Something to make them less prone to breaking, a built-in version of that charm that keeps rain from clinging to the lenses, and even a way for the lenses to adjust to a new prescription as his eyesight worsens, to a certain degree. It's the literal best thing ever, and he's never been able to see so well in his life.

"Your eyes..." he murmurs when he glances back at Draco. "I could always kinda tell that they had a bit of blue in them, but..." Bright flecks of blue glitter among the prettiest shade of silver that he's ever seen, and Harry finds himself feeling quite tongue-tied. "You're beautiful."

Pink immediately floods Draco's cheeks. "You're an embarrassment, Harry!" he snaps, but there's no hiding how pleased he is. "Wait... How long have you had your old glasses, anyway?"

"Years," he admits sheepishly. "And even then they weren't... They weren't the right prescription. They were just better."

Draco blinks rapidly. "I am trying not to think about the implications of that because I will grow quite violent if I do. Merlin above... I cannot believe that you've been beating me to the snitch with a built-in handicap. That niffler is going to be the worst thing that's happened to the Slytherin Quidditch team since you were scouted. Next year is going to be embarrassing."

"Probably," Harry agrees with a snort. "I apologize in advance for stealing the House Cup away from you."

"I suppose it can't be helped," Draco drawls. "I've found myself growing rather fond of red and gold lately anyway."

McGonagall pretends not to notice that they're leaning on each other just as heavily on the walk back to the castle as they did on the journey out of it. She has a smile tugging at her lips the entire time.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a lot of fun to write, honestly. A bit of downtime for our characters before things well and truly hit the fan. Next chapter builds into and covers the third task, after all... >:3

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Heheh, you all get this chapter tonight too! I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He's pretty sure that the entire Great Hall has fallen into a silent state of shock when Draco sits next to him at the Gryffindor table. It's the first time in ages that he's sat with his housemates, but considering the assortment of people he's usually with, he's really not sure why they're all so surprised. Fred and George are the only ones completely unphased by it.

"Hello, Malfoy. I see you've deigned to grace us with—"

"Your presence. Sitting among the commoners for a change? I must admit—"

"I didn't know you had it in you. I suppose that—"

"Our favorite brother is a good influence on you after all, hm?" Fred finishes with a smirk.

Draco rolls his eyes, scoffing playfully. "Bugger off, you two. You're not funny."

George clutches his heart like he's just been shot. "So cruel! My poor heart can't take it. I think this might be the end for me, Forge!"

"No, Gred! I will remember you always. Filch shall be pranked many times in your honor." The two of them devolve into snickering, and Draco joins them, much to the obvious surprise of the Gryffindors around them. Harry watches on fondly, looking and feeling like a besotted fool.

"It's far too early for this," Draco chuckles with a small grin. "How am I supposed to stay composed when I'm still half-asleep, hm?"

"That's why we strike in the mornings, Malfoy. You're always a bit—"

"Looser, more relaxed, than you are when you've had time to put on that poney mask. You really ought to just—"

"Do away with it, you know? No one's buying it anymore, not when—"

"Harry's got you wrapped around his finger."

Draco quirks an imperious eyebrow at George and says, "Oh, really? Ought we have a conversation about Viktor, then? I've heard—"

“Nope!” George cries out with a face nearly as red as his hair. “Let’s not!”

Now that the weather is getting warmer, Viktor has been spending a lot more time in the Black Lake than before, enjoying the feeling of cutting through the water as a shark. Recently, he’s taken to bringing George with him, and George doesn’t even gag when downing gillyweed anymore. It’s a bit impressive, really, because that stuff tastes and feels wretched.

“Have they told you about the next task yet?” Draco asks once the table has settled enough to return to eating, even if a few members of Harry’s house continue eyeing Draco warily. “It’s getting pretty close to time, isn’t it?”

It is. The end of May is nearly upon them, and so too is the final task. “Not yet,” he murmurs. “But it should be any day now.”

“Let me know if you need help with anything. You know that I love any excuse to go on a good research binge anyway.” Hermione perks up upon hearing that, visibly biting her lip to keep herself from saying anything.

Colin and Dennis aren’t nearly so reserved. They make a few older Gryffindors budge over as they sit across from the two of them, eyes gleaming with an eager sort of hunger that would have done well in Ravenclaw, he thinks. “The badges,” Colin starts. “How did you make them, Malfoy? We’ve been trying to figure it out for ages.”

The tension that falls over the Gryffindor table is thick and heavy, weighing down the very air between them. He can see the way several of the older years tense, preparing for Draco to sneer down at their muggle-born members and say something derisive and cutting. They really shouldn’t have worried. Draco loves any excuse to talk about his Charms experiments, and while Harry is always happy to listen, a lot of it goes right over his head.

“Well, first you’ve got to ensure that the base is receptive to magic, not just tolerant of it. Objects like this require multiple layers of spells if they’re going to work properly, and it’s usually best to use silver to facilitate that process so it works with you instead of against you. Then there’s the matter of weaving a spell matrix without it collapsing in on itself...”

His boyfriend is adorable. His hands move animatedly as he explains his process, and both Colin and Dennis are nodding along the whole time, even taking notes and asking questions throughout. Harry loves him so much that it hurts.

“I guess you don’t just like him because he’s fit, huh?” Lavender asks with a hum. “Good on you, Harry.”

He only barely registers the words. He’s too busy staring at Draco to pay much mind to them at all.

It’s during the last week of May that McGonagall holds him back after class. “You are to go down to the Quidditch pitch tonight at nine o’clock, Mr. Potter. Mr. Bagman will be there to tell the champions about the third task.”

He's full of restless energy for the rest of the day, and he really wishes that Transfiguration wasn't his first class today. He's hardly able to focus on any of the others with his magic humming beneath his skin, eager to do something more productive than practicing a few spells with no real aim or direction in mind. There are several times that he's needed to shift into a lamb to escape the uneasy jitters, if only for a moment, during these past few weeks.

Harry starts making his way toward the Quidditch pitch at about half past eight, smiling when he sees that the other champions are waiting for him by the Hufflepuff common room. "What do you think the task will be, Harry?" Cedric asks with a curious hum. "Fleur keeps going on about underground tunnels. She reckons we'll have to find some sort of treasure since both of the other tasks have had some sort of retrieval element to it."

"Why else would they keep us away from the Quidditch pitch?" Viktor asks with a quirked eyebrow. "They must have been doing something to it..."

"And zey 'ave not exactly cared about 'ow exciting it is to watch," Fleur continues. "Or zey wouldn't 'ave made our second task take place in zhe lake."

"It's as good a guess as any," Harry agrees. "I wonder if Hagrid would let us borrow a few nifflers..."

There are not underground tunnels. The Quidditch pitch is no longer smooth and flat at all, covered in long, low walls that twist and turn in every direction. It looks like the beginning of a maze, and it's only when Harry gets a closer look at them that he realizes, "They're hedges!"

"Exactly right, my boy!" Bagman cheers from the center of the field. The four of them make their way toward him, all climbing over the hedges with the exception of Fleur, who merely shifts and flies over the whole lot of them. "They're growing in nicely, aren't they? Give them a month and Hagrid will have them twenty feet tall. Don't worry," Bagman continues, seeing the thunderous expression on both Cedric and Harry's faces. "Your Quidditch pitch will be good as new once the task is over. Now, I imagine you've figured out what we're making here?"

They all nod. "A maze," Viktor grunts.

"That's right! The third task's really straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze, and the first champion to touch it gets full marks for the task."

Fleur's eyes narrow in contemplation. "Do we 'ave to go zthrough the maze?"

"Yes. There will be no flying over, digging under, or blasting through the hedges. You cannot intentionally damage the maze or avoid going through it, but beyond that, anything is fair game. There will be obstacles, of course... Hagrid is providing a fair number of magical creatures, and there will be spells that you need to break free of... That sort of thing! Now, the champions that are currently in the lead will get a head start in the maze." Bagman turns to Fleur with a nod, then shifts his gaze to Viktor, Harry, and Cedric in that order. Huh. Harry hasn't really been paying any attention to their rankings, so he's a bit surprised that he's not in last, really.

“You’ll all have a fighting chance, though, depending on how you manage the obstacles that you face. Should be fun, eh?”

He rather doubts it, but he nods politely all the same. Fleur snickers at the look on his face as he does so. Harry really wishes that they had a better idea of what obstacles they might face, but he supposes they can’t be any worse than a dragon...

“Very well! If you haven’t got any more questions, then we’ll head back up to the castle. It’s starting to get a bit chilly out here...”

They all follow Bagman through the maze and back into the castle, unaware of the man stumbling through the Forbidden Forest and onto the castle grounds mere minutes later. Bartemius Crouch Sr. dies with no one being any the wiser. Percy Weasley continues to receive letters of instruction regarding the Triwizard Tournament. Bartemius Crouch Jr. has always been rather skilled at forging his father’s signature, after all, and their handwriting is so similar that no one would notice the difference, least of all someone as overworked and harried as Percy Weasley currently is.

Mars glows even brighter.

Fleur is a flurry of movement as she puts him through his paces, making him work for every successful Disarming Charm and Stunning Spell. “Zey will not stay still for you to ‘it zem, ‘Arry,” she had said before dragging him into a proper duel. “You must move and cast at once.”

Dueling is a bit like dancing, in a way. Harry’s unsure of his footing, but Fleur takes the lead and guides him through the motions until he’s doing it without thinking at all. He can see the instant that she shifts from defense to offense, and Harry throws up a hasty “Protego Duo!”

The Stunner bounces back toward Fleur, and her smile is a wild, feral thing. “Vairy good, ‘Arry. Again!”

He has never been so exhausted in his life. Draco pats his back sympathetically when he slumps into the kitchen later, nearly collapsing into his potatoes with a quiet groan. “Fleur is merciless,” he mutters. “I ache in places I didn’t know I could ache.”

“You are getting vairy good at duelling, zhough!” Fleur looks utterly unruffled, and that would be discouraging if he hadn’t watched her untangle the messy disarray her hair had fallen into while they hurled spells at one another. “Zere is vairy little zat could give you trouble in zat maze, I zhink.”

Harry is so perpetually exhausted from his training that between Trelawney’s droning voice and the heavy perfume hanging over the Divination classroom, he drifts off in the middle of class.

There’s a chair, regal and stuffy in a way that looks utterly out of place in this vaguely familiar home that looks one good storm away from falling apart. He cannot see the figure sitting in the chair, but there are two large shapes sitting on either side of it. On one side, a giant snake stares up at whoever is sitting in the chair, and on the other, a short, balding man

cowers on the floor and does not dare look up from it, wheezing and sobbing as he trembles in place.

“You are in luck, Wormtail.” The voice comes from the chair, and it is only then that he realizes why he is unable to see that person. He is them. He is seeing through their eyes. “You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything. He is dead.”

‘*Who is dead?*’ he wonders idly, and images of Barty Crouch flash through his mind, as if in answer. He supposes that it isn’t so surprising, really, what with him being sick so long... Maybe Percy just didn’t want to believe that he was getting worse. He seems awfully fond of Mr. Crouch, after all...

“My Lord!” Wormtail gasps, bowing low and shaking like a leaf caught within a tornado. “I am... I am so pleased! And so sorry...”

