Deluded Musings FanficAuthors.net

Triwizard Tales Here There Be Dragons.

Part One: Here There Be Dragons.

There were hundreds and hundreds of faces staring down at him from stands that had been magicked there since he'd last stood on this spot. And there was the Horntail, at the other end of the enclosure, crouched lowover her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yelloweyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, heaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry didn't knowor care. It was time to do what he had to do... to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his only chance.

He raised his wand.

"Accio Firebolt!" he shouted.

Harry waited, every fiber of him hoping, praying... If it hadn't worked... if it wasn't coming... He seemed to be looking at everything around him through some sort of shimmering, transparent barrier, like a heat haze, which made the enclosure and the hundreds of faces around him swim strangely...

- Excerpted from "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire"

Up in the student section of the stands Hermione Granger had taken to biting her left fist to stop herself from screaming. Harry's Accio had not worked. Why hadn't it worked? They had drilled and drilled until the charm was second nature to Harry. But it hadn't worked and now the poor boy was standing there in front of the impossibly huge dragon looking so very small.

The crowd went almost silent watching; even Ron's constant harangue about Harry cheating his way into the tournament had gone quiet in the face of the horror that Harry had to face all alone when a single voice rang out.

"I'll lay a hundred to one odds that Potty forfeits or dies."

Every head in the student section turned to face a smirking Draco Malfoy. The Slytherin section of the crowd was peppered with laughter and then silence once again fell on the crowd. Harry still stood stock still in the arena. Hermione decided then that she had to do something.

"The Muggles have a saying Malfoy," she said clearly, loud enough that everyone could hear her. "It's morally wrong to allow a loud mouthed sucker to keep his money, and betting against Harry is always a sucker bet. I have ten Galleons not doing anything just now. I'll take some of that hundred to one action. Are you good for it?"

"Of course I am," the blonde said flushing.

"Oh, good," Justin Finch-Fletchley said from the row in front of Hermione. "I've got twenty Galleons looking for some friends as well. If attending Hogwarts for the last three years has taught me nothing else, it is that Potter usually wins. I'll take you up on your odds."

Malfoy managed to add up what thirty Galleons would be at a hundred to one and paled beyond his usual pallor. He tried to cover his nervousness with bluster. "Are you two sure that both of you can risk that much on a casual bet? Wouldn't it be better used to upgrade the mud huts your pathetic families live in?"

"That sounds like a little boy trying to **weasel** out of a man's wager Malfoy..." Justin asked with a twinkle in his eye. Getting a dig in for the transformation Draco had suffered at Professor Moody's wand was just gravy. Justin had long listened to Draco carry on about the wealth of the Malfoy clan, but having seen the Wizarding economy and the generalized pricing of consumer goods, the son of a pair of very successful investment bankers was willing to wager that his family could buy and sell that of the arrogant pure blood several times over. "What's wrong, don't you have the balls to carry through with your bet? You can cover Hermione and my little wagers can't you?"

"Of course I can cover it. Your paltry thirty Galleons is nothing to the Malfoy fortune."

"Great," Susan Bones broke in, pulling her eyes from where Harry still stood facing the mother dragon. Cedric was a 'Puff, but Harry was a very nice, very cute boy whom she had had her eye on for a while, and there was no way she was going to let an ass like Malfoy bad mouth him. "Now that you mention it, I could use some pocket money as well. Put me down for ten Galleons too."

The scion of the Malfoy clan paled even further when the crowd around him erupted with wagers against his offered odds.

Well this is bad, Harry thought as he fought to keep from vomiting in terror. OK Boy Who Lived Long Enough to End up Flash Fried, think of something.

Nothing came immediately to mind.

Crap.

What were the odds that Dumbledore would allow a competition that would kill the competitors dead? It seemed unlikely... but then he had almost been killed every year since he started at Hogwarts, and this year someone had entered him into a contest where, according to Hermione, death was a common occurrence, so, yeah, he could end up being killed here.

The dragon roared, and then seemed to concentrate her attention on a section of the crowd for a moment. The beast's oddly expressive face seemed to curl into what Harry could only describe to himself as an evil grin.

~ You carry the taint of a Speaker little one. Can you understand me? ~

Harry blinked. Dragons spoke Parseltongue? ~ I can, ~ he responded in a similar manner.

The dragon stomped her feet and strained at her chains, roaring furiously. ~ So this is a contest of some sort? A test for you and those others? ~

- ~ It is, ~ Harry responded, while dodging a gout of flame that seemed to him to have been very poorly aimed.
- ~ I heard some of your companions in the audience making wagers as to your success against me ~ the dragon said while again straining at her chains and roaring. ~ They are fools of course; against me, you have no chance... However, a thought occurs to me, what would winning be worth to you? ~
- ~ What do you mean? ~ Harry asked wondering just why these things kept happening to him.
- ~ It seems to me that I might need a few things for my hatchlings when they make their appearance. Things that no human would ever willingly supply ~ an evil glint appeared in the dragon's eye. ~ Gold however, solves so many problems. ~

Harry mind raced as he dodged yet another underpowered wave of flame. Was this Dragon offering to throw the contest? For money? How much money? He did a quick calculation of the amount of gold in his vault. From his estimated size of the pile in his vault, he guessed that he could give up approximately five thousand Galleons and still be able to afford Hogwarts for the next three years.

Still, there was no point in being stupid about it. ~ 500 Galleons. ~ He offered.

- ~ It's good to see that some of you humans have a sense of humor, ~ the dragon laughed. ~ Do you really believe you could convince me that you so undervalue your life? Ten thousand. Now cast something at me! ~
- ~ I'm summoning that rock behind you, ~ Harry said getting into the spirit of the game. "Accio Rock!" ~ I'm not rich; I haven't got that kind of money. One thousand. ~

The dragon grabbed the boulder from the air with her forelimbs before heaving the huge stone close to, but not at, Harry.

Hermione was far too terrified for Harry to manage to join in with the cheering of the crowd around her. Where the other three Champions had all gone at the dragons they faced from oblique angles, Harry was actually standing his ground and fighting the dragon practically toe to toe.

It slowly filtered into her consciousness that the crowd around her was actually chanting 'Harry!' over and over. Even the Hufflepuffs who had raised the sound level for their housemate Cedric were cheering for the tiny boy facing the huge Dragon with such... style.

Who was that, and what had he done with Harry Potter?

- ~ It's agreed then, ~ the dragon said while dodging the Leviosa Harry had flung in her direction. ~ Two Thousand Five Hundred Galleons, ten hogsheads of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey, and a hundredweight of habanero peppers and I let you win. ~
- ~ Deal! ~ Harry agreed. ~ How do we do this? ~
- ~ I'll send a fireball your way, you jump over it and run between my legs. As soon as you are under me, do whatever light show you want and I will do the rest. ~

Harry leaped over the expected gout of flame and ran for all he was worth, wondering while he was doing so if he was just committing a highly choreographed suicide. He slid between the widely splayed forelegs of the dragon and once under its belly he cast the most powerful Lumos he could.

Hermione was blinded for a moment by the sudden pulse of light. Once the spots before her eyes cleared, she saw the dragon lying on its back, with all four of its legs pointing skyward, twitching.

"Potter knocked the dragon out!" Justin shouted.

"Bloody Hell!" Ron agreed as he rose from where he sat.

As one, the crowd turned to the Malfov heir. "Pay up."

Harry rose from the ground. He must have bunged up his leg in the slide because it hurt like hell when he stood on it. He limped over to the nest and reached for the golden egg.

In a scene horrifyingly like his first year, he found the eggs to be hatching. First one, then another small head emerged from the heavy shell to stare into his eyes. Before he knew it, all five little dragons were staring at him and chirping in an odd tone, much as Norbert had three years before. That was when he realized that the chirps sounded something like baby talk. Why hadn't he noticed that with Norbert?

Realizing that the way the five small dragons were staring at him could not possibly be good, Harry gingerly pulled the golden egg from the pile of broken eggshells, deftly avoiding the small bursts of flame the baby dragons were producing between chirping sessions. Harry then limped over to the dragon, whose legs were still twitching dramatically.

- ~ You ham ~ Harry hissed.
- ~ You have no understanding of the dramatic; just get my fee to the red furred servant. ~ She said dismissively ~ tell him it's for 'Kiska' he knows who I am. ~
- ~ Yeah, whatever. Your eggs have hatched; ~ Harry informed the still over acting dragon.
- ~ Good, perhaps the servants will return me to my home sooner for it. ~
- Shaking his head Harry made his way to stand in front of the judge's stand. He raised the egg to show that he had accomplished the task.
- After a three count Harry turned and limped to the enclosure's entrance, where Madam Pomfrey and the other Champions were standing looking at him open mouthed. The stands were absolutely silent.

"What?" he asked.

And the crowd went wild.

Barty Crouch Jr. stood in his hiding place behind the stands with a look of shock on his borrowed face. When he made his suggestion to the Potter boy that he play to his strengths he had actually imagined that the child would mount his broom and display some of the talent he was famous for.

But this? The boy had done battle with and defeated a dragon?

How was that even possible?

A traitorous part of his mind wondered if even his master could have done the same with only a wand. He quickly clamped down on that thought, hating himself for doubting his master even within the privacy of his mind.

"Hello Professor..."

Crouch froze and curse himself yet again for having not yet mastered Moody's charmed eye. The damned girl had snuck up on him again.

"Good afternoon Miss Gwinn," he said trying to think of a way to end this conversation a quickly as possible. "Potter performed rather well at his task didn't he?"

"Hmm?" the seventh year Hufflepuff asked, her left hand idly playing with the décolletage of her blouse. "Did something happen?" Hope Gwinn paused to moisten her lips, "I was looking for you..."

In his life, Barty Crouch had regretted many things. He regretted getting caught in the raid on the Longbottoms, he regretted failing his master, he regretted the fact that Alastair Moody was evidently a breeder, and most of all he regretted that the old axiom that 'chicks dig scars' was turning out to be true, at least as far as several of his 7th year female students were concerned and this one in particular.

Though that regret was rapidly falling to second place when he made the horrifying discovery that his polyjuiced body was responding to the young woman precisely as the original would.

Charlie Weasley entered the rough log cabin that served as the offices for the dragon reserve through the employee entrance. It had been a week since he and his coworkers had returned the she-dragons and their clutches from that stupid tournament and the dragons were still in something of an uproar.

The higher ups all claimed that the dragons did not really communicate between themselves, but as the four nesting mothers came into contact with other dragons, the new comers seemed to be infected by the she-dragons' hostility. Any fool could see that the dragons were talking, and they were not pleased... All except Kiska, who seemed to be inordinately pleased with herself for some reason beyond the normal pride of a new mother with her brood happily flying about her.

That little detail was worrisome all by itself.

The redhead paused at the door to the Reserve Director's office and knocked.

"You wanted to see me Boss? Kiska is still acting a bit weird, even for her; her babies are awfully cute though."

"I rarely want to see you, Weasley," Constance Beaumont answered dryly. Beaumont was an older witch who had been a dragon handler for most of a century, with the burn scars to prove it. All of the handlers working on the Reserve respected the woman, and more than a few feared her. "The goblins of Gringotts on the other hand," she gestured toward a small being wearing the bank's crests, "seem to have some use for you."

The goblin looked up into Charlie's eyes. "You are Charlie Weasley?"

"I am," Charlie answered cautiously. He had never had much in the way of dealings with the goblins, as the Weasley clan rarely had enough gold to require a trip to the family vault.

The goblin thrust an ornate stone tablet with several sheets of parchment attached. "Sign on the bottom of page one, page seven, and page nine, initial in the marked spaces on pages three, four, ten and fourteen."