“Nagini,” he continues. “You are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you after all... But never mind, never mind... There is still Harry Potter.”

He doesn’t want to be eaten by a snake. That seemed like an awful way to go back in second year, and it still seems like one now. ***“Very well, master.”***

“Now, Wormtail... Perhaps you need another reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you.”

“My Lord... No, please, I beg you...”

He lifts his wand. “Crucio!” Wormtail writhes and squirms at his feet, screaming and crying as great big sobs tear out of his throat.

“It’s what he deserves, isn’t it?” something whispers at the back of his mind. *“For betraying your parents. For betraying Sirius. For being the reason why he knows hunger and pain and the agony of Dementors always being near. For being the reason that you know the same. Your godfather would have raised you if he wasn’t trapped in Azkaban, after all...”*

Harry watches Wormtail writhe beneath his wand, and though he knows he should feel horror or fear at the sight of it... He simply does not. Not for him. Not for Peter Pettigrew. Not for someone directly responsible for the pain and suffering of so many people that he loves.

‘He deserves it.’

When Harry wakes, it is with a faint smile tugging at his lips. He can’t remember what he was dreaming about, but it feels as if it was a very pleasant dream indeed.

He spends the last couple of weeks leading up to the final task learning a few new spells with the help of Fred and George. Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor are all busy preparing for their NEWTs –since those are required tests worldwide and dictate the kinds of jobs they can get, they’re only exempt from any final tests or projects outside of them– so Harry is left to his own devices for the most part. He masters the Impediment Curse, a spell that slows down any attackers; the Reductor Curse, a spell that blasts solid objects out of the way; and the Four-

Point Spell, a charm that makes his wand point due north and would help him stay oriented within the maze. Hermione was kind enough to pass along that one after overhearing the twins mention a maze, and Harry is very grateful for it. Maybe they can try being friends again once all the stress of this tournament is behind them. He doesn't know if he'll ever trust her like he used to, but...

'I'll write her over the summer,' he decides with a nod. *'And we can go from there.'*

Breakfast is an extremely noisy affair on the day of the third task. The entire Great Hall is buzzing with excitement as the owl post makes their deliveries, and Harry smiles when he receives a letter that is nothing more than a muddy pawprint pressed against the folded parchment. It's nice of Sirius to take the time to wish him good luck, especially since they haven't been exchanging very many letters lately. They haven't needed to, really. Everything has been pretty normal.

He's rather surprised when McGonagall makes her way over to the Hufflepuff table, a faint smile tugging at her lips at the sight of their mixed group. He doesn't know why it still surprises people so much. They've been doing this practically all year. "Champions, you'll be expected in the chamber attached to the Great Hall after breakfast."

Fleur's eyebrows furrow deeply. "Zhe task is zis evening, correct?"

"You're not misremembering," McGonagall assures them. "Your families are invited to watch the final task, you know? This is simply a chance for you to greet them." She walks away before any of them can say a word, and Harry's confusion only deepens.

"Um... Who does she expect to show up for me?" he asks with a slightly hysterical giggle. "There's no way it's the Dursleys, right? No way."

"If it is, then they von't be leaving this castle alive," Viktor vows.

Cedric heaves out a sigh. "Can you guys be a bit less open about plotting murder around me, please? One day someone is gonna start asking questions, you know?"

"I've gotta get going or I'll be late for the History exam." Draco squeezes his hand gently before getting to his feet. "Viktor, I'm going to be very cross with you if you get to maim Harry's relatives before me. You can't cut the queue."

Viktor snorts at that, a smirk slowly tugging at his lips. "I'll save some for you."

"You'd better." The Hufflepuffs titter with laughter as Draco walks off with a murderous scowl. He doesn't even dislike History of Magic, the absolute nerd, but it's very clear that the last thing he wants to do right now is leave Harry to face whoever might be in that chamber alone.

Thankfully, he won't be.

Cedric bumps shoulders with him and gives a reassuring smile, and both Fleur and Viktor look fit to murder the second they step through those doors if they have to. It ends up being

entirely unnecessary, and when they see his dumbfounded, grateful smile, they all go to greet their families and leave him to his.

“Mrs. Weasley! Bill!” There’s no hiding the excitement in his voice. He can’t believe that they’re really here. Even with his Christmas gift, he’d been so certain that they wouldn’t want anything to do with him anymore between him and Ron no longer being friends and him dating a Malfoy.

“Surprise!!” Mrs. Weasley cheers with a broad smile, walking up to him and wrapping him in a hug. She holds on for a lot longer than she usually does, but Harry certainly isn’t complaining. It’s nice. “Thought we’d come and watch you, Harry.”

“You doing alright?” Bill’s eyes dart around from head to toe, as if inspecting him for any signs of injury, before he makes himself look Harry in the eye and say, “Charlie wanted to come too, but he couldn’t get the time off. He still laughs about how you handled the Horntail, you know?”

“Oh, but it was so clever!” Mrs. Weasley praises him as she finally pulls back, pressing a kiss against his cheek. “Honestly, they shouldn’t have brought back something so dangerous at all, and I hate that you got tangled up in it, Harry. I’m just glad you’re being careful.”

Harry has to bite back a laugh when he sees Fleur eyeing Bill with great interest. ‘You will introduce me,’ she mouths with a stern look, and he nods, giving Mrs. Weasley a brilliant smile.

“I’ve got to introduce you to the others! They’ve been such a huge help with the tournament, really, and they’re wonderful friends too. They’re the only reason I’ve been half as prepared as I have been.”

Mrs. Weasley’s smile is as warm as the fireplace crackling within the chamber. “I’d love that, Harry.” Viktor introduces himself with a cheerful wave, translating for his parents with ease as they all say their hellos.

“You are George’s mother, yes?” Viktor asks, and Mrs. Weasley jolts with surprise. “He means... Very much to me. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh!” Mrs. Weasley gasps with a smile. “Oh, that boy... He didn’t even tell me! It’s wonderful to meet you, Viktor.”

Fleur engages Bill in conversation while Mrs. Weasley happily talks with Viktor and his family, and Harry waves to Gabrielle just before Cedric and his father join the group. Cedric has a vaguely menacing smile and an iron grip on his father’s arm, and though Mr. Diggory looks quite sour about the whole thing, he doesn’t say a word about Cedric and Harry happily chattering to each other.

Eventually, their group begins to wander around the castle in an approximation of a tour, and even Mr. Diggory brightens as he, Mrs. Diggory, and Mrs. Weasley reminisce on their days at Hogwarts.

“This is what the Triwizard Tournament is really meant to be about, you know?” Mrs. Diggory murmurs with a smile that reminds him far more of Cedric than anything Harry’s seen from Amos Diggory. “It’s a competition, but... It’s meant to bring us all closer together. And look at them now.”

“I am just saying, it is not technically against the rules for me to fly up to the top of the edges and look above them so long as I still do the maze properly.”

“Do you really want to risk that?” Viktor asks with a quirked brow. “I don’t think it would go over very well.”

“It’s the last task, who cares? Mr. Bagman said that whoever touches the cup first wins the round, and the scores are so close that no one who gets full marks here could lose.” Fleur looks extremely vindicated by Harry’s words, and Cedric barks out a laugh.

“I guess when you put it that way... May as well pull out all the stops, huh?”

They go their separate ways when they return to the castle for lunch, one champion per house table as their visitors follow after them. It would be far too crowded for their entire group to sit together like this, so they’re all sticking with their houses for the most part.

“Mum! Bill?” Ron blinks, evidently just as surprised by their presence as Harry was. “What’re you doing here?”

“We’ve come to watch Harry in the last task!” Ron’s face sours immediately. “Ronald Bilius Weasley, I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately, but—”

“Pardon me... Eldest Weasley?” Draco hedges uncertainly. “Could you budge over? I want to sit with Harry.” Bill’s eyebrows almost disappear beneath his bangs, but he does slide over. “Thank you.” Draco turns a brilliant smile on him almost as soon as he sits down, and Harry feels his heart do that funny twist in his chest again. “Are you ready for this?”

“As I ever can be, I think,” he murmurs.

Mrs. Weasley looks between the two of them with wide eyes. “Oh...! I thought that Skeeter was lying. She always does like stirring up trouble, that one...”

“You’re not wrong there,” Draco agrees with a chuckle. “But Harry served her with a cease and desist after that first disaster of an article, and she’s been toeing the line ever since. I’m sure she’ll forget herself eventually, but for now, she’s being truthful, if mildly exaggerating.” Draco pauses, takes a deep breath, and looks Mrs. Weasley in the eyes before saying, “I would like to apologize for my father’s behavior in Diagon Alley two years ago. And for my behavior in general up until recently. I have... Made many revelations recently. I know that I have much to make up for, but... I would like to try.”

“Oh, no, no!” Mrs. Weasley rushes to assure him. “Don’t feel like you need to apologize for your father, dear. Arthur was just as involved in that nonsense, and I don’t intend to let him forget it any time soon. As for the rest of it...” She looks between the two of them again, and

her smile is as warm and caring as ever. Her gaze lingers on where Draco's fingers are intertwined with his. "Well, you're certainly off to a strong start."

Fred, George, and Ginny join them only a few moments later, and if it wasn't for Ron scowling at the lot of them and Draco's presence at his side, it would honestly feel like he's back at the Burrow again. Even Hermione is here.

"Did you figure out that spell I sent you?"

"Yes! It's going to be incredibly helpful; thank you, Hermione."

"You told the other champions too, didn't you?" Hermione asks with a wry grin. She already knows the answer.

"Of course I did. I don't know how much practice they got with it –what, with their NEWTs and all– but I did tell them."

"Good." Hermione nods with a pleased smile. "I'm rather glad you've all thrown aside the competitive element of this. Though it's utterly barbaric that such a thing would get reinstated at all..."

"At least it's almost over," he murmurs. "Only one more task."

Percy seems quite startled to see so many members of his family present when he joins the other judges at the staff table during dinner, but beyond a faint grin, he doesn't show any indication of seeing them at all. He's utterly consumed by the paperwork sitting in front of him.

Harry picks at his food, feeling far too nervous to truly enjoy the plethora of food that is even more varied than usual today. The enchanted ceiling overhead is slowly fading from a brilliant blue to a darkening purple, and his nerves are returning full force.

"You've got this," Draco whispers in his ear. "You're nearly there. Show them all what you're made of."

He still feels uneasy, but it's more like the quiet hum of a hummingbird's wings than the swarm of frantically buzzing bees that it was before.

Dumbledore rises to his feet, and the entire Great Hall falls silent. "Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch pitch for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the pitch now?"

Harry stands up, reluctantly letting go of Draco's hand. Before he can fully disentangle their fingers, his boyfriend pulls him down for a kiss, much to the amusement of the entire Great Hall. "Good luck," Draco murmurs against his lips. "Though you won't need it."

The entire Gryffindor table is clapping and cheering as Harry makes his way over to the rest of the champions. Applause and cheers follow them down the hall for quite some time before

it fades into silence, and Bagman turns back to face them all. “Feeling alright, Harry? Confident?”

“Reasonably so,” he agrees easily enough. He’s learned so many new spells for this, and his duelling lessons with Fleur make him feel lighter on his feet too. Worst comes to worst, he’s not afraid to double back and take a different path if an obstacle is too difficult for him to manage. It’s not like he’s trying to win this thing.