"What is this?" Charlie asked unwilling to sign anything handed to him by some goblin, even if the being was wearing Gringotts' livery.

"Can't you read human?" the goblin sneered. "You have been designated the proxy for the she-dragon Kiska, and as such you are taking delivery of a gift for her."

Beaumont and Charlie exchanged a glance at the mention of Kiska's name. Who would be sending gifts to a dragon? Charlie's eyes then went to the delivery receipt in his hands. "Twenty five hundred Galleons, ten hogsheads of firewhiskey and a hundredweight of habenero peppers? Who would send that to Kiska? Where is it? I'm not signing for anything I can't see."

"I don't believe it, a wizard with basic business sense," the goblin said with just a touch of grudging respect. "Outside."

Charlie and Beaumont followed the goblin out to the front of the cabin. There, guarded by four large unfriendly looking Security Trolls they found a large chest, and the rest of Kiska's 'gifts'.. "Seriously?" the redhead asked, "someone sent a gift to a dragon?"

"I don't question a client's motivation," the goblin commented, "If he has the gold, I make deliveries. Sign the receipt, human, I'm a busy goblin."

In the end, it took every handler working at the Reserve to deliver the she-dragon's gifts to Kiska's cave. This is partially due to the penalties that would be exacted upon the Reserve's staff should the delivery not take place with expediency, but mostly it was the novelty of a dragon being sent gifts that drew the handlers to Kiska's lair.

Outside the cave, Charlie made sure that everything was ready, and then raised his dragon whistle to his lips and blew as hard as he could. The horrible wet sound of a cow being eviscerated issued from the device. The handlers all hated the sound of a dragon whistle, but it was the only device known to Wizard-kind that was guaranteed to bring the huge beasts running... Or flying as the case may be.

It only took seconds for Kiska to appear at the mouth of her cave, as well as a crowd of dragons from throughout the Reserve.

Charlie could not believe his eyes at the reaction of the huge she-dragon when she spotted her gifts. The Horntail was practically hopping in place with glee at the gold and other things. A giddy dragon? Now he had seen everything.

Kiska was directing the other dragons in the task of taking her treasure into her lair, when she seemed to notice the assembled handlers. The huge she-dragon seemed to fix them all in her stare, and then she butted her head against the flank of one of the smaller males who was carrying one of the firewhiskey hogsheads in his mouth. The drake deferred to the larger female and laid the hogshead at her feet, and then entered the cave to join the others.

The horntail lifted the hogshead in her mouth, and then swung about to face the handlers, until she was snout to nose with a very confused Charlie Weasley. Charlie hardly had a chance to register her hot, humid breath in his face, before she spat the heavy hogshead into his chest.

Charlie found himself thrown backwards into a pair of his fellow dragon handlers, and the three large men struggled to remain upright under the combined weight of fifty gallons of firewhiskey and the wooden cask that contained it. The other handlers gathered to wrestle the heavy cask

off their friends and coworkers in time for them all to see Kiska the Horntail vanish into her cave.

"What," Charlie asked the world, "the hell just happened."

"I'm not sure Weasley," Constance Beaumont answered, her voice full of wonder and confusion, her eyes never leaving the cave entrance.

"But I think you were just tipped for good service."

The assembled Dragon handlers worked through their confusion at the actions of their charges in the time tested manner their profession had always used. They drank from the hogshead of firewhiskey until they no longer cared about being confused.

~ Good morning, ~ a voice said, waking the dragon from her slumber and introducing her to her newest hangover. ~ Are you Kiska the Horntail? ~

Kiska opened a single bloodshot eye and unleashed a gout of flame upon the speaker.

~ Yes, ~ the speaker said in a bored tone. ~ Very impressive. Now, are you Kiska? ~

The Horntail opened both of her eyes now, ignoring the pounding in her head and found a somewhat singed Feathered Serpent staring at her in that disturbing unblinking way of its kind.

~ Sorry, ~ Kiska hissed. ~ Something of a party last night, feeling a bit fragile this morning. ~

The snake did the head roll that passes for a shrug for its kind. ~ We've all been there, my name is Alejandro Q. Emplumada, and I work for The News of the Magical World. ~

That caught Kiska's attention. The News of the Magical World was the premiere news magazine for all of the non-human sapients in Europe, available in whatever format an individual sapient might require; it carried all the news that anyone in any of the magical communities could possibly care about. To be interviewed by The News was an honor.

A soft cough caught Kiska's attention; to the Feathered Serpent's left she discovered an embarrassed looking Yeti, an amused Hippogriff, a midsized Acromantula sporting a pink bow on the left side of its multi-eyed head and a small fur-less human who appeared to be busily scribbling on a note pad.

~ You brought an entourage? ~

Again the snake did the head roll shrug. ~ Reporting staff. I speak Dragon and Yeti, Ming there speaks Snake and Hippogryff, Pinfeathers speaks Yeti and Acromantula, and Missy speaks Hippogryff and Human. The one with the note pad is our boss, Xeno Lovegood. He owns Lovegood publishing and The News. ~

~ A human owns and publishes The News of the Magical World? ~

~ And about a dozen other major Magical Sapient publications. He even has a magazine intended for humans, but that is mostly just a weird hobby he uses to amuse himself and his hatchling... So, about the human's Triwizard Tournament, what really happened when you faced down the Boy-Who-Lived? ~~~~~~~

~ Well, ~ Kiska began, ~ it's really a funny story... ~

- "Twenty seven thousand Galleons?"
- "Twenty seven thousand two hundred," Draco corrected his father quietly.
- "And how," Lucius asked attempting to rein in his anger, "did you come to owe twenty seven thousand two hundred Galleons?"
- "I was following your instructions to undermine Potter and Dumbledore whenever possible Father," Draco answered, wishing more than anything that he was anywhere but standing in front of his enraged father. "At the first task I saw my chance to humiliate Potter. He was just standing there in front of the dragon looking like he was going to pass out... so I..."
- "So you what?" Lucius barked.
- "So I offered hundred to one odds that he would forfeit or die," Draco admitted. "I didn't think anyone would take me up on it, I mean Potter was just standing there like he was going to wet himself. Then his pet Mudblood said it would be wrong to let me keep my money, and bet ten Galleons."

Lucius closed his eyes and slowly counted to ten, wondering, not for the first time if the best part of his son had not run down his mother's leg on the night he was conceived. "Alright," he sighed. "That's a thousand. Where did the rest come from?"

"Another Mudblood, this one from Hufflepuff, said that he'd learned to never bet against Potter. He bet twenty."

- "Which started a rush to take your bet?"
- The younger Malfoy became extremely interested in his own shoes. "Yes father."
- "And what makes you think that I will pay for your foolishness?"
- Draco swallowed noisily, "When I couldn't make good on the wagers there were threats of going to the Prophet and calling into question the honor of the Malfoy family."
- Lucius fixed Draco with a stare, the beginnings of a tic forming below his left eye. The aristocratic man produced a coin bag and handed it to his son. "Fine. Needless to say it will be several years before you get any more pocket money."
- "Father!" Draco responded, shocked at the thought of being cut off from the family vaults.
- "I trust," Lucius continued, ignoring the boy's outburst, "that you will continue in your assigned duties to undermine the support that Dumbledore and Potter have at the school?"
- "Of course I will Father," Draco responded, disturbed that his father might think he would shirk his duties to the family. "I have a cunning plan in place to humiliate Potter at the Yule Ball. I am your son after all."
- "Yes," Lucius nodded absently while trying not to imagine what might pass for a 'cunning plan' in his son's mind. "I know. And four paternity charms confirm it, against all odds."

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Triwizard Tales The Ball

Part Two: The Ball.

"Hello Harry."

Potter looked up from the book he was reading on magical objects and the sounds they made and blinked owlishly. He fought the temptation to stare at the rather impressive breasts in front of his eyes and concentrated on maintaining eye contact with Susan Bones.

"Hi..." he squeaked, his voice breaking at precisely the wrong moment. He swallowed and tried again, forcing his voice into a lower octave. "Hello Sue. How are you?"

"I'm fine Harry. What are you reading?"

Harry held up the book so that the Hufflepuff could read the cover.

"'From Gabriel's Horn to Knopfler's Axe, how magical sound changed the world'. That's an unusual book."

Harry pulled off his glasses and began cleaning them. "I'm trying to figure out the egg thing from the Tournament."

"Cedric gave us all headaches when he first got his," Sue confided. "Since the first couple of times he hasn't opened it in the common room though," she paused and seemed to steel herself. "I hear that you don't have a date for the Ball."

Harry blinked at the sudden change of subject. "I find it hard to believe that my pathetic social life could really be a topic of conversation in the 'Puff common room."

"Harry," the redhead said with a serious expression. "You are a champion without a date. Of course we talk about you."

"Ah, I would have thought..."

"That you weren't all that popular among the Hufflepuffs?" Susan asked with a small grin. "That was true, until Cedric sat everyone down and made it very clear to everyone that he believed you when you said that you didn't put your name in the Goblet, and that if it weren't for you warning him, he might not have survived the dragon in the first task. Cedric says he considers you a decent person and a friend."

Harry blushed and did not say anything, so Susan continued. "Anyway, I'm guessing that you are planning on waiting until the last minute and asking Hermione to take pity on you."

- "That was my original plan," Harry admitted, "but Hermione has a date, though she won't say who it is."
- "I wasn't sure if you knew about that or not," Sue sat across from the boy who lived. It was now or never. "How did you find out?"
- "Hermione started acting all girly, looking at fashion magazines and talking about colors and contrasts. It wasn't hard to figure out."
- "So Weasley has no idea?"
- "None at all," Harry returned her grin for the first time. "He has this great plan for asking Fleur Delacour to the ball. He tells me that she's sure to have an ugly friend I could go with, because he says 'extremely pretty girls always have an ugly friend for a guy's wingman."
- "And you would be the wingman?"
- "So he tells me," Harry closed his book. "And if I was a smooth talker this is where I would ask you if you had any ugly friends open to a pity date."
- "Sorry, I don't have a troll girlfriend for a wingman."
- "Ah," Harry said with a slight blush. "It was worth a shot."
- "However," Susan said, "I do have a brand new set of formal robes, and I was telling myself that since you are pretty much responsible for my being able to afford them, I thought that I might ask you to go to the Ball with me."

Harry blinked. "With you?" One of the prettiest girls in his year was asking him out? There had to be a catch, his luck most specifically did not work like that.

"Yes. Is it that uncomfortable a suggestion?" Susan said with a small grin. Hermione had been right; Harry looked like he was frightened out of his mind.

- "What?" he gasped. "No, no, not at all. I just didn't think that...."
- "Then don't think Harry, just tell me yes or no."
- Harry swallowed hard, and then nodded so that it appeared he would shake his head off, "Yes!"
- Susan's smile got even wider as she stood from the table. "Excellent, we'll have fun. We'll have to get together later and compare colors so that we don't clash."
- Harry nodded again, despite having absolutely no idea what the busty Hufflepuff was talking about.
- "Ill let you get back to your research," Susan said dazzling him with her smile again. "Talk to you later, Harry."
- "Later," the Boy Who Lived agreed as he watched the girl walk away, silently marveling at the way her body moved in every direction at once, yet did it gracefully.
- Wow, he thought as a wide smile stretched across his face. He had a date.
- Just as suddenly the color in his face drained away and a sense of impending doom filled his mind. Bloody hell! He had a date.
- Wait...Wait... What was that about her being able to afford her new dress robes because of him? Harry sighed. It always seemed like he was the only one with no clue as to what was going on.

Hannah skidded to a stop in front of the door to the Library a look of disappointment on her face as she found her oldest friend with an expression of victory on hers.