“Good to hear, lad.”

The Quidditch pitch is utterly unrecognizable. Massive hedges have grown nearly twice as tall as Hagrid, and between them and the darkness of the night sky that now has stars twinkling merrily above them, the maze looks quite eerie.

Hagrid, Moody, McGonagall, and Flitwick are the first to join them out on the Quidditch pitch, walking toward them while wearing peculiar, glowing red stars pinned to their robes. He bets that Draco would love to learn how to make one of those. “We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze,” McGonagall tells them. “If you get into difficulty and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come to get you. Do you understand?”

They all nod, and the last bit of tension in Harry’s chest slowly melts away. This task really is the safest of all of them, and if he gets into any sort of trouble, then he can just forfeit. He’s tempted to do so immediately, but he doesn’t want to risk the goblet deciding he’s being difficult about participating after coming so far.

“Off you go then!” Bagman says merrily.

“Good luck, Harry,” Hagrid whispers before all four professors go to take their stations around the maze. A crowd is steadily trickling in, taking their seats in the stands as their voices rise to an excited fever pitch.

Bagman points his wand to his throat and mutters, “Sonus.” He clears his throat, and the excited chattering died down to a hushed whisper. “Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! In first place, with ninety points— Fleur Delacour! In second place, with eighty-eight points— Viktor Krum! In third place, with eighty-six points— Harry Potter! And in fourth place, with eighty-five points, Cedric Diggory! This is one of the closest competitions in all of the Triwizard Tournament’s history, and it’s still anyone’s victory!”

Harry can just barely make out Draco’s pale blond hair amidst a wave of red-haired Weasleys, and he waves before blowing him a kiss.

“On my whistle, Miss Delacour! Three... Two... One!” A sharp whistle blows, and Fleur sprints into the maze, fireballs flickering to life in her hands. It barely feels like any time has passed at all before Bagman blows his whistle again, and Viktor is off, wand glowing with the light of a silent Wand-Lighting Charm. Then it’s Harry’s turn.

He runs into the maze, and though he's sorely tempted to show off more than necessary, he opts for a simple "Lumos" instead of calling upon his Patronus. He knows that the crowd must be making an awful lot of noise out there, but either due to the hedges' thickness or some sort of enchantment, he cannot hear anything beyond the crunching of grass beneath his feet. When he comes upon a fork in the maze, he barely hesitates at all before running down the left side. His path seems utterly deserted. It's more eerie than if there'd been some sort of obstacle immediately awaiting him, and tension thrums in his chest as he makes a right and finds more of the same.

'Did Fleur and Viktor already clear out what was waiting here? Or is there something else at play...?' He still isn't sure why someone put his name into the Goblet of Fire. He's beginning to wonder if they plan on making it apparent soon. It feels like he's being watched "Point Me," he whispers, and he watches his still-lit wand spin around in his hand. It points just to his right, due north, and since the center of the maze is northwest, the fastest way to get there is to take the left fork here and then turn right as soon as possible.

He runs into absolutely no trouble at all. *'Danger. Danger. Danger,'* his instincts scream as he keeps running, glancing behind him to see if he can figure out why it feels like he's being followed. He almost breathes a sigh of relief at the sight of a Dementor –and isn't that a funny thought– before realizing that he would have felt if there was a Dementor in this maze forever ago if it really was one. "Oh, you're a boggart! Riddikulus!!"

The boggart explodes in a wisp of smoke, barely visible in the pitch-black darkness of the maze. Harry has to frequently use the Four-Point Spell to reorient himself, as he often finds himself wandering too far east and has to correct course. The next obstacle that he encounters is a strange, golden mist hovering close to the ground. It looks like an enchantment of some sort, and he's not really sure what the best way of getting around it is. He can't recognize it at all. "It's probably better to loop back around–"

A scream pierces through the silence, and Harry's heart lurches. "Fleur?!" He doesn't hesitate for a second. Harry sprints through the golden mist, ignoring the violent sense of vertigo he gets as his entire world flips upside down. He takes another step and nearly falls to his knees before forcing himself to stand upright, shaking his head and pushing onward now that the world is right-side up again.

Cedric comes running up behind him, and the two of them don't need to do anything more than nod before they're sprinting off after Fleur. She hasn't sent up any red sparks, so she could be fine but... She could also be in such bad trouble that she cannot reach her wand, and Fleur doesn't frighten easily.

The scene that they arrive at is so terrifying that Harry nearly forgets to breathe. Fleur is slumped against the hedges with a pale, sweaty face and shaky hands that cannot properly hold onto her wand. Viktor has been stunned, laying face-down on the ground as Fleur keeps a wary eye on him. "'E... 'E was being controlled," she whispers as her hand spasms violently, dropping her wand to the grass below. "'Is eyes were all... Fuzzy. Blank. And 'e wouldn't 'ave... 'Ave used zhe Cruciatus Curse ozzewise. Please... Be careful. Somezzing is... Wrong."

Harry's heart thunders in his chest as he sends up red sparks for them both. "We will be," he promises. "Cedric... Stay close?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Cedric smiles, and as soon as they hear the rapid footsteps of one of their professors approaching, they're off. Someone has to complete the task. Quickly. It's the only way they can all get out of here safely. The two of them meet relatively little resistance as they traverse through the maze, and beyond having to backtrack a couple of times, they don't meet any obstacles until they're standing before a giant sphinx. They warily raise their wands, but the sphinx makes no move to attack them, simply pacing back and forth to obstruct their way forward.

"You are very close to your goal," she speaks in a deep, hoarse voice. It sounds as if it's been a very long time since she's spoken to anyone at all. "The quickest path is just behind me."

"Then... Will you let us through?" he asks hesitantly.

The sphinx pauses and turns a considering gaze upon him before shaking her head. "No. Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer on your first guess, and I let you pass. Answer incorrectly, and I attack. Remain silent, and I will allow you to walk away. What shall you do, boy who is marked by the unicorns?"

Riddles really aren't his area of expertise, but if it's too difficult for him and Cedric to figure out, then they can always backtrack and take another path. "Can I hear the riddle?"

"I am fear, and I am pain.

I am the cause of tears rolling down your face.

I am the burden you carry and the future you embrace,

And I am the end, the fate of all fates.

You may run and you may hide,

But in the end, you cannot escape my eyes.

I could arrive tomorrow or after decades passed

Look deep within yourself, reflect, and ask:

What am I?"

Harry swallows harshly. Cedric blinks, looking wide-eyed and more than a bit confused as he asks, "Can you—"

"Death," Harry whispers in a shaky, wavering voice. He feels entirely too seen as the sphinx stares down at him. A smile curls her lips. "You're death."

"Indeed I am, little lamb. As are you." The sphinx lets them through, and Harry tries very hard not to think about what her final words could have meant.

“That was... Weird, right?” Cedric murmurs, as they take another right. “This whole thing is weird.”

“Yeah, it is...”

With the help of the Four-Point Spell, Harry and Cedric steadily make their way to the center of the maze, and before they know it, the Triwizard Cup awaits them on its podium. One of the shadows moves. “Cedric, watch out!!”

They just barely manage to duck beneath the acromantula’s gleaming fangs, venom dripping onto the earth below. He and Cedric glance at each other, raise their wands, and both shout, “Stupefy!”

The acromantula falls to the ground, stunned, just before it reaches them. “That was... Far too close,” Cedric pants as he staggers forward. He gestures toward the cup with an expectant look. “Go on then, Harry. I never would’ve gotten past that riddle, I don’t think. And you deserve it. For keeping up with all of us, for pulling us all together in a way that I know we wouldn’t have otherwise... You’ve earned it.”

Part of him wants to argue. He really doesn’t care about winning this stupid tournament, just surviving it. But... There’s something wrong here. Someone put his name into the Goblet of Fire for a reason, and they haven’t shown their hand. Until now. Viktor would never attack Fleur, so that means... Whatever they have planned, they intend to do it tonight. His paths were almost completely free of obstacles. They wanted him to catch up, they wanted him to win.

Harry doesn’t care about winning the tournament, but he does care about protecting his friends. “Thanks, Cedric.”

He walks forward, takes a deep breath, and allows his hand to wrap around a gleaming, golden handle. There’s a violent tug behind his navel, and his hand clenches tighter at the sensation of being shoved through a straw as his feet lift off the ground. Harry’s eyes slide shut with a grimace.

When they open again, he’s standing alone in the middle of a graveyard.

Chapter End Notes

Try not to hate me too much for leaving you on a cliffhanger ;3 This chapter would be far, *far* too long otherwise. Besides, I promise that you won't have to wait very long. Chapter 14 should be done by some time on Thursday at the latest; I don't work that day, so I'll have plenty of time to write it if I don't manage to finish it tomorrow.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Hoo boy, I have been looking forward to this chapter for *ages* I hope you all enjoy! It's a fair bit longer than usual, too.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry retches. He doesn't understand why magical travel all has to feel so terrible, but he is still miserable about it, even if he likely has bigger problems to worry about right now. This graveyard is... Eerie, though perhaps that has more to do with the fact that it's a graveyard and it's pitch-black out than anything else. But no, there's this skittering sense of danger lurking nearby; an instinctive panic that feels more sheep than human. Something like a lamb being stalked by a wolf and knowing that it has very little chance of escaping.

A figure approaches. Harry tightens his grip on his wand, even when it becomes evident that the cloaked person is cradling something small against their chest. A baby? The size and shape of the bundle certainly suggests it, but something feels terribly wrong about this. The figure stops before a marble headstone, and for just a moment, he wonders if he was wrong. If he's being overly paranoid due to his steadily rising sense of unease throughout the school year. This is a graveyard, and while he isn't sure how much time they spent in the maze, it could not have been more than a couple of hours. It's entirely possible that he's just stumbled across someone visiting a lost loved one. Maybe they don't want anyone to see them mourn, and so, they come long after everyone else has gone. Harry can understand that.

But then there's a strange buzzing, a sense of tightness, that pulses from his scar, and he's firmly disabused of that notion.

Reflecting back on it, years later, Harry will wonder if this is the moment that he made his decision. In reality, there is no reason for him to freeze here. There's no reason at all for him to stand stock-still as the hooded figure approaches him, no reason beyond this strange sense of yearning that he cannot place, like finally coming home after being forced to spend years apart from it. But stand still he does and resist he does not. His wand sings beneath his hand, and it continues to do so when it falls to the withered grass beneath his feet. It sings a symphony of '*Home, home, where we belong,*' so loudly that Harry hardly registers the ropes tightening against his skin.

It's only when the cloaked figure hauls him forward that he comes back into his own skin. He distantly wonders why the man doesn't just levitate him when he seems to be struggling despite Harry's slight form, but he supposes that most wizards don't have an awful lot of common sense. There is a steady march toward a marble headstone so white that it gleams beneath the pale moon, allowing him to just barely make out the name 'Tom Riddle' that is carved into it.

“Ah,” he hums. “I wondered when we were gonna get another Voldemort resurrection attempt. You don’t seriously think you’ll find his body down there, do you? Last I heard, he didn’t exactly leave one of those behind.” Though he does wonder who it was that purchased a grave for Voldemort in the first place. Perhaps one of his supporters, one of the ones that escaped going to Azkaban, had done so, honoring him in the only way they could. It’s not like many know Voldemort as Tom Riddle anyway, so it’s unlikely that such a thing would be traced back to them. *‘How odd,’* he thinks. *‘That there are people who would mourn him. People who want him back more than anything else in the world.’*

The ropes extend behind him, tightly fastening Harry to the regal headstone. The cloaked figure runs trembling fingers over the scratchy twine, and it is only when they check the ones by his chest and reveal that there are four fingers on one hand that it hits him all at once. “You!” he snarls as hatred burns in his chest. Wormtail squeaks like the rat that he is before pulling a length of black fabric from somewhere within his robes, harshly shoving it in Harry’s mouth just before he can manage to bite through another one of those fingers. Wormtail’s shaking grows more pronounced as Harry glowers at him, screaming something with his eyes that he does not need words to say. *‘You deserve death. You deserve everything that’s coming to you, and the instant I break free of these bindings—’*

Wormtail skitters away. A gigantic snake takes his place as the trembling coward returns to the bundle of robes laying at the foot of this grave, picking up the bundle with something close to reverence. It is not the sort of reverence that Harry has seen on the few occasions that the Dursleys dragged him along to church with him, obviously hoping that he would burst into flame upon crossing the threshold. This is not the reverence of a man to a loving god, but rather, the reverence of a man to a wrathful one, one of the lucky few to be spared from the worst of its fury.

The snake’s tongue flicks rapidly in excitement. He feels distinctly hunted as her piercing, unblinking gaze lingers on him, thoroughly distracting him from the sound of something large being dragged nearer, liquid sloshing around within. This snake isn’t nearly as large as the basilisk, but her body is powerful and thick and venom drips from her fangs as she lets out a sharp, meaningless hiss. It’s probably meant to frighten him, but he just feels this detached sort of numbness to it all.

‘So this is how I go, huh? At least I was able to spare Cedric from this fate.’ Cedric, who has his family that loves him. Cedric, with such a bright future ahead of him as a barrister. Cedric, who loves Cho with every fiber of his being and plans to ask her to marry him once she graduates Hogwarts. *‘I’ll never get to go to their wedding,’* he realizes distantly. *‘I’ll never get to see them again.’*

He’ll never get to hear Cedric’s bright, startled laugh as they come up with increasingly bizarre ways they could kill the Dursleys. He’ll never get to feel the pleasant buzz of warmth that washes over him whenever Fleur summons fireballs in the midst of these conversations, so outraged by what has been done that she would march off and burn Number Four Privet Drive to the ground if they gave her half the chance. He’ll never get to laugh so hard that he cries as he teases Viktor about how gone he is on George, often falling victim to Viktor teasing him about Draco in return. He’ll never get to see the twins open their joke shop. He’ll never get to see Angelina become Gryffindor’s Quidditch Captain, because who else would it

be after Wood graduates? He'll never get to hear Pansy and Blaise lovingly tear into Draco, and Draco...

His vision blurs. He no longer has the years he once imagined to spend by Draco's side. He'll never get to see the way Draco's eyes glitter with excitement whenever he stumbles across an interesting new project. He'll never get to see that crooked smirk as it brightens into a smile so joyous that Harry's heart stutters in his chest as heat rises to his cheeks. He'll never get to hear his teasing drawl –taunting and fond all in one in a way that's so distinctly Draco that he cannot imagine hearing anything else– while Harry splutters indignantly and pretends not to be quite as besotted as he truly is. It never works.

Tied to a headstone and faced with his imminent death, Harry has the horrible, sudden realization that he wants to live. He wants it so fiercely that he burns with it. He chokes on the sob that builds in his throat, bizarrely grateful for the gag that silences it.

Wormtail stokes crackling flames that burn beneath a stone cauldron, and the liquid within it sparkles in the moonlight as if permanently infested with glitter. "Hurry!" a high, cold voice urges from within the bundle. That voice feels oddly familiar somehow, but he can't quite place why. The snake circles around the grave once more, pausing and regarding him with a slower flick of the tongue.

"It is ready, Master."

"Now...!"

Wormtail seems utterly petrified as he unwraps the being wrapped within the robes, revealing a sickly, inhuman-looking creature with a flat face and gleaming, red eyes that almost appear to glow in the dark. The creature is dropped into the cauldron.

Unbidden, a surge of panic washes over him. He shouldn't feel this way. He knows that he should, but even still, as the tiny body of what is more than likely Voldemort himself slips beneath the bubbling water, Harry has to fight back the urge to scream. With fear, with rage, with sorrow... He is not sure which.

Wormtail raises his wand and begins to speak, trembling with fear all the while. "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!" The earth cracks near Harry's feet, and he watches, equal parts entranced and horrified as a steady stream of dust floats into the air and falls into the cauldron at Wormtail's command. The glittering liquid within the cauldron hisses and explodes with sparks, steadily shifting into a vivid, eye-searing blue that illuminates the area surrounding the cauldron beyond what even the flames burning beneath it are capable of.

He watches as Wormtail pulls a wicked, curved, silver dagger from somewhere within his robes, sobbing in terror as he whimpers, "F-Flesh of the servant... W-Willingly given... You will...! Revive...! Your master...!" He stretches his right hand out in front of him, allowing it to hover over the cauldron for a long, tense moment. Four fingers clench into a fist as the dagger sharply cleaves upward, and Wormtail screams in agony. The potion glows a vibrant, angry red as Wormtail staggers toward him, bleeding heavily from the stump that once was his right hand as he gasps and moans brokenly.

Harry's heart pounds in his chest as Wormtail stutters, "B-Blood of the enemy... Forcibly taken... You will r-revive your foe!"

He tries to fight against it, he really does. But he's bound so tightly that there's nowhere for him to run as the gleaming, bloodied dagger approaches him, and shifting forms in this situation won't make him any less trapped. The ropes tighten every time he thinks he's managed to find a loose end somewhere. No, turning into a lamb will just make it easier for him to bleed out and harder for him to defend himself.

His eyes slide shut, and he waits for his end even as he desperately longs to avoid it. A sharp, cutting pain drags up his right forearm, but he's pleasantly surprised and equally wary when it stops there. He opens his eyes just in time to see Wormtail gather a few drops of his blood in a crystal phial, staggering away as he whimpers and moans and dumps it into the cauldron. The liquid within immediately glows a blinding white.

Wormtail falls to his knees, clutching at his stump as he wretches and sobs. But Harry's focus isn't on the trembling rat, no, it's on the cauldron as a beam of bright white mist pours out of it, filling the air surrounding them like a dense fog until it is the only thing he can see. He feels it before he sees it. A low thrum of satisfaction, a siren song of *'Home, home, home,'* that beckons him for reasons he cannot understand.

The mist slowly begins to dissipate, and it is only then that he sees the dark outline of a tall, skeletal man rising from within the cauldron. "Robe me," the figure demands, and Wormtail, stuttering and in pain as he is, does not hesitate to do so.

Harry stares as a figure even paler than the marble headstone he's been tied to takes a single step forward. He's immediately pinned beneath glowing red eyes, and fear and hope in equal measure begin swirling within him. *'Danger, danger, danger! Home, home, home...'* His instincts war with each other as he stares into the eyes of Lord Voldemort, risen again.

Voldemort looks away from Harry, idly observing his new body. His slitted, cat-like pupils narrow and widen in pleasure as he stretches his long, spidery hands. He seems utterly enraptured by the sight of them. He pays no mind at all to Wormtail sobbing at his feet or the snake approaching Harry cautiously, tongue still flicking slow and steady. Voldemort slips his hand into the pocket of his robe, pulling out a wand just as long and pale as everything else about him. He caresses it with all the quiet reverence that Harry feels with his own wand in hand, and Harry watches as, without uttering a single incantation, Voldemort points and lifts Wormtail into the air, hurling him against a headstone with a cold, mirthless laugh.

Something like pleasure squirms in his chest.

"My Lord..." Wormtail whimpers. "My Lord... You promised... You did promise..."

"Hold out your arm," Voldemort drawls disinterestedly, and Wormtail sobs with relief.

"Oh, Master... Thank you, Master..." Wormtail holds out his bleeding stump, and only the scrap of his own robe tied around is preventing him from bleeding out. Or at the very least losing consciousness.

“Your other arm, Wormtail.”

Harry shouldn't laugh. He really, really shouldn't laugh, but the abject look of fear and betrayal on Wormtail's face... *“It's the least he deserves. It's the least he deserves,”* that voice hisses in his head. It sounds... Strangely familiar, come to think of it. Eerily like...

“Master, please... Please...!”

Voldemort bends down and firmly grasps Wormtail's left arm, lifting it himself. He pushes the sleeve of his robe up past his elbow and presses the tip of his wand against a vivid, black tattoo of a snake twining through a skull. The Dark Mark. The same mark that had hung heavy in the air at the Quidditch World Cup...

“It is back,” Voldemort murmurs softly, ignoring Wormtail's inconsolable weeping. “They will all have noticed it... And now we shall see... And now we shall know.” He presses a long, spindly finger against the Dark Mark, and Wormtail howls with pain beneath him. Magic thrums in Harry's veins, burning so hotly that he nearly screams as well. Cool scales brush against his leg, and the pain lessens. “How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?” Voldemort whispers as he lifts his eyes to the stars above. “And how many will be foolish enough to stay away...?”

Voldemort begins to pace back and forth, eyes studying the graveyard around them as he searches for something within the darkness. Then he turns his gaze back to Harry, and a cruel smile twists his lips. “You stand, Harry Potter, upon the grave of my late father,” he hisses. “A muggle and a fool, much like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child... And I killed my father, and see how useful he has proven in death...”

The snake settles its giant head on top of his lap just as a surge of anger threatens to overtake him, and Voldemort halts in his pacing, eyeing him like he is a particularly fascinating bug. “You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother—a witch who lived in this village—fell in love with him. But he abandoned her when she told him what she was... He didn't much care for magic, my father...” Voldemort's gaze rests heavily upon him then, and any hope that Voldemort may not have read Skeeter's article dies a swift death. “But you would know all about that, wouldn't you, Harry Potter?”

He can't say a word. Even if he wasn't gagged, Harry isn't sure if he could force the agreement through his tightened throat. His eyes fall to the grass beneath him, and Voldemort takes that as an answer in and of itself.

“He left her and returned to his muggle parents before I was even born, Potter,” Voldemort continues quietly, words flowing through his ears like silk. “She died giving birth to me, and I was left to be raised in a muggle orphanage as a result. But I vowed to find him... I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me the name Tom Riddle...” And the worst part is... Harry understands. Harry understands because there has always been some part of him that wanted to do the same to the Dursleys. When Marge floated away the summer before his third year... A very small part of him hoped that she'd pop like a balloon too.

“Ah, but listen to me, reliving family history. Why, I’m truly growing quite sentimental... But look, Harry! My true family returns...” He doesn’t want this to be yet another thing that he and Voldemort have in common. He doesn’t want them both to be lonely orphan boys who fought tooth and nail against a world that hated them so that they could build a family, build some semblance of happiness, for themselves. He doesn’t want it, but that doesn’t make it any less true.

Dark, billowing robes swish through the air as rapid-fire cracks of Apparation sound all over the graveyard. He wonders if anyone nearby will turn their heads to the sky and search for fireworks. Every single person that joins them in the graveyard is hooded and masked, gliding forward like eerie apparitions of death incarnate. He distantly wonders if the sphinx knew about this. Her riddle seems a little on the nose...