- "The Library? He was in the Library?"
- "Yep," the busty redhead affirmed.
- "Of course he was. I ran all the way out to the Quidditch pitch, and then pounded on the door of the Gryffindor dorms for half an hour before someone would answer me, and you just find him in the Library."
- "He's researching his egg," Susan said with a grin.
- "I bet. So?"
- "So, I've got a date to the Ball."
- "Damn it Sue..." Hannah shook her head. "It's not fair. Something should be going my way this year. You've gotten those boobs, new robes and a date with Harry Potter. What do I get? How did you find him?"
- "Before Cedric sat you all down to tell you that Harry was a good guy, he might have told me where his competition was likely hanging out." the redhead said with an even wider grin.
- "Damn it!" Hannah swore. "You had better let me dance with him at least."
- "Maybe," Susan said as she walked away from her flustered friend.

The Ball, it turned out, had changed Hermione into, well, a girl. Not that Harry had ever doubted her status as a female, but this whole taking several hours to get ready thing was something new for his most trusted best friend.

Harry, along with most of the other males of Gryffindor above third year, sat in the common room waiting for the women to get ready. Harry and Hermione planned to go the Great Hall together to meet their respective dates, Susan in his case and Hermione's mystery man.

This year was turning out to be exceedingly weird, and that was before Ron's rather spectacular crash and burn in front of everyone when he asked Fleur Delacour to the Ball at the evening meal. The French girl's dismissal of the suggestion followed by her refusal to recognize Ron's existence had several of the girls in the Great Hall, from all three of the represented schools, scrambling to take notes for the proper method to use in the crushing of a boy's ego and removing his will to live.

Ron blamed Harry for not being a supportive wingman. The redhead told everyone who would listen that the only reason that Beauxbaton's champion had turned down his offer was due to his not being able to offer a date to take her obligatory ugly friend.

The fact that Fleur did not appear to have an ugly friend did not dissuade Ron in the slightest.

- Harry sat on the sofa in the corner that the fourth years normally staked out as their own and contemplated what little he remembered of the 'Dance Lessons' that Susan had shanghaied him for. Mostly he had concentrated on not staring down into her awe-inspiring cleavage and trying to keep Susan from discovering the evidence that he had, in fact, looked down once or twice by bumping her hip into said evidence. As a result, he had not actually learned much in the way of dancing.
- Neville quit pulling at his collar and nudged Harry to get his attention. He then nodded toward the doorway to the boy's dorms.
- There stood Ron Weasley, all decked out in his dress robes, a mélange of purple and lace. Ron spotted his dorm mates and made a beeline for them.
- "So," Dean asked, "who took pity on you Ron?"
- "Ha, you're so funny Dean. I'm here to keep Hermione from looking silly."
- There was a moment of silence until Neville asked the question that all the others were thinking. "The sight of that purple monstrosity is going to distract everyone I suppose, but how is it going to keep Hermione of all people from looking silly?"
- "When she comes down and has to admit that her 'mystery date' is a figment of her imagination of course," Ron sighed as if he was explaining the most obvious thing in the world.
- "Ron," Harry said, trying to spare his somewhat unreliable friend's ego, "Hermione has a date."
- "You would take her side wouldn't you?" Ron sniffed.
- "Ron, pull your head out of your arse," Seamus laughed. "The girl has a date. You pissed about, and then set your sights impossibly high, and now you have the choice of staying here with the youngsters or going stag."
- "I asked Hermione before Ginny asked me," Neville pointed out. "She already had her date then. That was more than a month ago Ron. Quit being such a wally and man up."
- "Ginny asked you?" Ron shouted before wheeling on Harry. "This is your fault. If you had been there for me when I went after the Frenchie, then I wouldn't be left out like this."
- "For god's sake Ron, this isn't about you," Harry began.
- "Ron," Dean cut in dangerously as he stood, showing that Ron had not been the only Gryffindor to have had a growth spurt over the previous summer. "You're being an ass. No one made you go after a girl that everyone knew you had no chance with, no one made you ignore Hermione, and for you to start blaming Harry for anything after the way you badmouthed him before the task with the dragon is just stupid. Now shut up and go away before you get hurt."
- Ron looked furiously at his dorm mates before stomping off out the common room doorway and out into the halls.
- Dean shook his head and returned to his seat. "Sorry Harry, I know he's your best mate, but I'm just not in the mood for Ron's shite tonight."
- The silence spread among the fourth years for several moments before Seamus broke it. "Krum's date was something of a surprise eh?"
- "Yeah," Harry noted, wondering just when it was he quit being so interested in Cho. "Kind of makes sense though, the both of them being seekers and all that."
- "I kind of doubt that Krum is looking for tips on seeking," Neville said with a grin.
- "Probably not," Harry agreed with his own grin. Ah, yeah. It was the first time Susan's dance lessons had him holding her close and he looked down and...
- Cho who?
- "Merlin!" Seamus breathed as he stood up from the squashy chair. Harry turned his attention to the door to the girl's dorms in time to see that the girls were making their appearances.
- They were... There was... Hermione was... How the hell had he missed this? Had he been so wrapped up in himself that he missed... this?
- "Close your mouth Harry," she said with a pleased smile. "You're staring."
- "Bloody hell Hermione," he answered trying to recover his dignity by looking her up and down in an exaggerated manner. "You scrub up quite nicely."
- Hermione cocked her head to one side as if thinking of a proper response, and then quicker than Harry could react she cuffed him on the side of the head. Glancing down at her nails, she smiled happily then held them up for Harry to see.
- "Magical nail polish, complete with built in quick-drying charms, and it's chip proof, as I just demonstrated on that hard head of yours. Lavender loaned it to me," the girl grinned. "And mind your language Harry. There are ladies present."
- Harry rolled his eyes as he rubbed the side of his head. "This side of you is scarier than normal; I'll have to warn your mystery man about how violent you can be."

- "Oh Harry," she cooed as she took his arm and lead him toward the doorway. "Not if you value your life."
- Hermione stumbled at the top of the first staircase, and ended up leaning heavily on Harry to keep her balance.
- "Are you ok?" he asked.
- "It's these heels," she explained. "I'm not really used to them. So, what's wrong?"
- "Wrong? Why would there be anything wrong?"
- "Well, after you got over the shock of discovering that I was a woman, you made your little joke, and then got very quiet. That usually means something is wrong."
- "Oh," he said quietly. Was this, he asked himself, what having a family was like? Having someone in your life who knew you well enough to know what you are thinking from what you don't say? "It's Ron; I think he might make a scene."
- "Why?"
- "He showed up in the common room saying that he was going to 'keep you from looking silly' because he just knew that you didn't really have a date."
- "Oh he did, did he?" Hermione asked with a raised eyebrow.
- "We set him straight, but well, he got mad and stomped off," Harry paused. "I think he's really still mad about Fleur."
- stairs.

"How her shooting him down was your fault because you weren't there to be his 'wingman'?" Hermione asked as they reached the bottom of the

- "Yeah. I don't know where he gets that stuff." They were at the top of the last staircase before they arrived at the last set of stairs before the Great Hall. All around them students dressed in their finest robes were making their way to the party. "So," Harry asked as he steadied her again, "are you going to tell me who your mystery date is?"
- "Maybe I like being an enigmatic woman," she laughed.
- "Do I at least get to stomp on your feet while pretending to dance tonight?"
- "If you can tear yourself away from Susan I suppose."
- "Tear himself away from ME?" Susan's voice broke into their conversation, "as if that could happen."
- "Hi Sue," Harry said, his voice cracking yet again at the very worst time. He swallowed and again forced his voice into a lower register. "You look amazing."
- "I do, don't I?" the redhead said while twirling so that Harry could see her from all sides.
- "Susan Amelia, at least try to show some modicum of decorum can't you?"
- "Yes Auntie Amelia," Susan sighed, offering Harry a wink. "Harry, this is my aunt, Amelia Bones."
- "Hello," Harry said awkwardly shaking the woman's hand, before receiving an elbow to the ribs. "Oh! And this is my friend Hermione Granger."
- "Oh, yes, Cedric's friend." the grey haired woman nodded, her monocle flashing in the light. "He has mentioned you in his letters."
- "Yes I did, but not so that you could embarrass her, Aunt Amelia," Cedric interjected, as he approached to take Hermione's hands in his. "You look lovely tonight."
- "Thank you," Hermione said while a blush spread across her features. "You look quite handsome as well."
- Harry looked back and forth between his best friend and his competitor. Hermione and Cedric? When had this happened?

Hermione and Susan were joined by Hannah Abbot and the three girls were suddenly in an in-depth conversation with Susan's aunt about some obscure aspects of their party wear. Cedric and Harry exchanged a confused glance before stepping back from the women to have their own conversation.

- "So," Harry began, "you and Hermione? When did that happen?"
- "Well," the tall handsome Hufflepuff said, "After Cho decided that she would rather be a Quidditch groupie than my girlfriend, you knew we were dating, right?"
- Actually, Harry had not known that, but he nodded in the affirmative.

- "Like I said, Cho decided to be a Quidditch groupie, and I sort of, well, got to feeling sorry for myself, so I threw myself into my studies. So I started spending all my time in the Library."
- "Where you met Hermione," Harry concluded.
- "Yep. After my ego got over having my Potions essay corrected by a fourth year, we started to talk. Then we started going for walks, and we talked some more. Hermione is amazingly mature for her age. Hell, she's more mature than I am."
- "Yeah," Harry agreed, "me too." He still was not comfortable with the idea of Hermione being with an older man like Cedric... Cedric was a good bloke, scrupulously fair in a match, but it was no secret that Hermione was his closest friend, would he...
- "Hermione and I made an agreement not long after she started helping me with my classwork," Cedric continued. "That was we would never discuss the Triwizard, or you, so you don't need to worry about that."
- Shocked that the Hufflepuff had read his thoughts so easily, Harry looked away.
- "Don't worry about it Harry, if you had suddenly stated dating my best friend I would have had the same suspicions... Of course if you actually were dating Percy Weasley we might have something else to talk about."
- The thought that Cedric's best friend might be Percy Weasley managed to shock Harry all over again.
- "Hey, I know he can be something of a prig," Cedric shrugged reading Harry reaction for what it was. "Ottery St. Catchpole is a small town, Percy and I were the only lads our age, so we hung out before he started Hogwarts, and we stayed friends afterward. We both have our own passions, I drive him mad with my Quidditch stories and he bores me to tears with his fixation on rules and regulations, but we are still mates. Percy, Ollie Wood, and I are planning on sharing a flat after I leave Hogwarts."
- "I bet you'll have wild cauldron bottom and Quidditch themed parties." Harry joked.
- "Believe it or not, we've already had one of those, last summer," Cedric said with a grin. "Who knew the girls who work in Administration at the Ministry were so kinky? Anyway," he said changing the subject, "I've got to get my 'Older Brother' thing out of the way; 'if you hurt Sue, they'll never find your body."
- Harry blinked. That had come out of nowhere. He nodded, and glanced at Hermione meaningfully. "Right back at you."
- It was Cedric's turn to be surprised; he took a step back from Harry, and then laughed at himself. "You know, before this year I would have laughed at the idea of you threatening me. However, after I saw what you did with that Horntail. I think I'll be on my best behavior."

It turned out that Susan's Aunt was attending the ball not as a family member, a bit concerned that her niece had for some reason chosen to associate with a known trouble-magnet like Harry, (though that was at least part of the reason) but rather because she was standing in for Barty Crouch as the representative for the Ministry. Over dinner, Madam Bones told an amusing story about how for a short period Percy Weasley was actually supposed to represent the Ministry at this function, standing in for his boss. Then someone in the Ministry's Protocol Office realized what an insult it would be to the participant schools to have the Ministry represented by someone only a year out of school himself.