Voldemort stands in silence, waiting for his followers as they slowly, hesitantly approach him, as if they cannot believe the sight before their eyes. Harry wonders how many of them hoped that he’d never come back. He wonders how many of them are ecstatic that he did. One of the Death Eaters falls to his knees, crawling forward as he presses a reverent kiss to the hem of Voldemort’s robes. “Master... Master...” It takes a moment for him to regain himself, staggering to his feet as he silently joins the other Death Eaters in forming a loose ring around Tom Riddle Sr.’s grave. There are a few gaps in the circle, as if they expect others to arrive and fill their places, but Voldemort seems quite certain that no one else will arrive.

“Welcome, my Death Eaters,” Voldemort murmurs quietly. “Thirteen years... Thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday... We are still united under the Dark Mark, then. Or are we?” A few of the masked forms cannot hide the way they shuffle uneasily as Voldemort’s slit-like nostrils flare. “I smell guilt. There is a stench of guilt upon the air.”

‘Huh... Is that actually something he can do, or is he just trying to scare them?’ Either way, Voldemort’s words have their intended effect on the Death Eaters crowding around them. The circle shudders in almost perfect unison, unease clear in every inch of their bodies despite the fact that they’re covered from head to toe. Even still, they do not dare to step away from him.

“I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact, and you’ve made such prompt appearances! But still, I ask myself... Why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?”

No one speaks. No one moves at all, with the exception of Wormtail who still sobs and writhes with agony as he clutches what remains of his arm. “And I answer myself,” Voldemort whispers. “They must have believed me broken. They must have thought I was gone. They camouflaged themselves among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, ignorance, and bewitchment...”

Everyone in the graveyard is hanging onto every word he says, Harry included. There’s just something... Mesmerizing in the way he speaks. Something that grabs and holds his attention in a way that none of his professors have ever managed.

“And then I ask myself, but how could they not believe that I would rise again? They, who knew the steps I took long, long ago to ensure that death could never hold me in its grip. They, who had seen proof of the immensity of my power. They, who knew me to be the strongest of any living wizard.”

Voldemort pauses, eyes roving over the crowd surrounding him as he murmurs, “And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort. Perhaps they now pay allegiance to another... Perhaps that champion of commoners, of mudbloods and muggles, Albus Dumbledore.”

That gets a reaction out of the Death Eaters. Several members of the circle shake their heads, muttering too lowly for Harry to hear. Voldemort ignores them. “It is a disappointment to me... I confess myself disappointed.”

“Betrayed, abandoned when he needed them most. Just like you. Forced to forge his own fate as the world rallies against his right to live, same as any other human. If it is a monster that you see, then it is only because they have created one.”

One of the Death Eaters suddenly flings himself forward, laying prone at Voldemort’s feet as he begs for forgiveness. “Master! Master, please forgive me! Forgive us all!”

Voldemort looks down at the man and laughs. He points his wand and whispers, “Crucio.” The Death Eater writhes and screams, choking on the blood that foams out of his mouth. He must have bitten his tongue. Voldemort lifts his wand, and the Death Eater gasps for breath as he lies flat upon the ground. “Get up, Avery,” Voldemort says softly. “Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years... I want thirteen years of repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, haven’t you, Wormtail?”

‘It’s strange,’ Harry thinks. ‘That his followers seem more afraid of him than I am.’

Wormtail hasn’t stopped sobbing, and that does not change when Voldemort looks down upon him. “You return to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of those you once called friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don’t you?”

‘He deserves it. He deserves it. Even Voldemort agrees with me.’ Maybe that should concern him more than it does, but so long as it means that Wormtail suffers even a fraction of what he inflicted upon Sirius... It’s not enough, it’ll never be enough, but it’s something.

“Yes, Master...!” Wormtail whimpers. “Please, Master... Please...!”

“Yet you helped me return to my body,” Voldemort muses idly, as if he was merely discussing the weather. “Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me... And Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers.”

Longing so intense that it nearly suffocates him washes over his entire body. Wormtail is a wretched, cowardly human who will do anything to save his own skin. Even Harry wants him dead. But Voldemort... He can find a use for even such a person as that? *“You don’t have to*

be perfect. You don't have to be the golden boy savior. Can't you see, Harry? He is the only one who will see and value you exactly as you are."

That's not true. He won't let the voice convince him of that. He has Draco, Sirius, Fleur, Viktor, Cedric, Fred, George, Cho... Maybe even Pansy and Blaise. He has people, people who see and love him as he is, and those people are important. *"The only one who can keep you out of this war, then,"* the voice continues. *"And the only one who could ensure the protection of the rest of them."*

Now that thought... That thought lingers.

He watches as Voldemort waves his wand, and a silvery stream of liquid follows his movements. The strange substance hovers in the air for a moment before suddenly swirling around itself, creating a perfect replica of a human hand. The gleaming, silver appendage is as bright as the moonlight itself, and it flies down to affix itself to Wormtail's wrist. The sobbing abruptly stops. Wormtail looks down at his new hand, wide eyes filled with awe, and flexes his fingers. He then picks up a small stone from the ground and crushes it into a fine powder.

"My Lord..." he whispers. "Master, it is beautiful...! Thank you... Thank you..." Wormtail scrambles forward on his hands and knees, kissing the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail." Voldemort doesn't have to raise his voice for the words to be a clear warning, a threat.

"No, my Lord... Never, my Lord...!" Wormtail stands to his feet, still shaky from the blood loss, and quickly takes his place in the circle. Voldemort turns his attention to the man at Wormtail's right.

"Lucius, my slippery friend." The name makes him jolt to awareness, though he knows that he shouldn't be surprised to hear it. "I have heard that you have not renounced the old ways, though you present a respectable face to the world. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of muggle torture, I presume? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius... Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay..." Harry swallows harshly. He knew that Lucius was involved, of course, but the one who started it..? No wonder Draco was so quick to find and warn them, even back then. He must have been terrified. "But might not your efforts have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," Mr. Malfoy responds without a beat of hesitation. "Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, then I would have been at your side immediately. Nothing could have prevented me from—"

"And yet, you ran from my mark when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer," Voldemort whispers with a chilling disregard. Mr. Malfoy's voice cuts off quite abruptly. "Yes, I've heard all about that. I have many eyes and many ears..." Here, Voldemort's gaze trails back to Harry. "And I have heard the most fascinating rumors about your son, Lucius."

Now Mr. Malfoy truly sounds afraid. “H-He desired to be useful to you, my Lord! He knew that you would return eventually, as we all did, and wished to ensure that Potter would be easily led to you once the time came.”

“Do not lie to me, Lucius,” Voldemort hisses sharply. “You have disappointed me most severely of all. If those such as Quirrel and Wormtail were able to find me with their scant few resources, then do not believe me fool enough to think you could not have. You did not want to. I expect more faithful service from you in the future, or you may find that you are not the one paying the price for it...”

“Y-Yes, my Lord,” Mr. Malfoy whispers. “You are ever so merciful. Thank you, my Lord.”

Voldemort moves on, halting in front of a gap within the circle large enough to fit two people. “The Lestranges should stand here,” Voldemort whispers quietly. “But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me, and when we free them, they will be honored beyond their wildest dreams. The Dementors shall join us... I shall recall the banished giants... I shall have all my devoted servants returned to me and an army of creatures that shall make all who see them quake with fear.”

He watches as Voldemort makes his way around the circle. Some Death Eaters he passes by without speaking to at all, others he makes a passing comment to, and a scant few receive warnings nearly as scathing as Mr. Malfoy did. Then Voldemort comes to a standstill at a large gap in the circle, Harry’s one chance of making a run for it if he can get out of these ropes.

“And here we have six missing Death Eaters... Three who have died in my service. One who was too cowardly to return, and he shall pay...” Harry is willing to bet all the gold in Gringotts that Voldemort is talking about Karkaroff there. “One that I believe has left me forever... He shall die, of course. And one, who remains my most faithful servant. He has already reentered my service.”

That makes the Death Eaters shift uneasily again. “He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it is through his efforts that our young friend is here tonight.”

‘It really isn’t,’ he wants to say. ‘Because Draco is the only reason that I didn’t become a bloody smear on the ground long before this. Would it have been so difficult to kidnap me outright?’

“Yes,” Voldemort continues, a cruel smile curling his lips as almost every pair of eyes flashes in his direction. The hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. “Harry Potter has kindly rejoined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor.”

Mr. Malfoy steps forward, bowing low as he murmurs, “Master... We all wish to know, we beg you to tell us, how you have achieved this... Miracle. How you have managed to return to us...”

“And what a story it is, Lucius. And it begins –and ends– with my young friend over here.” Voldemort lazily stalks to his side, looking for all the world like a panther that knows its prey is already within its reach. The snake drapes herself over his body, resting her head on top of

his with a contented hiss. Voldemort pauses, narrows his eyes, and says, ***“You will have your meal in a moment, Nagini. Do have patience.”***

“But Master, he is—!”

“You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?” Voldemort continues, ignoring the way Nagini sulks and hisses plenty of none-too-kind things that only the three of them can understand. “You all know that I attempted to kill him on the night that I lost both my powers and my body... It was nothing the boy did, of course. His mother sacrificed herself to save him, and in doing so, she provided a protection that even I could not have foreseen... I could not touch the boy.”

Voldemort raises one of his fingers and allows it to hover just in front of Harry’s cheek. “His mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice... It was old magic, and I should have recognized it for what it was. But no matter. I can touch him now.” A frightfully cold hand caresses his cheek, and despite the distant terror that he should be feeling, Harry feels... Whole. Complete in a way that he’s not sure he’s ever felt before. He relaxes beneath Voldemort’s touch, and Nagini squirms as she bumps her head against her master’s hand.

“Master, listen to me!” Nagini hisses sharply. ***“This boy is not food! He is like me! He carries a piece of you, I can taste it!”***

Harry has absolutely no idea what that means, but whatever it is, it makes Voldemort halt in his tracks. The Death Eaters shift uneasily. ***“You are certain?”***

“He tastes of you and me,” Nagini repeats with an exaggerated nod of her head.

“I suppose that I had already performed the ritual... The magic crackling around me, the promise of a sacrifice soon to come, the death of the Potters... If the magic did not dissipate when I lost my body... If it instead latched onto the one living thing in the room, the very same child that I had just failed to kill... The very same child that was positively coated in sacrificial magics... Yes, yes all the ingredients were there.”

Voldemort narrows his eyes. Harry balks as Voldemort lifts his chin and whispers, “Do not resist me, and this will not hurt.” They lock eyes, and at once, Harry is plunged into a memory.

“Are you really sure about this?” Harry wrings his hands nervously, pacing back and forth in the Chamber of Secrets as Draco carefully breaks apart the basilisk’s skeleton. He remembers him mentioning something about the goblins preferring bone for several of their weapons, and bones from powerful magical creatures fetch an especially high price. Something about the impression of their magic lingering down to their bones, whatever that means.