- The meal was over soon enough and the four champions took to the dance floor for the opening dance.
- As nervous as he had been while heading out to the floor, Harry had to admit to himself that having Susan in his arms and moving to music most specifically did not suck. He hoped that she was having fun as well.
- "Am I staying off your toes?" he said hopefully after an hour of dancing.
- "You're doing fine Harry" she awarded him with one of her dazzling smiles. "I'm having a wonderful time, and you're a big part of that."
- For no reason he could identify, that made Harry feel very good. A large smile spread across his face as the music ended. The pair broke apart and joined the rest of the dancers in applauding the band.
- When the next song started, Susan wrapped herself around Harry's right arm and led him to their table. "I hate that song, let's get something to drink."
- Behind them, there was a sudden splash sound, followed by an ear-splitting screech. Pushing Susan behind him, Harry spun into a crouched and ready position with his wand out. He found himself staring at Fleur Delacour drenched in some kind of sticky crimson fluid and covered in some foul smelling... rope like somethings. Past the French champion stood Draco Malfoy, levitating some sort of metal container and a look of shock on his face.
- After a few heart beats, Malfoy's shock dissolved into laughter.
- At hearing that laughter, the French girl's cries of horror became a roar of fury, and some very strange things began to happen.
- "Oh Merlin," Susan whispered into Harry's ear. "Veela really do transform when angry..."

The castle's elves had the mess cleaned up in minutes, but the attack on Fleur put a real damper on the party, and the result of her response to Malfoy put the fear of Veela into all of the witnesses. Most of the Beauxbaton's contingent had left with their still raging though once again human formed champion and Headmistress. The students from Durmstrang and Hogwarts tried to keep the party going for a while, but individuals slowly started drifting away to prepare for leaving for the holiday the next morning.

Harry himself was torn between sympathy for Fleur's humiliation and hysterical amusement for what she had done to Malfoy. He decided that he was going to have to buy the French girl a Christmas gift for her trouble.

- "The party is breaking up," Amelia Bones said as she approached their table. "I think I'll be leaving so that I can go to the ministry to deal with the fallout of the Malfoy boy's actions. I'll be seeing you tomorrow Susan?"
- "Yes, Auntie," the redhead said, rising from her seat to hug her aunt. "I hope there isn't much trouble and you don't end up working too late."
- "I'll be alright, though Lucius Malfoy will be explaining his son's actions. Of that, I have no doubt. Good night Mr. Potter, and don't think I didn't see you place yourself between Susan and possible danger. Thank you for that."
- Harry had no idea what to say to that, so his blush was his only answer as Amelia exited the Great Hall.
- "Hey, Harry," Cedric called.
- The raven-haired boy looked up to the Hufflepuff. "Yeah?"
- "Come over here a second. Hermione and Sue can amuse themselves for a few moments."
- Harry looked between his best friend and his... girlfriend? The pair shrugged at his unasked question, so he crossed to where the older boy stood.
- "Harry," Cedric said in a low voice. "Have you figured out the clue in your egg yet?"
- "No," Harry admitted. "So far all I've managed is to annoy everyone in the common room by opening it."
- Cedric nodded. "I know what you mean. You know, it occurs to me that I never thanked you for your warning about the dragons."
- Harry shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Telling you was just the decent thing to do, anyone would have done the same."
- "Maybe so, but you're the only one who did. Viktor and Fleur both knew, that much was obvious, but neither of them as much as whispered a warning. Looking back on it, I figured out my egg when I got away from other people and just focused on the egg itself."
- "I suppose I could try using an empty classroom," Harry said thoughtfully, "but the noise is like to bring the whole castle running."
- "Maybe you should try some other place. Somewhere quiet and soundproofed... like maybe the Prefect's bath. You could take a bath and relax, unwind a bit, and use the time to give your egg your full attention."
- "Take a bath?" Harry asked, wondering just what Cedric might be suggesting... surely not... The Hufflepuff was dating Hermione; surely, he wouldn't be...
- "Believe me Harry, take your egg to the bath and everything will be much clearer..." Cedric turned back to the two girls who were pretending not to be listening. "I think I'd best get Susan back to our dorms, can I trust you to escort Hermione back Harry?"

In a private suite at St. Mungo's, Lucius Malfoy stood at the foot of the bed that supported his son's burnt and broken body. "And what," the head of House Malfoy asked, "made you think that dumping pig blood and entrails on the French champion was a good idea? And in front of Amelia Bones no less?"

- "It wud thuposed tuh be Pottah!" Draco ground out around his immobilized jaw. "He muved!"
- "So, Potter moved did he? How unexpected." Lucius said through clenched teeth and he gripped the rails of the hospital bed to keep from strangling his only son. "Who would have ever expected someone to be moving on a dance floor?"
- "Fathuh! Id wad a mithake!" Draco declared, wondering if his hair was going to grow back. "How will da Veewa be punished foah attacking me?"
- Before Draco could blink, Lucius' wand was in his hand. "Pater Detegit" the man called out with a complex wand movement. The tall blond man paused to read the glowing name that blossomed over his wand. Draco blinked through the pain to make out the letters. Y... O... F... L... A... M... S... U... I... C... U... L... what did that mean?
- "Damn it!" Lucius cursed, before calming himself enough to continue. "Let's think about your question, shall we Draco? You dumped several gallons of pig's blood and rotting entrails on the French girl, you stood there with your wand in your hand, still levitating the trough, once you saw what you did, you laughed..." Lucius' anger was getting the best of him again. He took several deep breathes to calm himself. "And... And you did all of this directly in front of Amelia Bones, the Director of Magical Law Enforcement."

- "Tho she cahn do this to me an' get awah wif it?"
- "Draco, after what you did, she could have killed you and probably been applauded for it. What were you thinking son?"
- "Damn Pottah!"

Lucius shook his head. "Draco, Potter went toe to toe with a dragon and won. What makes you think that if you had done what you did to the French girl to him and the niece of the Director of Magical Law Enforcement, the end result would have been any different?"

"Buh Fathuh!"

"But nothing. You were a fool. You were not cunning, you were not covert, and you stood in front of the entire school and were spectacularly stupid. You paid for your stupidity. It took all of my political capital to keep you from being expelled, passing your actions off as that of a confused young man showing off for a pretty girl." Lucius paused shaking his head in disappointment, "I am ashamed of you Draco, and your actions betray your heritage every time you have anything to do with the Potter boy. I want you to stay away from him. When you return to school, just stay in your common room, and stay out of trouble!"

"Buh Fathuh!"

Lucius spun to face his son and cast "Pater Detegit" once again. Once again, the glowing letters formed the same name before the man's eyes.

"Damn it!" Lucius cursed yet again, "Just do what you're told for once in your life boy!"

Draco watched as his father left the room. Damn Potter, this was entirely his fault! He was going to pay!

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Triwizard Tales The Rescue from the Depths.

Part Three: The Rescue from the Depths.

"Myrtle, please?"

"You don't have to ask me so politely Harry," the ghostly teenager said with a smirk. "I could stare at you all day, every day."

"Lovely," Potter noted, wondering if this was how Susan and Daphne Greengrass felt when every perv in the castle stared at them. He returned to the issue at hand, that being Cedric's rather cryptic suggestion that he take a bath with his egg. Harry leaned back in the scented water and reached for the magical construct. It seemed a pity to spoil the wonderful silence of the Prefect's bath with the screeching horror that escaped whenever he opened the egg, but there was nothing else for it. Harry began fumbling with the latch, his hands slippery.

"The other one held the egg under the water," Myrtle said in an uncharacteristic bout of helpfulness.

Harry considered that for a moment, wondering if water would damage the egg and its clue. Then deciding that he did not know enough to guess what might happen, he held the egg under the water and opened it. He was immediately rewarded with an unintelligible murmur coming from beneath the water.

That was... odd. Well, at least the water muffled the screeching so that it was no longer painful.

"The other one stuck his head beneath the water," the ghost said helpfully. "His bum stuck out of the water when he did." she giggled.

Harry sighed to himself and tried to ignore the pervy ghost. Drawing a deep breath, he ducked his head beneath the water. Immediately his consciousness was filled with singing.

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 took, But past an hour - the prospect's black Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.

Harry surfaced and wiped the water and soapsuds from his eyes, while trying to ignore Myrtle's giggling as he pondered what he had heard. That little song was not ominous at all. Something he valued was going to be taken from him and he had an hour to find it. That much was clear at least. If he did not find it in that hour, then it was gone, evidently forever.

Harry tried to think of things that he would miss enough to really care about... He would miss his wand certainly, the same for his Firebolt, and then there was the photo album with pictures of his parents that Hagrid had made for him first year. Beyond those items, there were not too many things he was particularly attached to. Logically, it had to be one of those things.

That thought gave Harry pause. Was it a good idea to try and think logically about a magical competition?

Where would whatever was to be taken be hidden? "Come seek us where our voices sound," the singers had said... "We cannot sing above the ground,"

Ok, look where the singers are... they could not sing above the ground...

Where their voices sound... He had to submerge the egg under water, and be underwater himself to understand it... Underwater! Something he valued was going to be hidden underwater? In the Black Lake perhaps? Would the Squid have it?

"Fuck!" Harry exclaimed as he closed the egg and lay in on the floor outside the giant tub. "I can't swim."

"Purhups Ah cahn ahsistah in thaht."

Harry sat bolt upright in the tub shocked to see a scaly head rising from the sudsy water, a pair of eyes with huge black irises stared at him unblinkingly. Harry's mind raced. His wand was with his clothing on the other side of the room.

"Be aht eahse hoomahn," the... watery voice said through the water, those unblinking eyes focused on him. "Hyou are Hahrry Pahtah?"

The being's voice sounded remarkably like someone speaking while gargling, which Harry supposed was exactly what it was doing. "I am,"

Harry admitted.

A scaly arm shot from under the surface of the water. A scaly hand wrapped webbed fingers around Harry's neck and pulled his head under. "I am Clahcktahnk of the WahahahsTokkah," the being paused while observing Harry's expression indicating a total lack of comprehension, and perhaps more than a little panic. "Your people call us the Merfolk."

The being released Harry's head and he pushed himself to the surface so that he could breathe. Wiping the water and suds from his eyes, Harry immediately looked to the animated mermaid in the stained glass window, who was currently blowing him a kiss.

"Merfolk?" He whispered incredulously.

Again, his head was pulled beneath the surface of the water. "Yes, I know of the silly way your people have portrayed us, but we are in no way part mammal."

"What can I do for you Clahcktahnk?" Harry asked after he surfaced again, sure that he was mangling the pronunciation of the unfamiliar name while wondering how the hell a mercreature had gotten into his bath. To preclude another dunking he stuck his head under the water under his own power.

"To the point then," the being nodded in a manner that Harry hoped was approvingly, "We of the WahahahsTokkah know of your dealings with the dragons," the scaly being produced something that looked to be something like a magazine, but it appeared to be waterproof, and there was a picture of a horntail on it. Was that... Kiska? "Your next task will be in our realm, and we want in."

"So, if I get you what you want, you'll help me?"

The mercreature nodded again.

"What do you want?" Harry asked, dreading the answer.

Once again, the scaled arm shot from the water and pulled him under. "Only the rarest of treasures," the mercreature said before it explained in detail what it wanted.

Harry surfaced, sucking in the wonderful air while considering Clahcktahnk's words and nodding to himself. He could do this.

All three School heads, Ludo Bagman and Amelia Bones sat staring at the fourth slip of parchment that was still smoking from having been ejected out of the Goblet of Fire in preparation for the Second Task.

Amelia reached out hesitantly and picked up the offending scrap of parchment. "I can't say I expected that," she rubbed her thumb over the name as if she expected it to rub off. "Can we allow this?"