“As I’ve already said, it’s a bit late to change my mind, Harry,” Draco teases fondly without even looking up from the task at hand. “But I do not regret it, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“But... Your father—”

“Sod what my father thinks. He has no room to judge me when he...” Draco clenches his fist. “In any case, he’s unlikely to disown me when he has no other heir. The last thing he wants is for some branch family to take over. He’ll get over it, Harry.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Draco sighs, drumming his finger against the dirt as he asks, “You hate my father, yes?”

“Well, er, yeah.”

“But even still, you wouldn’t force me to distance myself from him.”

“Of course not! He’s still your father, and you seem to care for him, even when...”

Draco turns back to face him with a small, fond smile that never fails to tug at his heartstrings. “You would not make me choose between you, not even when he nearly got you killed in second year. If he tries to force me to choose between you, then he only has himself to blame for what comes after. He’s the adult in this situation. I expect him to act like one.”

Harry snorts at that. “I just... I just don’t want you to go through all of that because of me, you know? I don’t want to be the reason that you’re fighting with your parents.”

“Just my father,” Draco reassures him as he slowly stands to his feet. “My mother looks forward to meeting you properly.” Harry melts into his boyfriend’s embrace as soon as those arms wrap around him. “And I believe that you severely underestimate the lengths I would go to for you,” Draco murmurs. “I would die for you, Harry Potter.”

His breath catches in his throat. Harry wants to echo the same promise, and he knows that he means it too. But... Flashes of memory, feet dangling over the ledge of a too-high roof as the stars twinkle in the sky. His gaze peering down, down, down, as he braces to push off the edge. A hand snags the back of his robes and pulls him back onto solid ground.

It would cheapen everything that Draco has done for him if he returned that promise. So instead, he looks into those brilliant eyes and promises something that he feels just as profoundly, means just as much, as the promise that remains unspoken. “I would live for you, Draco Malfoy.”

The memory fades, and he finds himself back atop the Astronomy Tower. He’s just found out that he has to face dragons for his first task, and he is so afraid that death seems a kinder option. Just one, final dive... No burning, no pain, no jeers from the crowd as he fades into darkness. What a tempting thought, that is.

He finds himself staring through Voldemort’s eyes once more, reliving a dream that even Harry hadn’t remembered before now. He watches Wormtail writhe beneath his wand, and he feels nothing but satisfaction.

Harry’s eyes feel painfully dry, and he blinks rapidly as he finds himself in the waking world once more. Voldemort is staring at him with a softer, more curious gaze now. ***“How curious... How curious indeed, Harry Potter. Now, what shall I do with you...?”***

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Draco has had a bad feeling about this task since the instant that red sparks flew up in the maze, hanging heavy in the air as heated whispers break out among the audience. He knows firsthand just how capable each of the champions is, so when Professor Moody returns with Viktor and Fleur, both unconscious and clearly worse for wear, the first trickle of unease settles in his heart.

Everything goes silent for a very long time after that. They can see little more than the dim glow of light within the maze, and he clings to the sight of that light as confirmation that Harry and Cedric are still alive, at least, having joined paths shortly before they stumbled across Viktor and Fleur. But even still, he has a bad feeling about this. That bad feeling intensifies when the lights reach the middle of the maze before suddenly dimming, seeming half as bright as before. The single light steadily makes its way back through the maze, occasionally stumbling into dead ends and getting caught up in obstacles that are no kinder on the return trip, it would seem.

Cedric is the only one that stumbles out of the entrance of the maze. His robes are a tattered mess, and his left arm is bleeding profusely. But even still, his eyes dart around frantically in search of someone that he cannot find. "Where's Harry?!" he shouts, voice sharp and demanding as it cuts through the confused murmurs of the crowd. "He got the cup. He... I thought he was portkeyed back to the entrance. Where is he? Where the hell is he?!"

"H-How peculiar," Mr. Bagman stutters. "The portkey should have taken him back to the entrance, yes... It must have malfunctioned. We'll find him, don't you worry, Mr. Diggory."

But no. This isn't something as simple as that, and he knows it. Whoever put Harry's name into the Goblet of Fire has struck, and with the Dark Mark growing more vivid... He doesn't have a lot of time. He jolts to his feet, marching off stiffly and ignoring the increasingly loud protests of the Weasley clan. He doesn't have time to stop, and he doesn't have time to explain. He practically sprints away from the stands, and as soon as he's travelled a safe distance, he whispers, "Dobby!"

Dobby wrings his ears in clear anxiety as soon as Draco summons him. "Harry is being very far away," the house elf whispers fearfully. "He is being here and then he is being not. Is it being part of the task...?"

"No," he whispers, and his voice cracks on the word. "Something has gone wrong. Dobby, this is very important. Can you take me to him? Can you still find him, wherever he is?"

"Y-Yes!! Dobby can be doing that! We be going now?" Dobby extends his hand, and Draco does not hesitate to take it.

"Let's go save Harry," he whispers as they both disappear with a quiet pop.

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No sooner than Voldemort whispers those words, a quiet pop sounds in the graveyard that immediately has everyone tensing. Harry nearly sobs with equal parts relief and terror when

he sees Draco and Dobby standing in front of him. A snap of Dobby's fingers is all it takes for the ropes to disappear, the gag to vanish, and Harry's wand to be firmly back in his hand again. Draco's wand is in his hand too, and Harry can see Mr. Malfoy go stiff with absolute horror.

A wave of magic washes over them with a silent jerk of Voldemort's hands, and Dobby's eyes get wide and teary as he babbles, "I can't be popping us away, Draco! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry...!"

"It was remiss of me to not ward against house elves in the first place," Voldemort murmurs as he glances over at Harry. "Given your apparent fondness of them."

Draco shrugs it off, having clearly expected something like this to happen. "You got us here. That's the important part, Dobby. We'll just have to go with Plan D instead." Mr. Malfoy isn't the only one frozen stiff when Draco lifts his head imperiously, locking eyes with Voldemort as he murmurs, "Would you believe me if I told you that he doesn't want to fight? Not you, not anyone. He will not be a problem so long as you leave him be. Spare those he cares for, and, well..."

"And if I did not?" Voldemort queries with narrowed eyes. "If I told you I intend to kill him regardless of anything you might say to me?"

"Master—!" Nagini starts, being cut off by a sharp glare from Voldemort.

Draco takes a deep breath. He loosens his grip on his wand slightly, and Mr. Malfoy must not know his son very well at all if he relaxes at the sight of it. Defiance is lining every inch of Draco's body.

Between one breath and the next, pale skin gives way to gleaming white scales. Forty feet long and nearly as tall, the Death Eaters scramble back as Draco forces the circle to widen. An ever-shifting swirl of blue and grey forms a maelstrom of protective fury in Draco's eyes, and a roar cracks through the air like thunder. A thick, smooth tail slams into the ground, shattering several headstones and creating faint tremors that shake the very earth.

It is a thick, rumbling snarl that answers, ***"Then you will have to get through me first."*** Draco crouches low, and Harry can feel the brush of scales against his skin as his boyfriend physically blocks any attacks that may come his way. ***"And you and I both know that it will take more than a single Killing Curse to down a dragon. Do you think those trembling fools will be able to lift their wands and do what must be done? Or will they cower and run away as I reduce them to ashes?"*** A puff of smoke escapes Draco's mouth, fire glowing within. ***"Is that a chance you wish to take?"***

"You would do that for Harry Potter?"

"I would do far worse."

Voldemort laughs. It starts low and deep, an amused chuckle that has all of his Death Eaters freezing in terror, before it crescendos into an outright cackle. "Oh, Lucius... Your son truly takes after his mother." Voldemort's appraising gaze rests on their odd trio. Dobby is

clutching onto Harry's robes with fierce determination in his eyes, and a low snarl still rumbles in Draco's throat. ***"You have nothing to fear, Heir Malfoy. I had already decided to spare Harry Potter before you arrived."***

"You... You did?" he asks, and Voldemort's eyes narrow even further at the sound of hissing escaping Harry's throat.

"Indeed, I did. How I did not see it sooner..." Voldemort shakes his head slightly, chuckling all the while. ***"Harry Potter, you have become someone that I have a vested interest in keeping both alive and well. Heir Malfoy, you have just passed my little test with flying colors."***

"A test...?" Draco pauses, huffing out a billow of smoke before saying, ***"You wanted to see if I'd defend him, even from you. Why?"***

"Because you may have to defend him from Dumbledore." Ice plunges through Harry's veins. ***"I will not go into the specifics, not just yet, but... In order for me to die, so too must Harry. I intend to ensure that does not happen, for obvious reasons. However, I can hardly lock him away without drawing suspicion and breeding both misery and resentment, and I cannot physically guard him myself either. Nagini is too recognizable. But you... You will do quite nicely, Heir Malfoy."*** Voldemort begins pacing again, and a smile tugs at his lips. ***"You have an invested interest in keeping him safe as well, and you are both willing and able to face foes stronger than yourself should it be necessary. It will not draw any suspicion at all for Harry Potter to spend so much time with his... Partner, not like it would for anyone else I assigned the task to. I must admit, though, I did not expect this..."***

Mr. Malfoy looks like he's about to keel over in fright. His wand hand keeps twitching, like he's just barely resisting the urge to hex Voldemort away from his son. "This... This may be just the ticket we need to sway the dragons to our side this time," Voldemort says with a chuckle. "Very well then. There has been a change of plans. Harry Potter shall be under our protection, and in return, he shall not raise his wand against us so long as we do not do so to him. Are these terms agreeable to you, Harry?" Voldemort offers his hand.

"And my friends?" he whispers. "What happens to them?"

"So long as they do not raise their wands against us, we have no reason to do so against them. You may provide us with a list later; we will need to lay low for a while regardless," Voldemort explains patiently, hand still outstretched. "You do not have to fight for us," he whispers. "Indeed, I would rather you didn't. You do not have to fight at all."

Harry takes Voldemort's hand, and his magic *sings* .

Chapter End Notes

It's never made any sense to me how absolute the Killing Curse is, especially given the fact that there *are* magical creatures resistant to spells and magic in general. If it takes

half a dozen powerful stunners to even begin to stun a dragon when one can knock a human out, then I'm of the firm belief that such a thing would apply even to the Killing Curse. Draco is not above abusing that and turning himself into a big, deadly shield if he has to. Besides, if canon can have all these bs, plot-armor workarounds for the Killing Curse, then I'm allowed to have one that at least makes *sense*.

Also, it's a very subtle thing, but I love getting to incorporate my knowledge of snakes to influence Nagini's behavior here. Snakes flick their tongues rather rapidly when they're going after food, while slower, longer tongue flicks indicate curiosity. Nagini shifting from "ooh, meal!" to "wait, not food?" as she picks up on the Horcrux is one of my favorite things in the world, even if it's a tiny detail.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

And so we reach the end! Of this book, at least. I will most certainly be moving on into fifth year and onward, and I hope you've all enjoyed the journey for the first book in this series. Things start getting really interesting (and really canon-divergent) starting next year, and I cannot wait for it.

“Well then,” Draco murmurs once he’s back in his human form, grinning in a smile that’s closer to a baring of teeth. “If you intend to avoid notice, then we shouldn’t dawdle for long. Cedric’s only just alerted everyone to Harry’s disappearance, but even I can only get away with being so relieved to find Harry unharmed that I snogged the life out of him for so long, especially with such an easy way to get back.” Here, Draco nods down to Dobby, though his shoulders are still stiff with tension and unease. “Was there anything else you needed...?”