"Can we not?" Albus asked. "The magic of the Goblet has spoken. We cannot stand in its way anymore than we could when young Harry was chosen."

"I'm no expert," Ludo added, "but I expect that the penalties associated with the tournament would extend to this task."

"I want to go on record as saying that this entire task is ill conceived," Amelia said. "If I had been involved in the planning, I never would have allowed this."

"Because your niece is involved with Potter..."

"Karkaroff, perhaps you've forgotten what I was doing fifteen years ago, but I haven't forgotten what you were doing," Amelia said dangerously.

"Every time you open your mouth, I feel more and more like I should be examining the evidence against you for crimes your pardon didn't cover."

"You forget yourself Madam!" The Headmaster of Durmstrang spat.

"Please?" Albus asked, "Can we have a single meeting without the threat of some among us coming to blows?"

"I agree," Olympe interjected, fighting to hide her grin. "This point is moot. The task is set, the participants are chosen. We can do nothing but wait for the day and see how well our champions do."

Harry approached the lake where the rest of the champions had gathered. He was running a bit late, but that was unavoidable. Sirius' gift, it turned out, was a major pain to put on, and ten minutes before he was supposed to be at the lake had been a bad time to figure that out.

Still he was ready. Beside his new outfit, Sirius and Remus had come through in spades. Harry's one regret was that he had not been able to test any of the gear beforehand.

Having never doubted that Sirius would help him, Harry was at first hesitant to approach Remus. After all the man had been one of his

professors, and while Remus' time at Hogwarts had not shown him to be a stickler for the rules, he had still been a teacher. As it turned out that Harry had been worrying about nothing. The prankster side of the unfortunate werewolf found Harry's plan to be hilarious and Remus made several suggestions that improved his original scheme.

- Both of the Marauders agreed with the dragon, Harry did not understand showmanship, but he was willing to learn.
- Cedric and Viktor stood, waiting for the signal to start, already in their swimsuits, clapping their arms around themselves in the February cold. Fleur stood a bit apart from the others still bundled in her robes.
- Harry approached the two men a bit out of breath from rushing, to catch his breath, he leaned forward, with both hands upon his knees.
- "Alright there Harry?" Cedric asked.
- "Yeah," Harry responded as he stood upright, shrugging out of his robes since the others were out of theirs. Cedric's eyes bugged out.
- "What the hell you wearing?" Viktor asked incredulously.
- "This?" Harry asked with a grin while pulling the gloves onto his hands, "it's called a 'Dry Suit'. Muggles make them for going into cold water."
- Viktor raised an eyebrow,
- "What?" Harry asked. "I can't swim, I had to do something."
- "I wish I had thought of such a thing," Fleur said joining the conversation.
- "And it's just a coincidence that you're in Gryffindor colors?" Cedric snarked.
- "Oh, am I?" Harry asked innocently.
- "We three," Viktor said shaking his head, "we adults, we experienced. We freezing like fools while young Harry warm and comfortable."
- "Well, thanks Viktor, but I wouldn't go as far as comfortable," Harry said. "I still can't swim; the suit isn't going to help with that."
- "Oh yes," Fleur said sarcastically, "you fought and defeated your dragon, so we are supposed to believe that you are simply going to sit on the shore? I made the mistake of thinking you were a 'leetle boy' once, never again."
- "Well... yeah, I guess I've got some ideas," Harry admitted. "But something is bothering me. We're all decked out to go into the water so we all solved the egg, but I haven't figured out what they might have taken. I checked all the things that I would miss and none of it is missing. I have no idea what we're supposed to be after."
- Both Fleur and Viktor shrugged, but Cedric looked concerned. "I don't think it's a thing we're after; I think it's a person. I haven't seen Hermione anywhere today, and even if she wasn't going to be here for me, she would certainly be here for you."
- Harry paled as the implications of that thought sunk in. Where was Susan? He looked to the lake... surely not. Harry shot a glare at the judges table, where all of the arrogant prats, including Susan's aunt were sitting surrounded by comfortable warming charms. If a single hair of either Susan's or Hermione's head were harmed...
- Ludo Bagman was now moving among the champions, spacing them along the bank at intervals of ten feet. Harry was on the very end of the line, next to Viktor, who was now holding his wand at the ready.
- "All right, Harry?" Bagman whispered as he moved Harry to his position. "Know what you're going to do?"
- "Yeah," Harry nodded.
- Bagman returned Harry's nod and returned to the judges' table; he pointed his wand at his throat and said, "Sonorus!" and his voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.
- "Well, all our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely one hour to recover the treasure that has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One... two... three!"
- The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause; without looking to see what the other champions were doing, Harry pulled the hood of the dry suit over his head and from the pouch on his belt, he produced a shrunken boat that he tossed into the lake. Upon touching the water, the boat expanded to its full size.
- Harry climbed into the boat and used his wand to raise the sail, and then with a flick, cast the wind charm that pushed him away from the shore and out into the middle of the lake.
- It was only then he heard the noise from the crowd. There was an even mixture of cheers and laughter and boos, from those who felt his use of tools was cheating.
- That was OK, Harry decided; he had not wanted to play this stupid game in the first place. His little boat moved cleanly through the water to the middle of the lake, and the boat suddenly stopped dead in the water. That was his signal.
- He lowered his mast, and then enlarged the last three of his boxes and started to follow Remus' directions. Once the box to the front of the boat

was secured, and he had just finished tying down the box designated for the rear a voice interrupted his toil.

"Where is Draco, Potter?"

Well, crap, Harry thought as he looked up to find Vinnie Crabbe and Greg Goyle on school brooms, both of them struggling to maintain a consistent hover maneuver, and failing rather badly, directly over his little boat.

"How should I know where your idiot boss is?" Harry asked. "Get out of here, you're in my way."

From the distance, Bagman's amplified voice called out in outrage at the presence of the pair over the lake.

"Draco was saying he was going to be out here to see you lose Potter," Crabbe continued. "Draco told us that his father said that you were supposed to be pulling your girlfriend out of the lake, and Draco wanted to be here to see the Bones bird's body pulled out of the water after you fail and she dies."

"Yeah? Well fuck you two and Draco as well," Harry said as he pulled the welder's mask from the rearmost box, pulled it on over his face, and triggered Remus' contribution to his plan.

As Cedric Diggory moved through the water using powerful strokes, his bubblehead and warming charms firmly in place, he wondered how he was supposed to find anything in the vast expanse of the Black Lake.

A few grindylows scuttled about in the waterweeds that lined the bottom of the lake, so Cedric concentrated on staying above the aquatic forest, but those same plants obscured his view of the lake bottom. Was Hermione down here, somewhere?

If she got hurt, he would never forgive himself.

Then, without warning, to his left was a burst of light, blinding even through the water. The light burned bright, not dimming in the slightest until several seconds after it started it faded away to nothing, returning Cedric to the murky darkness of the Black Lake.

What the hell was that? He wondered. One of the others was casting... something? Potter, it had to be Potter. After the show the boy had put on with the dragon, Cedric had no doubt in the slightest. Blinking the spots from his eyes he turned to the direction the light had come from.

If nothing else, this should be interesting.

Viktor Krum fought against the alien instincts to hunt and maintained his search pattern.

The partial self-transfiguration hurt like hell, but he had evaluated it as his best chance in the lake. The professional athlete was no stranger to pain.

The strange field of vision was difficult to deal with, but he was learning. His gills worked effortlessly so that was good. Unlike Diggory and Delacour he had no time limit on his ability to breathe underwater, where they would each need to reapply their bubblehead charms twice if this task ran for its full hour. And Potter... Potter... Potter claimed not to be able to swim... which should have counted him out of this task, but the boy did not seem to be rolling over. As Viktor had entered the water, he had seen Potter enlarge a shrunken boat.

What was the boy up to?

The lake flooded with a blinding light that sustained for several seconds. The shark instincts tried to get Viktor to flee from the area, but no. This had to be Potter's work. Viktor just had to see what the boy was doing. He turned and kicked into the direction of the light.

She cut through the water with the grace she showed in everything she did. Fleur Delacour was a most focused witch.

Embarrassed by her fourth place standing after the dragon task, and infuriated by the prank played on her by the Malfoy whelp, Fleur was a young woman with something to prove.

Her plan was simple. She would head to the center of the lake and explore the bottom. Her readings on the merfolk suggested that they preferred deep water and isolation from other sentients, so given that there was a giant squid frequenting the shallows of this lake, which made the most likely place for a village to be the center of the lake.

She was perhaps halfway there when the lake lit up with the light of the sun.

From the judges table the sight of Harry making his way to the center of the lake in the small boat sparked some amusement.

- "Does the boy think he's going to go fishing out there?" Karkaroff asked with a laugh.
- "I heard him tell the others that he couldn't swim," Bagman said, all the while wishing to himself that he had not bet so much on the boy placing in this task.
- "He should have just stayed on the shore and conceded," Olympe suggested. "Potter may have gotten lucky against the Horntail, but in this competition he has to have more than just raw power. He would also need to have skill."
- "He was certainly skilled enough against that dragon, Olympe," Amelia noted. "I wouldn't fancy my chances against one, how about you?"
- "I am sure," Albus broke in trying yet again to head off the inevitable confrontation that came about any time these individuals came together, "that Harry has a plan."
- "Who is that out there?" Bagman asked raising his Omnioculars to his eyes. "There are two Hogwarts students over the lake on brooms."
- Albus raised his own Omnis to his eyes as Bagman incanted 'Sonorus' and began to shout. There were two boys wearing Slytherin robes hovering over Harry's small boat. Wonderful, the old man mused to himself. What else could go wrong this year? Harry was doing something on his small boat, seemingly ignoring the Slytherins. There was a small flare of light from the boat, and Albus dropped his Omnis in surprise, only to discover that in doing so, he may have saved his sight.
- A shaft of intense light rose from the surface of the lake like a solid column until it reached the cloud deck, where it feathered against the low February clouds. Albus shielded his eyes and wondered what the hell had the boy done this time?

- As soon as Remus' light show died, Harry pulled the welder's mask from his face and moved to the center of the boat.
- "We haf yor treashor!" Clahcktahnk called out as he surfaced next to the boat. "Evan prpaared, your light almast blinded us."
- "Sorry," Harry said as he reached over the side to assist, pulling a sopping wet Susan Bones from the icy water. As soon as the girl's head broke the surface she drew a deep ragged breath and started to regain consciousness.
- "Bastards," Harry grumbled as he pulled the shivering girl into his arms trying to warm her.
- "H'rry?" Sue mumbled.
- "Yu haf yor treashor," Clahcktahnk rasped in the air, "wut of ouras?"
- "Sorry," Harry repeated as he used his wand to tip the center box into the water. "You asked for a case, I got you a pallet. If you need more, contact me."
- The leader of the mercreatures nodded. "Wot uf those two?" he asked as he gestured toward the stunned forms of Crabbe and Goyle being held above the water by a pair of submerged mercreatures.
- "I've got no room in the boat, could your people get them to shore?" Harry asked hopefully, guessing that his light show had knocked the pair off their brooms.
- "Uf course... Our tanks Hahrry Pahtah." the Mercreature said as it submerged.
- "What happened?" Susan asked her teeth chattering, "How did I get so wet? So cold?"
- "The bastards used you as the thing I'd miss the most," Harry said apologetically as he cast warming charms all over the girl. "I'm sorry."
- "You paid the merfolk?"
- "Well, I can't swim." Harry said as he raised the mast and sail of the small boat. "It was the only thing I could do," he admitted as he settled down next to the girl and pulled her close to share his body heat as best he could while casting the wind charm to return them to the shore and medical attention.
- "What was I worth?" she asked, her teeth chattering in the cold.
- "Everything I've got," Harry admitted before realizing what he had said. Hoping she had not heard him, he continued. "They wanted peanut butter."
- "Peanut butter?"
- "Yeah, the crunchy kind. They call it the rarest of delicacies. I got them a whole pallet."
- "Oh," Susan said as she cuddled into him, wondering just what peanut butter might be.