“You are lucky that your insolence amuses me, child,” Voldemort snorts as he carelessly waves his hand. The magic that blankets the entire graveyard swiftly fades away. “And that you mean so much to Harry Potter, I suppose... No, you are free to go. However...” Here he pauses, studying them both before whispering, “It would do you well to look neither Dumbledore nor Severus in the eye. They are skilled Legilimens, much like myself, and our secrets will not remain as such long if you do. How fares your Occlumency, Heir Malfoy?”

“It is passable, of course.” Draco lifts his head in a nod. “My shields are not impossible to shatter, but they would have to do just that: shatter them. I rather think that either of them will want to avoid drawing that much attention to themselves.”

“For now, perhaps,” Voldemort concedes. “Though do keep it in mind should either have reason to suspect you. Though... I suppose Severus will not be a problem for much longer if he has truly betrayed me.” Draco tenses slightly here, but he does not say a word. “Harry, how about you?”

“I... Have no idea what Occlumency is,” he admits sheepishly. “Or what a Legilimens is, for that matter. There’s still a lot that I need to learn about magic and this world...”

“There is always more to learn,” Voldemort murmurs softly. “Very well. Step forward, then. Our connection should allow me to shield your mind for you, though it will become imperative to teach you over the summer break. I presume you intend to stay with the Malfoys?”

“That was the plan.” Harry steps forward, and though he is trembling faintly, Dobby is only one step behind him. “Or if Mr. Malfoy refused, then we’d both go on the run with Sirius.”

“Ah, yes, Sirius Black... How ironic that they should imprison one of the few Blacks that had nothing to do with my cause before, and now, he very well could to ensure your safety. Self-fulfilling prophecies...” Voldemort chuckles, shaking his head as he murmurs, “Ironic indeed...”

A tendril of magic brushes against his mind when red eyes meet green, and the sense of security it brings with it makes his own magic buzz contentedly. *“There you are,”* Voldemort speaks within his mind after he finishes constructing his barrier. *“It is not perfect. It is better to convince a Legilimens that there is nothing to find by allowing them to see only what you wish them to see than it is to block them out entirely, but it will have to do for now. Avoid direct eye contact and they should not notice your barriers regardless.”*

‘Okay. Thank you.’

Voldemort pulls his magic back, and Harry shudders slightly at the sensation. “The servant I have within Hogwarts’ walls has taken on the form of Alastor Moody,” he warns them. “Polyjuice. He will likely attempt to get you alone after you return, Harry. He may see Heir Malfoy as an acceptable casualty to drag along with you given his involvement in your... Rescue, as he will see it, though lying about it may also give him pause. You have no need to fear him, regardless. Simply inform him that... The darkest hour has given way to dawn. He will understand.” Harry nods. The Triwizard Cup floats over, falling into his hand. “It was a one-way portkey,” Voldemort explains. “But it’s best not to give them any reason to go searching for it. They will not have any way of finding out where it took you, regardless.”

“I understand,” he murmurs.

“Safe travels, hatchling. We will see you again soon.”

The last thing Harry hears before Dobby pops him and Draco away is Voldemort telling Mr. Malfoy, “You will house Harry Potter over the break, of course. You are very fortunate that your son has succeeded where you failed, Lucius.”

There’s an outburst as soon as they appear in front of the frantic crowd. Cedric practically tackles him in a hug, not even giving Draco a chance to step away. He just wraps his arms around them both and refuses to let go. Dobby gets caught up in it as well, wiggling in clear relief and happiness.

“Harry...” Cedric whispers brokenly. “Merlin, I was so scared. When they said you hadn’t shown back up at the entrance... What happened? Where did you go?”

“Portkey malfunction,” he chokes out, sniffing in sheer relief and exhaustion. For a moment there, he really thought he was a goner. “Wound up in some... Field or something, I dunno. I was freaked out and tired, and I didn’t think about calling Dobby. I’m just glad Draco kept his head about it.”

“Yes, well, one of us has to,” Draco teases, and if there’s a slight hitch in his breath, then everyone will dismiss it as relief. “Apologies for taking so long. I was so relieved that... Well, I lost myself for a moment.” It’s entirely unfair that Draco can practically make himself blush on cue, but it’s immensely helpful here. “You’ll have to forgive me.”

“No forgiveness necessary,” Cedric assures him, assures them both, and guilt squirms in Harry’s chest. He hopes that Cedric will forgive him for what he’s done someday. He hopes that his friends won’t one day look at him like he’s a monster. But... To have even a chance of protecting them, to ensure his own safety and, more importantly, Draco’s... He would do it again. Everything that happened tonight, he would do again, no matter how terrifying and uncertain it has made his future. “I’m just glad you’re alright.”

“O-Our Triwizard Champion!” Bagman cries as deafening cheers ring out from the crowd. “Harry Potter!!”

Dobby gently pats his hand as they finally pull apart whispering, “Dobby be having many duties to fulfill, but Harry be letting me know if he needs help. I will come. Always.”

“Thanks, Dobby.”

Mere moments after his friend pops away, Dumbledore is rushing up to them. “Harry! Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he promises, and he even means it. He’s still rattled, but all things considered, he got off very lightly.

“And nothing happened?” Dumbledore presses. “You’re hurt.”

“Well, the maze was dangerous, you know?” Harry muses, laughing nervously as he rubs the back of his neck. “The acromantula almost got me, and I cut myself in the process.” Cedric straightens up slightly at that, but when Dumbledore glances in his direction, he merely nods. Harry is so relieved that he almost cries. “But I really am fine. If there was... If whoever put my name in the cup planned to do anything tonight, then we got out of there before they got the chance to.”

“That is... Such a relief to hear, my boy,” Dumbledore murmurs, and he even sounds genuine. “We’ll get you seen by Madam Pomfrey, and—”

“That’s quite alright,” Draco interrupts, pulling out his wand with a faint grin. He loops it in a perfect circle before whispering, “Episkey.” It’s a rather shallow cut, so the minor healing spell is all it takes to stem the flow of blood and close the wound.

Dumbledore’s eyes widen in astonishment. “I was unaware that you were so versed in healing spells, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Yes, well—” Draco stammers, letting his eyes drift to the ground in a show of embarrassment that is mostly an excuse to avoid Dumbledore’s eyes. “There’s a reason I focus so heavily on my Potions and Charms classes, you know? I intend to be a healer.”

“A noble profession indeed,” Dumbledore murmurs, sounding distinctly approving now. “I thank you for returning Harry to us. That was quick thinking on your part.”

“Of course. I could hardly do anything else.”

“Still, we should get him checked out, lad.” It’s only the knowledge that they now have that prevents Harry from flinching at Moody’s sudden appearance, though he does draw back slightly when his hand grips onto Harry’s wrist. “Plenty of venomous stuff in that maze. Best we ensure he doesn’t need any antidotes.”

“Of course,” Draco murmurs with a dip of his head. “After you, professor.”

Moody nods his head, and the three of them make their way back into the castle unimpeded. His grip on Harry’s wrist is just a bit too tight, but he grits his teeth and bares it as he allows himself to be dragged into Moody’s office. He can’t help wondering where the real Moody is. He’s probably still alive if this Death Eater has been using Polyjuice constantly for the entire school year. He would’ve run out of doses otherwise.

For a moment, Harry fears that the door will slam shut before Draco follows them in, but Moody turns, waiting for Draco’s entry before the door shuts and locks with an effortless wave of a wand. “Now, I want you two to tell me what really happened tonight,” Moody demands.

“The darkest hour has given way to dawn,” Draco murmurs, and Moody jolts upright immediately.

“He has returned, then? And you lied about it?” Moody eyes Harry with something close to astonishment. “I knew you and Dumbledore weren’t close, but this... You’ve surprised me, boy, I must admit. So you see it, then? How glorious he is? What of the others? Did they return?”

“Most of them.”

“How did he treat them?” Moody asks quietly. “Did he forgive them?”

“No.” And here, a small smirk begins to tug at Harry’s lips. “He demands thirteen years of repayment before he even begins to. He said that you were the only one who remains truly loyal among those outside of Azkaban.”

“Good... Good,” Moody whispers as he paces back and forth. There’s a solid thunk, thunk, thunk from the sound of his peg leg beating against the stone. “I told you, Harry... There’s nothing I hate more than a Death Eater who walked free. They turned their backs on my master when he needed them most. I expected him to punish them. I expected him to torture them. Tell me he hurt them, Harry...”

“He did.” He decides that it’s for the best not to mention that only Wormtail and Avery suffered that fate. Moody –or whoever he really is beneath the disguise– seems a bit unstable. Then again, maybe that’s why he’s able to play the part of Mad-Eye Moody so well.

“Listen... Tonight has been a very long night. I should probably actually go to the hospital wing before people start asking questions, and you should get out of here while you still have the chance. Voldemort will want to update you on what happened tonight.”

“Seeing as you’re standing here, alive before me, I reckon it must be quite the story...” Moody chuckles. “Go on, then. I reckon Diggory will join you soon enough, and both

Delacour and Krum are recovering in the hospital wing.”

Harry narrows his eyes at that and whispers, “Hurt them again, and nothing will save you. Just so we’re clear.” Because really, who else could’ve put Viktor under the Imperius Curse?

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Potter,” Moody warns. “Whatever favor you’ve earned yourself tonight, do not forget that there will always be those above you.”

“I rather doubt that, in this case,” Draco murmurs. “You really ought to be going. You’ll understand soon enough.”

“... Let me lead you both to the hospital wing. Best I not rouse any suspicion until I’m long gone, then.” Cedric is already waiting for them by the time they arrive, pacing back and forth in the hallway. He levels Moody with a heavy gaze as soon as he sees them, eyes darting to Harry before his wand hand twitches in an unasked question. Moody looks vaguely impressed. “I’ll leave them to you, then, Diggory. Apologies, I’m not as quick as I used to be.”

“Did he do anything to you?” Cedric demands as soon as Moody’s out of earshot, walking alongside them as they enter the hospital wing. “I should’ve run into him on my way here, at the very least. Where did he take you?”

“It’s fine, Cedric, I promise,” he murmurs. “You know how Moody is. He’s just paranoid. Wanted to make absolutely sure that nothing happened.” Cedric’s eyes fall to Harry’s still bloody, torn sleeve. They linger there for several long moments.

“... Okay,” Cedric whispers, but his eyes tell another story. ‘You will tell me later, when we don’t risk being overheard,’ they practically scream, and Harry simply nods. He will. He has to. Cedric is the only one that can reveal his lie for what it is, and beyond that... He doesn’t want to lie to him. Not to him, not to Fleur, and not to Viktor. They’re a large part of the reason why he made it through this mess, and they deserve to know. It’s not like they’ll be at Hogwarts next year anyway, so he doesn’t have to worry about Dumbledore finding the information within their minds.

And maybe it’s just wishful thinking, but Harry doesn’t think they’ll betray him outright. They’ll be worried, they’ll be upset, but when they hear that it was either this or die... They’ve been very invested in keeping him alive so far. He hopes that doesn’t change when they find out that he’s keeping Voldemort alive too, whether he wants to or not.

Fleur is still trembling faintly in her bed, and the look of stark relief in her eyes as soon as she sees him makes his throat feel very dry. “Arry... I’m so glad zat you’re okay...!”

“She’ll be right as rain by tomorrow morning,” Madam Pomfrey reassures him. “I’ve got her on a Nerve-Restorative Draught, and thankfully, she was not under the Cruciatus Curse for long... Mr. Krum was fighting against the Imperius Curse very strongly.” Viktor is still unconscious, laying completely still in his bed. Harry worries at his lip. “He will be fine too, dear. He’s just exhausted from attempting to wrest back control of his body and mind.”

And then, shocking everyone in the room but Madam Pomfrey most of all, Viktor suddenly jerks awake, shouting, “Harry!!” His eyes are wide and fearful, and it is only when he sees Harry standing next to him, alive and relatively unharmed, that his gasping breaths begin to slow into something close to normal. “There vas...! There vas...!”

“It’s okay,” he promises. “Nothing bad happened. I’m alright. The task is over.”

Viktor slumps with relief. Fleur looks to between him and Cedric and asks, “So... Who won?”

“Harry,” Cedric whispers. “Scared the crap out of all of us because the portkey malfunctioned, but Draco and Dobby brought him back, no problems.”

“Zat is a relief,” Fleur murmurs. “What will you do with zhe prize money? I know you didn’t care much for it.”

“I was thinking of giving it to Fred and George, actually,” he murmurs. “To help them start their joke shop. I know they won’t accept charity from me, but it’s an investment, really. I know they’re going to do well.”

All three of the champions smile at him then, and though there is a bit of unspoken tension between him and Cedric, a bit of it melts away as he says, “That’s a good idea, Harry. A way to turn this whole mess into something positive for everyone.”

“Exactly! That’s what I was thinking.”

And if his laugh is a touch strained, then at least no one calls him out on it.

It is... Strange to carry on like yesterday didn’t happen. Like his entire world hasn’t turned on its head in a single night. Voldemort wants him alive. Dumbledore wants him dead, or rather, he wants Voldemort dead and will have to kill Harry to achieve that. These are inescapable truths. They haunt his every waking moment, and he is not surprised in the slightest when the other champions drag him and Draco off to the Room of Requirement for a talk. They only have a couple of days before Fleur and Viktor will be going home, and they do not have time for him to steady his feet before they start asking questions.

“You lied to Dumbledore,” Cedric starts hesitantly, glancing down at Harry’s now-healed arm. “You weren’t hurt in the maze. The acromantula didn’t even get close to us. I... I know you don’t trust him, and honestly, after what he did to you, or at the very least didn’t do, I can’t blame you. I can’t really say that I... Things have been very strange around here ever since your first year. It didn’t used to be like this, and after Skeeter’s article, I’m not the only one realizing that. So you lied to him. That doesn’t bother me, but Harry... What really happened after you touched that portkey? Please... Don’t... Don’t lie to us.”

“I don’t want to,” he whispers. “I want to tell you, but... Please, just promise that you’ll listen. I know that it’s going to sound bad. I know that... That you might not ever be able to forgive me for it, but just... Listen.”

“Of course ve vill.” Viktor’s smile is a touch strained, clearly uneasy, but his words are resolute.

“Zere is not a zhing in zis world zat could turn me against you, ‘Arry,” Fleur murmurs. “Not a zhing.”

“You’re my friend, Harry. And you know how we Hufflepuffs are about our friends.” They all laugh at that, and it feels almost like everything is exactly like it was before. He wonders if he’ll ever truly get to have that feeling again.

Harry opens his mouth, closes it, tries and fails to find where he can even begin. Draco steps forward. “The Dark Lord is back.” It’s as if the entire world has been plunged into an endless winter, suffocating cold freezing his friends to the bone. It’s as if they barely dare to breathe. “And he... Has struck a deal with Harry.”

Three wide gazes turn to face him, and he swallows harshly. “So long as I don’t fight him, he won’t target me. Or anyone that I care about. If... If that was all there was to it, then I wouldn’t have agreed, but... The night that he attacked me... I don’t know all the specifics, but there was something about a ritual, about the sacrificial magic my mother used to protect me, and the combination of that and the Killing Curse rebounding on Voldemort... It forged some sort of connection between us. To kill Voldemort, I would have to die.”

Cedric inhales sharply. Fleur has fire swaying around her as she fights back tears, and Viktor clenches his fists even as his hands tremble. “And Dumbledore... If he doesn’t know, then he likely suspects. I think that’s why... He’s not training me to survive this war. He’s training me to die for it. The trials every year, the little hints and nudges while otherwise staying out of it, even leaving me at the Dursleys... Was it to ensure I’d be beaten down and desperate? Willing to die for my only escape from them without hesitation? I don’t know. I don’t... I don’t think he necessarily wants to kill me, but I don’t think he’s above it. I don’t think he’s above it at all. And that thought... That thought terrifies me. I mean, hell, I almost did it for him—!”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” Fleur asks, flames flickering out as her eyes widen in shock. “‘Arry, what do you mean by zat?”

He and Draco exchange an uneasy glance. He hadn’t meant to say that, but there’s really nothing for it now... “We never did tell you how we became friends, did we?” Draco murmurs, knowing that Harry will not be able to force the words out of his throat. Not in any serious manner, in any case. He just... Tries not to think about it. “Just before the first task, I was having a hard time sleeping. I usually go up to the Astronomy Tower whenever I need some space to think, but when I got there... I saw Harry sitting on the ledge. He was looking straight down. If I had been even a few seconds later, he...”

“Oh, Harry...” Cedric whispers, horrified and teary-eyed as he wraps his arms around him in a hug. Harry’s breath hitches as he desperately fights back a sob.

“I... I had just found out about the dragons,” he stutters out. “I was so sure I was done for. I was going to die in a horrifically painful way in front of all those people, and I just... I thought it might not be so bad if I just made one last dive, you know? Almost like I was

chasing the snitch until I wasn't. I just... I didn't want to die, really, and I don't now, I promise. I just... I just wanted everything to stop hurting so much...!"

Fleur's hand brushes the tears away as Viktor rests a steady hand on his shoulder. Cedric still hasn't let go. Draco laces his fingers with Harry's, and that sends a fresh wave of tears rolling down his face. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry...!"

"Non, 'Arry, non," Fleur shushes. "Don't apologize. Not for zat. You... You say zis Voldemort won't kill you?"

"No," he whispers. "I'm... I'm one of the things tethering him to life. His snake said I was like her, but I don't know if there are any more... I just... He doesn't even want me to fight. He said he'd rather I didn't. Dumbledore will want me to fight, if nothing else. Even if he doesn't try to kill me himself. Maybe he expects Voldemort to do it for him. I don't know. But... These trials –and you really can't call them anything else– he could do something about them if he wanted to, couldn't he? Maybe I'd be willing to think it all a coincidence if it wasn't for my first year, but..."

"The Philosopher's Stone," Draco murmurs. "He was the one that chose to house it here. He had to know that the Dark Lord would want it. He had to know that something was off about Quirrel. And yet, he's conveniently gone on the night he goes for it..."

"Exactly..." Harry chokes out. "Exactly. I don't... I can't trust it. I can't. And if I can't trust him with me, then how am I supposed to trust him to protect you? Any of you?"

"Vat do you vant us to do?" Viktor murmurs. "This changes nothing as far as I am concerned. Though I do vonder vat Durmstrang will do without Karkaroff..." There's no doubt about what will happen to him. He may have ran last night, likely as soon as he felt the searing burn of the Dark Mark against his skin, but they will find him eventually.

"You don't have to do anything. I don't expect anything from you. Just... Just know that you'll be on the list of people he's not allowed to hurt, not him or any of his followers, and please... Don't tell anyone. They'll kill me. And don't look Dumbledore or Snape in the eye. They're both Legilimens."

"I'd like to see zem try," Fleur snarls. "And I'll be careful. I won't say a word, 'Arry. I promised, didn't I? Not a zhing in zhe world." Viktor nods in easy agreement, and Harry feels his gaze slowly, reluctantly turning to Cedric.

"... You know, I really wanted to become a barrister to be better than the rest of them," Cedric murmurs as he takes a step back. "To be a bastion of good in an industry dominated by bribery and deceit. But I... Maybe it makes me no different from the rest of them, but I won't betray you, Harry. Not for this. You say you won't be fighting for him? You won't be out there torturing muggles and trying to oust muggle-borns?"

"No, never!" he promises. "I... I want to try swaying him from that, actually. If I can. If he'll listen to anyone, then..."

“It would probably be you,” Draco finishes with a wry grin. “Though I think I may have earned some amount of begrudging respect last night.”

“... Vat did you do?” Viktor asks, almost hesitantly, and Draco’s answering smirk makes him look like he wants to take the question back. He doesn’t, though.

“The initial plan was just to have Dobby pop me over, grab Harry, and get us both out of there. But we didn’t anticipate running into the Dark Lord himself, and he put up a ward against house elves as soon as he saw us. So I went with Plan D instead. You know, Plan Dragon. I shifted, threatened, and bluffed like hell, basically. It worked though. I’ve been put in charge of protecting Harry, actually...”

Cedric laughs at that. The sound is just a touch hysterical, but he smiles as he wipes a tear out of his eyes nonetheless. “You two are insane. Only you...” Cedric shakes his head. “You know what? Yeah, I can get behind this. If you’re trying to change him, to lessen the lives lost in a war we all know is coming whether we like it or not... You’re doing something that no one else can, Harry. You’re doing everything you can, and that’s enough.”

“You will look after ‘im?” Fleur asks Draco with a fierce look in her eyes. He nods immediately. “Good. If you need me, zen I am only an owl away. Write me. Write me whether you need me or not.”

“I will,” he promises. “I’ll write all of you.”

There’s some sort of presentation ceremony where Harry receives his prize money and promptly gives it to the Weasley twins. They try to refuse him, but when he frames it as an investment, they’re more than happy to accept it in exchange for giving him an equal partnership in their shop. Mrs. Weasley looks equal parts misty-eyed and horrified. It’s a bit funny, honestly.

And then, before he knows it, he’s boarding the Hogwarts Express. Only this time, he’s not riding back with Hermione and Ron, dreading his return to Privet Drive. No, Harry’s sitting right by Draco’s side, talking animatedly with Fred and George as they run several experiment ideas by him. Blaise looks downright intrigued, whispering in a low tone to Pansy as she watches on with narrowed eyes, mentally running the calculations in her head. “Fred, George, let me know if you need any help with advertisements or sourcing a building. I’m very good at that sort of thing, and I’m willing to work on commission...” Cedric looks equal parts amused and despairing as everyone plots, and Cho giggles behind her hand as he groans quietly. Crabbe and Goyle sit like silent sentinels, occasionally offering input over one prank sweet or another, and Nott left almost as soon as they’d entered the compartment, saying they were far too noisy for him to put up with while he was trying to read.

It’s... Nice. For once, the return trip from Hogwarts isn’t something that has him tense and wary. He’s not going back to Privet Drive. He’s never going back to that awful place again. He gets to spend all summer with his boyfriend, fully entrenched in the magical world and catching up on all the things he’s so behind on, and nothing can be better than that.

Well, that’s what he thinks until they step off on the platform and he sees a big, black dog standing by Mrs. Malfoy’s side, tail wagging as soon as he catches sight of Harry.

“Snuffles!!”

This summer is going to be the best ever.

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