Fleur arrived at the source of the light and found a small village made up of stone structures on the lake bottom; the structures were dotted here and there by dark windows, the occasional face appearing through those windows as Fleur continued on her way to the village center.

Soon the dwellings became more numerous; there were gardens of waterweed around some of them, and she even saw what appeared to be a pet grindylow tethered to a stake outside one door. Mercreatures were emerging on all sides now, watching her eagerly, pointing at her as she swam by. Fleur turned a corner and a very strange sight met her eyes.

A whole crowd of mercreatures were floating in front of the houses that lined what looked like an underwater version of a village square. A choir of the beings was singing in the middle of the open square, calling the champions toward them and behind them rose a huge statue; a gigantic mercreature roughly sculpted from a boulder.

And tied to the tail of the statue were three people.

Fleur recognized the Hogwarts student who had accompanied Viktor to the ball; she smiled to herself inside her bubblehead charm. The Bulgarian was such a boy. Next to the Chang girl was the mousy, bushy-haired girl who had accompanied Cedric... but she was one of Harry's confidantes was she not? No, she was the one that Cedric would miss most. The last was her own hostage. The one they thought she would miss most. She almost laughed.

All three of them appeared to be in a very deep sleep. Their heads were lolling onto their shoulders, and fine streams of bubbles continuously issuing from their mouths. Only three. That means that she had been beaten to the village, likely by Harry Potter.

She was not going to win this one, but that was fine. Ever since Olympe had let slip who her hostage was, winning this one was not really her objective. It would have been nice to beat that damned child to the prize, but it was not her real goal.

Fleur made her was toward the bound captives, half expecting the mercreatures to block her advance, but they did nothing. The ropes of weed tying the hostages to the statue were thick, slimy, and very strong. Not for the first time, the French Witch was pleased that she had heeded her mother's admonition to never go anywhere without a blade within easy access. She reached for the charmed knife she had strapped to her left thigh.

Fleur checked each of the hostages in turn. As far as she could tell, they were fine, so she passed down the line to her hostage. She gathered a handful of the slick fibers and slowly sawed her knife back and forth, making sure the enchanted blade had time to work its magic until the strands parted. She then turned and began retracing her path out of the village.

A seven-foot-tall mercreature with a long green beard and a necklace of what appeared to be sharks teeth tried to block her exit. Your Hostage..." he said in a harsh, croaky voice.

Fleur laughed and shook her head inside of her bubblehead charm. "I have what I came for." She pushed past him on her way to the shore.

Cedric was the next into the village, making his way to the remaining hostages. Cho still floated unconscious, her hair fanning from her head like a halo... she must be here for Viktor... probably... Next to Cho was Hermione... his hostage? Or perhaps Harry's? He spent a moment wondering who was ahead of him.

Finally, Cedric decided that it did not matter and he started trying to cast cutters on the weeds restraining Hermione.

There was a movement he caught out of the corner of his eye and he turned in time to see an enormous shark bite through the restraints holding Cho and then on a second pass gather the unconscious girl in its mouth and swim off... then he saw that rather than a tail, the shark had human legs.

Viktor. Inside his bubblehead charm, Cedric breathed a sigh of relief before he realized that he was now behind the Bulgarian in the race for second place. The weeds parted with his next cutter, so he grasped Hermione's robes with his left hand and began the long swim back to the shore.

Viktor did what he considered to be a rather impressive turn flip to catch Cho after freeing her from her restraints and made his best speed back to the shore, more than a little surprised. One of the gifts of the Shark transfiguration was an amazing sense of smell while in the water. On top of Cedric Diggory's scent, the water was rife with the scent of Fleur, so after passing Cedric that put him in second place. He didn't like second place, he never had.

Where was Potter? He wondered while he passed through the last of the stone structures. He had been positive that the light flare had been Potter's doing, yet there was no hint of the boy's scent in the water. A flash of bright color caught his eye. Viktor paused for a moment to investigate the unexpected bit of red in the village of stone and green weed. It was a merchild, playing with some kind of crockery that had a blue lid sealing the top... and the label was in English...

Viktor returned to his long swim to the shore with a pair of thoughts burning in his mind. The first being, **do not bite down**, and the second, **how very odd**. He would have to remember to ask Cedric just what 'Jif' might be...

- Harry ignored the assembled crowd as he half-led, half-carried Susan to Madam Pomfrey and her medical tent.
- "What are you wearing Mr. Potter?" the school Healer asked incredulously.
- "It doesn't matter, I'm fine, I never even got into the water," Harry answered. "It's Susan that needs you, she's nearly frozen. There are three more hostages out there slowly freezing to death, and the other three champions are in normal swimwear. They're going to need you as well."
- Pomfrey pushed Susan onto one of the waiting beds muttering about insane old men and their stupid contests when a cheer went up from the crowd. It must be the next champion to arrive.
- "Harry," Susan said through chattering teeth. "You should go out there; you should be with the others when they come out of the water."
- "I'm not leaving you Susan,"
- "I believe Miss Bones is correct Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said quietly. "I was going to ask you to leave anyway, as I have to get Miss Bones out of her wet clothing to get her warmed up."
- Harry's mind blanked for a moment when the image of what he imagined a naked Susan might look like flashed through his mind, and then a blush spread across his features. "I'll be going outside then," he said edging toward the door.
- "Make sure the others come directly here," Madam Pomfrey called as she closed the curtain around Susan's bed.
- Harry stood outside the Healer's tent for a moment, the image of a naked Susan still consuming the majority of his attention, and then shaking his head, he made his way through the crowd to the shore of the Black Lake. He arrived in time to see Fleur stop swimming and stand up to begin wading ashore. Harry glanced around and spotted the robes that Fleur had removed prior to going into the water. He picked them up and carried the robes to the shoreline.
- "You beat me," Fleur observed as she emerged from the water and wrapped her robes around herself. "So the light, that was you?"
- "Um... yeah," Harry admitted feeling a bit guilty for how he had won, "sorry about that."
- "Do not apologize, Harry Potter. This contest is about winning, and you are doing just that," She smiled. "Viktor and Cedric will be embarrassed."
- "Fleur..." Harry hesitated, "your hostage... didn't you find him? Or Her?"
- "Oh, I found him," she answered with a wide smile. "I just didn't need him. Raising her left fist, she showed the shock of fine white strands it was clutching. "I have what I would miss most right here in my hand."
- Harry's brow furrowed, was that... hair? Fine white-blond hair? What was the French girl telling him?
- A sudden splashing out on the lake interrupted their conversation. Perhaps twenty yards away a thrashing form surfaced, throwing itself back and forth as it became apparent that Viktor had returned and was reversing the partial transformation back to a fully human form. Victor stooped to lift Cho Chang from the water, and as soon as her face was exposed to the air, the enchantment over the girl broke and she began to breathe with an all too familiar start.
- Before Viktor could take his first step toward the shore, Cedric surfaced beside him with Hermione Granger in his arms. The two young men looked at each other, then at the coughing shivering women in their arms, and then at their two fellow champions standing on the shore waiting for them. Viktor issued an odd bark-like laugh, while Cedric moved to bump shoulders with the Bulgarian, then as one the pair made their way to shore.
- Harry and Fleur were waiting with conjured blankets. "Madam Pomfrey wants everyone to the Healer's tent," Harry said as soon as everyone was on the shore.
- "Good idea," Viktor agreed, "I will never be warm again."
- "Wait!" Dumbledore called from the Judge's table. "Miss Delacour, where is your hostage?"
- "Hostage?" Fleur asked innocently, "what hostage?"
- "The hostage you were tasked to rescue."
- "I'm not sure what you are talking about, Headmaster Dumbledore," Fleur responded in a confused tone, "we were tasked with retrieving something that we would sorely miss... when I arrived at the underwater village I found two young girls, whom I had met socially once or twice and an insignificant nothing whom I despise. There was certainly no person down there I would sorely miss."
- "So you just left Draco Malfoy down there in the dark?" the old man asked incredulously.
- "Well, I certainly wasn't the one who put him 'down there in the dark', as you put it, but no, I didn't leave all of him."
- "What?" Dumbledore asked, horrified at what that statement might mean.
- "It occurred to me that what I would truly sorely miss would be the opportunity to torture the horrible little insect, so I took advantage of the situation and took a souvenir..." Fleur lifted her left hand and allowed the shock of white blond hair to flutter away in the cold wind, strand by

strand. "If you will excuse us, Headmaster Dumbledore, it is very cold and we are very wet."

The French girl turned and imperiously walked away toward the Healer's tent. The three male champions hesitated for a moment, then looked at each other, shrugged, and followed her.

Harry spent the several seconds of silence that passed between the champions by struggling not to laugh at the mental image of a scalped Draco Malfoy, until Viktor Krum broke the silence between them.

"Remind me," he said shaking his head, "to never, ever, make Fleur angry with me."

Clahcktahnk of the WahahahsTokkah carefully equalized his swim bladder so that he could lounge comfortable among his favorite stand of Canadian Pondweed. Using one of his clan's ancestral spells, left over from that horrible time when his people fought a long and ultimately pointless war against the Veela clans, he created a small bubble, approximately the size of a human head. This bubble tethered to his wrist by a simple linking charm.

The knowledge of the fact that his people were the origin of the human's 'bubble head charm' amused Clahcktahnk to no end. Inside his bubble, he carefully suspended one of the jars he had received from the Potter human. The food of the gods could be exposed to water with no real harm, but doing so would limit the storage life of the wondrous mixture drastically. Therefore, unless the entire jar was to be consumed in a single floating, his people only opened the jar inside one of the chained air bubbles.

As he brought a three-fingered scoop of the heavenly mixture to his mouth, Clahcktahnk reflected that his decision to approach the Potter human had turned out to be a good one. His popularity among his people, having delivered to them so much of this almost unattainable delicacy, had risen like a bloated fish. Life was, he admitted to himself as he worked to dislodge a mass of peanut butter from the roof of his mouth, good.

He raised a scaled brow ridge when he noticed a human being lowered nearly on top of him. Carefully securing the tether of the bubble to a convenient rock, he moved to situate himself in an upright attitude to reflect that of an air breather, he took in his visitor. The human was encased in a large full body suit of material similar to that Clahcktahnk recalled from the sails of human ships. Heavy metal covering shod the visitor's feet, and a heavy metal sphere enclosed the human's head, with small windows on the front and sides so that presumably the human could look out of the sphere. Heavy lines extended from the visitor disappearing toward the surface leading the way for the bubbles that issued from the helmet in a constant stream.

The appearance of the visitor seemed somewhat familiar... it was not until he recalled stories told by some visiting saltwater cousins that Clahcktahnk made the association. This was a human diving suit. How very odd.

Xeno Lovegood nodded to himself as he reached the lake bottom and found the leader of the Merfolk waiting for him. As usual, his sources were perfectly accurate. This was the place that the Mer-chieftain went to relax from his duties.

"Good Morning," Xeno called, offering his best approximation of the tail-wag greeting of the Merfolk. This was somewhat hampered by the bulk of his diving suit and by his generalized lack of a tail. "I am Xeno Lovegood, Owner, Publisher, Crusading Editor and Chief Reporter for the Quibbler, News of the Magical World, the Gringotts' Financial Review, The Daily Web, The Dark Lord's Daily Planner, Riddle Me This, and the Beano. I am here to investigate the charges of collusion between the Merfolk and the Boy Who Lived."

Outside the diving suit, Clahcktahnk heard only an unintelligible muffled drone. "What?" he asked. "What do you want?"

Xeno could clearly see that the Mer-Chieftain was speaking, but he could not hear a thing over the sound of the air hissing into his helmet. "What was that?" he asked. "I can't hear you."

"What?" Clahcktahnk responded.

This exchange went on for slightly less than two hours.

Clahcktahnk surfaced at the edge of the lake, wondering, not for the first time, just why he was bothering. After the day before and his long exposure to the insane air breather he had almost forbid all interaction with the surface world, but then a rather intriguing note came drifting down attached to a most fetching stone.

There on the edge of the shore stood the human he suspected of being the man in the diving suit. Now however rather than a heavy diving suit that smelled and tasted of canvas, metal and rubber, the human now had a black body stocking stretched over his ample frame with a black beret perched atop the man's furless head.

"Ah ahm hyer hoomahn,"

"Oh good!" an unexpected voice chirped in an oddly cheery way. A smaller human with long yellowish fur sprouting from its head appeared from behind the man. A young female if Clahcktahnk was any judge, she was also dressed in a black body stocking and beret. "After how badly Daddy got on with you yesterday I wasn't sure you would come."

"Yass, ahm ahm hyere now..."

"So," the small human continued as if Clahcktahnk had never spoken, "we much begin our conference in the only way known to magical kind that ensures communication between different cultures, and indeed different species."

"Bhut Ah spek yor Engliss!" Clahcktahnk insisted.

"No," yellow fur declared. "The time for words is past. To ensure complete understanding we must depend on that most expressive of all the arts. I am speaking of course, of interpretive dance!"

From no apparent source, music filled the air and the pair of humans in black began to cavort in the oddest of ways. It was, Clahcktahnk mused, like a shipwreck. He did not want to see it, but somehow he just could not look away.

The dancing went on for 90 minutes before Yellow Fur declared an intermission, and appeared only seconds later with some sort of tray strapped around her neck, hanging to her waist. From this box, she sold Clahcktahnk something called an 'ice lolly' that turned out to be surprisingly tasty. Clahcktahnk surprised himself by discovering that he was really looking forward to the second act, and wondering about the possibility of obtaining season tickets.

Crouch finished writing his main points for the lesson on the chalkboard and turned to find his classroom of seventh years studiously scribbling their notes of his lesson.

It was odd, the Death Eater thought, how satisfying teaching was, and it seemed that he was actually good at it. Who knew? There was something... fulfilling about having a room full of students hanging onto his every word.

Even his newest nemesis, the young Hope Gwinn was busily working on her notes instead of gazing at him in abject devotion.

This quiet period gave him a chance to contemplate, not for the first time, his assigned target. Crouch had been tasked by the Dark Lord himself to shepherd Potter through the tournament, ensuring that the boy did well enough to make it to and win the third task, so that the waiting trap could deliver Potter to the Dark Lord in time for the ritual.

Crouch had hinted to Potter that flying might be the way around a dragon; instead, Potter had taken the dragon on and somehow won. That made no sense at all. Crouch had spent far too much time trying to understand how such a thing was even possible.

Then Crouch had actually sought out the Longbottom whelp and made sure the boy would have access to a book describing Gillyweed, only to have Potter display some insane level of power that had him retrieving his hostage without even entering the water.

None of it made a damned bit of sense, yet he had gotten a message from his master congratulating him on the success of his efforts.

Crouch's musings came crashing to a halt when Hope Gwinn finished her notes and looked up catching his eye. The girl blushed, and then purposefully closed both of her eyes. Barty was horrified to find the words 'I Love' and 'You' written on her eyelids.

This year could not be over soon enough.

"Calm down Draco," Narcissa Malfoy admonished her son.

"Father," Draco whined piteously, ignoring his mother while looking in his conjured mirror, "it won't grow back! They've tried dozens of potions."

Lucius sighed. The boy's hair had been the only topic of discussion for more than two hours. "Draco, the healers have assured me that your hair will grow back, eventually," the man said for perhaps the fiftieth time in the last hour. "You've got to learn some patience. I've filed a complaint with the French over the girl's actions, but there is nothing I can do about her second place finish in the task."

"Father!" the boy whined yet again, still stroking his fingers through the few strands of hair that the Veela's cursed blade had left on his head.

"In the meantime, I've had my agents scouring the world to find a way of disguising your disfigurement. This is what they found." Lucius silently congratulated himself on not mentioning that these were the best ways Bernie his office assistant had found in a local second hand shop with a budget in the range of approximately three galleons.

Draco turned away from the mirror to examine his father's offerings. When he saw his alternatives, a bit of his heart broke.

Deluded Musings FanficAuthors.net

Triwizard Tales Lost in a Maze

Part Four: Lost in a Maze.

Harry reached out to take Susan's hand as they made their way around the Black Lake. As had become their habit whenever the weather permitted it, the pair had taken to spending the weekends together out of the castle, away from prying eyes.

Despite the damned tournament, in Harry's opinion, this was turning out to be the very best year of his life. Susan seemed to actually enjoy being around him, which was a big plus. Ron, after his huge blowup with Hermione in the common room the night of the ball, had actually seemed to pull his head out of his arse and was acting like a friend again. Hermione appeared to be deliriously happy dating Cedric and Harry's fellow champions all seemed to accept him as a peer.

Yeah, he thought as Susan cuddled close to him, life had gotten pretty good.

Which was why he was not particularly surprised by what happened next. Alarmed, yes, but not surprised.

As the pair rounded a corner where the foliage would hide them from anyone on the castle grounds, Susan stopped and leaned back against what she had taken to calling her 'favorite tree'. Then with both hands, she took hold of Harry's jumper and pulled him against her body and into an open-mouthed kiss.

As it usually did when Susan took the initiative like this, Harry's brain went off line with extreme happiness. When the pair broke their kiss, some very small part of Harry noticed that the sky had suddenly gone dark, despite there not having been a cloud in the sky only moments before.

The sudden darkness was only beginning to penetrate through the dense layer of happiness that surrounded Harry's brain when something small yet massive suddenly hit him, shoving him to the ground.

- ~ Uncle Harry! ~ A cheerful childlike voice called out. ~ We found you! ~
- Harry found himself looking into a pair of cold yellow reptilian eyes. He was utterly shocked to find a miniature dragon the size of an Alsatian dog sitting on his chest wiggling in excitement.
- ~ Get off Uncle Harry, ~ another child's voice called out as another miniature dragon butted its head against the side of the one on top of him, knocking it from his body. ~ You'll break him! ~
- ~ Children, ~ a familiar voice scolded. ~ be careful. Humans are fragile. ~
- ~ Kiska? ~ Harry asked his eyes wide to see the jet-black she-dragon from the first task.
- ~ Hello again Harry Potter, ~ the dragon said with what could only be called a grin on her face. ~ You should tell your friend to calm down before she gets hurt. ~

Friend? Suddenly Harry realized whom Kiska was referring to, his eyes flicked to Susan who was still standing with back against the tree, her wand in a badly shaking hand.

- "Susan, no!" Harry shouted. "Don't, she'll hurt you. This is Kiska! The dragon from the first task."
- "Why is it here?" Susan yelped, her eyes wide with fear. "And why are the little ones swarming you?"
- That was a good question, Harry reflected. "I don't know, I'll try to find out."
- "Try to find out?" she screeched in near hysterics, "You'll try to find out?"
- ~ Is she your mate? ~ One of the smaller dragons asked in its child voice.
- ~ Ewwww! ~ Three of the others chorused.
- ~ I think it is romantic, ~ the fifth disagreed. ~ Even if she does get excited real easy. ~
- ~ Ewwww! ~ The mini dragons chorused again.
- ~ Kiska, ~ Harry called out, ~ what's going on? Why are you here? ~

- ~ The children wanted to see their Uncle Harry, ~ the she-Dragon explained calmly.
- ~ Uncle Harry? ~
- ~ Yes, they imprinted on you when you were the first living thing they saw upon hatching, ~ Kiska explained. ~ I must admit to be a little jealous, since it is usually their mother newly hatched dragons imprint on. Because of that imprinting, they will always be able to find you, and they will always know how you are. You belong to each other. ~
- ~ We love you, Uncle Harry, ~ the five dog sized dragons called out.
- Harry looked over to Susan. "Kiska says that her hatchlings imprinted on me because I was the first thing they saw after hatching. They think I'm their uncle."
- "Kiska says?" Susan sputtered. "Kiska says? Are you telling me that you can speak to dragons?"
- "Well, yeah," Harry admitted as he climbed to his feet. "It seems that dragons speak Parseltongue."
- ~ We most certainly DO NOT, ~ Kiska roared. ~ Serpents speak a bastardized version of Dragon. ~
- Harry winced at the volume of the rebuke, while noticing that Susan was even more terrified than she had been. "And Kiska understands English. It seems that dragons don't speak Snake, snakes speak Dragon."
- ~ Quite so, ~ the Dragon huffed.
- "You speak to dragons..." Susan whispered, before seeming to calm and a weak smile crossed her lips. "You didn't really fight her did you?"
- "um," Harry cringed a bit. This could not possibly be good. Hufflepuffs were famous for their love of fair play... Susan had gotten over his paying off the Merfolk easily enough, but this... "Not as such, no."
- "You made a deal with her, just like you did with the Merfolk, didn't you?" Susan asked accusingly.
- "Yes," Harry admitted. This was it. He had known all along that this relationship with Susan was too good to last, and that sooner or later she was going to wise up and tell him to get lost. It looked like that time had arrived.
- "So, we aren't in any real danger?"
- "I don't think so, not really, no."
- ~ I must be going, little wizard, ~ Kiska said, interrupting the potential breakup. ~ I shall return on the morrow, there will be the standard exchange of treasure upon my return, ~ she pronounced. ~ Ensure that my Hatchlings eat well, and only those foods that are good for them, and see to it that they are asleep by the time the moon is high tonight. ~
- Harry blinked. Wait a minute, he recognized this spiel. The words are different, but the intent was the same... he was being hired as a baby sitter?"
- ~ Kiska, wait, I don't know... ~
- ~ I'm sure that my Hatchlings will be safe with their Uncle Harry, ~ Kiska spread her wings. ~ Children, behave for Harry. ~
- ~ Yes Mum! ~ Five high pitched voices chimed.
- ~ Mum! Mum! ~ The little red dragon piped as Kiska began to take off.
- Furling her wings, she paused. ~Yes little one? ~
- ~ Our names Mum, you forgot to ask Uncle Harry about our names, ~ this speaker was the smallest of the five, colored a fire engine red where the others were all jet black in their coloring.
- ~ Oh, yes. You will need to name them, ~ the dragon said in an offhanded manner before she took to the sky, rocketed upward at an incredible speed and... vanishing in a slit second while Harry blinked. She had been there and then she wasn't.
- "What was that?" Susan asked.
- "It seems I'm babysitting tonight," Harry said with a sigh while hanging his head. "And for some reason I don't understand, I need to name them."
- "Only you, Harry," Susan said shaking her head, "only you."
- "How much trouble am I in?" Harry asked. He had always been of the 'get bad things over with and out of the way' school of thought. Maybe it would hurt less if she just told him to go to hell right away.
- "Trouble? Do you think I'm mad at you?" Susan asked taking his hand.

- ~ Are you two going to mate **now** ? ~ The little red dragon asked. ~ I mean, can't you wait until AFTER we eat? ~
- ~ Shut up! ~ One of the others hissed. ~ This is so romantic; do not spoil it by being YOU. ~
- "You're not?" Harry asked hopefully.
- "Oh Harry, I already knew you were a Parselmouth, I learned that second year, remember? I also know that you want nothing to do with this tournament." Susan pulled Harry into a hug. "You are doing what you need to do to survive this stupid game, and since one of the things you did was get me out of that damned lake, I don't mind at all. The fact that you're in first place doesn't hurt. Besides, I've looked at the rules since they chose to involve me without as much as a 'by your leave', there is nothing in there about making a deal with the opposition, so when you paid the Merfolk for their help, you didn't break a single rule. And now that I know about your being able to speak with dragons I can tell you that being able to speak to them isn't against the rules either."
- "I just don't want to disappoint you," he whispered.
- "Oh Harry, you aren't going to disappoint me," Susan laughed. "You are almost the perfect boyfriend. You're clean, you're polite, you pay attention to me, you don't try to grope me without permission, and you're terrified that I might dump you almost all the time."
- "So I'm a good boyfriend?"
- Susan smiled. "As boyfriends go, I rate you a nice solid nine."
- "Out of ten?" Harry asked smiling. "I guess I'm almost a great boyfriend then."
- "Nine, as in the number of seconds it would take me to replace you if you ever start to annoy me," Susan said taking hold of his jumper once again and planting a kiss on his lips, provoking a chorus of ~ ewww! ~ and at least one longing sigh from the dragon hatchlings.
- When she broke the kiss, Susan took his hand. "Come on Uncle Harry, we should introduce your new family to Uncle Hagrid, he'll be thrilled, then we can start thinking up names for your little entourage."

- 'Uncle' Hagrid was indeed thrilled with the appearance of the clutch of mini-dragons to the point where he began crying over his lost Norbert.
- "Yeh are one lucky man, Harry Potter!" the half giant said wiping at his eyes with a tablecloth sized handkerchief. "I only had one sweet baby dragon, an' yeh, yeh've got five!"
- ~ We aren't babies! ~ The small male hissed.
- "I'm only the baby sitter Hagrid," Harry explained ignoring the small red dragon as Susan giggled at the antics of the small creatures she had been terrified by only an hour before. "We've got to give them back."
- "I know, I know. As much as it hurts, they'll go back to their mum. So, yeh get to name the sweet darlin's do yeh? Tha"s an honor Harry, a great honor."
- ~ Names! Yes! I want to be Bloodwing... Or Reddeth, or something cool like that. ~ The small male called out. ~ Or maybe... Smaug! ~
- ~ Uncle Harry should name you something that suits you, ~ one of his sisters interjected. ~ Uncle Harry, you should name him 'FlamingFart', that would fit him perfectly. ~
- The snarky female found herself tackled by her brother, and the two went rolling about Hagrid's cabin spouting flame in every direction.
- ~ Will you two behave, please? ~ Harry hissed as he stamped out the small fires the fight had caused before returning to his seat next to Susan and his conversation with Hagrid. "Kiska said that I needed to name them, but she didn't way why."
- "I wish I could speak with the lil'I darlings as easily as yeh do," Hagrid said as he picked one of the females up and set her on her lap, stroking her dorsal spines as he did so, causing the miniature dragon to purr not unlike a cat. Unfortunately the purr was accompanied by gouts of flames that set the half giant's beard aflame, which he calmly put out by batting at the flames with his free hand, never stopping his stroking of the dragon's back for a moment. "Dragons on their own don't take names, yeh see. Humans have always named the dragons they have come in to contact with. Tha' yeh've been selected is a great honor."
- "Wow," Harry breathed. "This is a lot of responsibility; I've never needed to name anything before... well, other than Hedwig."
- "Only you, Harry," Susan laughed.
- "Oh, it's more responsibility than either of yeh know," Hagrid pointed out. "Since the lil'I darlings imprinted on yeh when they hatched Harry, yeh will be part o' their lives forever. They know how yeh are feelin', an' if they think yeh're in trouble, they will move Heaven an' Earth ter be with yeh in yer time o' need." Hagrid paused and looked about his small cabin, as if he thought that there might be eavesdroppers around. "I never told anyone, but when Fudge sent me to Azkaban yer second year, my Norbert felt my despair an' came to me to protect me. Dementors don't like dragon fire any more than any other creature. It was only 'cause o' 'im I survived as well as I did."
- "Who is Norbert?" Susan asked.

"Hagrid sort of acquired a dragon egg our first year," Harry explained. "Norbert is the dragon that hatched from that egg. Hagrid are you telling me that Norbert flew all the way from Albania?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Flew? Nah, fer long distance travel dragons have somethin' like apparition, once they are in the air, they jus' burst into flame an' are someplace else. It's sumptin' to watch, when Norbert left to return to his home I watched as he did it. Amazin'," the half giant shook himself at the memory. "But fer now the babies must be gettin' hungry."

~ We're not babies! ~ The small male insisted yet again.

Setting the female back onto the floor, Hagrid rose from his massive chair and rummaged about in a huge pantry cupboard for several moments before he emerged with a pair of headless sheep carcasses, still clad in their wool. Susan and Harry shared a look of muted horror, and not for the first time Harry had some serious concerns about Hagrid's diet.

- "This should do nicely," Hagrid rumbled as he tossed the two ewes on the floor next to the miniature dragons. Immediately the red male tackled one of the carcasses and was rolling around on the floor with it, ripping mouthfuls of flesh from the main body with great enthusiasm. His sisters, on the other hand, settled around the other ewe and began to nibble delicately on the carcass, at least when compared with their brother.
- ~ Thith id GOOD, ~ the male enthused through a mouth full of flesh. ~ Iths betta when you mak da kill yersef o course... ~
- ~ That is disgusting! ~ The female Hagrid had been stroking said with a sniff.
- ~ Uncle Harry! ~ One of her sisters called out. ~ Make him stop being so disgusting. ~
- Harry translated the exchange for Sue and Hagrid despite the shade of green Susan was turning.
- "I think I'd best head back to the castle," she said, trying not to look at the mess the small dragon was making.
- "I'll walk you back," Harry said, until she laid a hand on his chest.
- "Don't be silly," she said with a forced smile. "The fresh air will do me good." She leaned forward and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Besides," Susan whispered in his ear, "we both know that if you leave your 'babies' alone with Hagrid their mother will never get them back."
- For several long seconds after Susan had left Hagrid's cabin, Harry continued to stare at the door, only to be interrupted by Hagrid's rumbling chuckle.
- "What?"
- "It's just that watchin' you two is like watchin' yer Mum an' Da once they stopped fightin' all the time and started payin' attention to each other," the big man laughed.
- ~ Is she going to be our Auntie? ~ One of the females, the one obsessed with romance asked while delicately wiping her muzzle with a bit of the still intact fleece.
- ~ You never mind that, little Miss Romance, ~ Harry hissed before turning his attention back to his first magical friend. "And you, Hagrid, quit giving the dragons ideas."
- Once again, the half giant chuckled in the face of Harry's glare. "Right then, names fer the lil" darlin's?"
- ~ Names! ~ the small red male called out with his mouth full, looking up from inside his ewe, ~Yef! Names! ~ He then tore into the carcass once again.
- "I suppose you're right Hagrid." Harry went to his knees in front of the females. ~ Alright, Kiska said I was to name you, but what would you like to be called? ~
- One of the black miniature dragons looked askance at the question. ~ Uncle Harry! A dragon's name is given, never taken! ~ She huffed sounding for all the world like a dragonesque Hermione.
- Harry grinned widely, he was sorely tempted, but more than a little frightened by what Hermione might do if she ever found out he had named a she-dragon after her. ~ So the rules are important to you are they? ~
- The she-dragon's eyes grew large, and then she looked down shyly. ~ I just think that there are proper ways to act... ~
- ~ Well then, let's see. The Goddess Juno was the protector and special counselor of the state of Rome... Rules were important to her, I would guess, so how does the name Juno sound to you? ~
- ~ Juno? ~ she asked, a sense of wonder in her voice. ~ My name is Juno! I have a name! ~
- ~ Me next Uncle Harry? ~ One of the other females asked, her tail thumping on the floor in excitement.
- "Makes a right racket that one," Hagrid noted, "She must really want to be named."
- "She is a loud one, isn't she?" Harry laughed.

- ~ I'm sorry, ~ the dragon hissed quietly, dropping her head to focus on the floor, ~ don't mean to be loud. ~
- ~ Never apologize for being yourself; ~ Harry said stroking his hand along her dorsal spines. ~ You got your brother good when he wanted to wrestle earlier. I think 'Thumper' might be a good name for you. ~
- ~ Thumper? ~ the dragon said, as if trying the sound of the name, before she nodded. ~ I'm Thumper! ~

Harry stroked Thumper's back, and knelt down to lift the small dragon that had been so happy sitting on Hagrid's lap to his own. He smiled as she attempted to cuddle into his smaller form. ~ You do like being held, don't you? ~

- ~ I do, Uncle Harry, ~ the dragon said rubbing her head against Harry's jaw.
- ~ That tells me your name should be Cuddles ~
- ~ ooh, ~ the dragon thrummed. ~ Cuddles, I like that! ~
- ~ I thought you might, ~ Harry laughed as he set her back down onto the floor. He then turned to the final female of Kiska's clutch. ~ And you, little Miss Romance, ~
- ~ Me? ~ The sole unnamed female squeaked.
- ~ Yes you, don't think I didn't hear you when Susan and I were saying good bye. ~

The small dragon seemed to gather herself, ~ I like Aunt Susan, ~ she huffed. ~ She keeps you in line! ~

- ~ She does, ~ Harry admitted. ~ I think we're going to call you 'Sweetie'. What do you think of that? ~
- Harry was unprepared for the flying tackle the small Dragon threw at him, nor for the wet forked tongue that seemed determined to bathe every part of his face.
- ~ Hove my new name Uncle Harry, ~ the crying, kissing, miniature she dragon sobbed, ~ And Hove you! ~
- ~ Oh big hairy deal, ~ the scarlet male said as he let loose with a belch that filled the entire cabin with a ball of flame. ~ It's my turn Uncle Harry, I don't want a girly name, I want to be Smaug! ~

Harry rolled to a sitting position, wondering if he should be worried by the amount of dragon spit currently on his face. ~ Oh, I haven't forgotten you. You said that you wanted to be Bloodwing, or Reddeth, or even Smaug, but there are already many dragons with those sorts of names aren't there? ~

The thought that he might not be the first to use those names seemed to surprise the small red dragon, ~ I guess so, ~

~ No, ~ Harry continued, ~ I've got the perfect name for you... ~

- ~ And did my Hatchlings behave? ~
- ~ They did, ~ Harry nodded. ~ And we had a lot of fun. ~
- ~ Knowing my young drake, I find that to be somewhat questionable. ~
- ~ He is a handfull, no doubt, but he is a credit to his mum, all your little ones are. ~
- ~ You lie badly Harry, but the hatchlings truly love you. ~

Harry watched as the five miniature dragons swooped by in an elaborate game of high flying tag. ~ The idea that five dragons had somehow bonded with me was a bit of a shock, but it seems to have gone both ways. ~

- ~ I rather thought it would, ~ Kiska laughed.
- ~ Is there a problem with the collars? ~ Harry asked hesitantly.
- ~ Not at all, occasionally a new servant appears in the homelands and starts making something similar and it becomes fashionable for a while, ~ she gestured toward her flying children, ~ my hatching will likely spark the latest revival of the fashion. I noticed that each of them carry different markings. ~
- "The collars are inscribed with the little one's names, ~ Harry shrugged. ~ It seemed the easiest way to relay the names to your keepers.... ~ Harry hesitated for a moment, ~ your servants. ~
- ~ Well done Harry, ~ Kiska laughed. ~ I believe you were promised an exchange of treasure... ~ the she-dragon dipped her head under her left wing and emerged with a golden... something in her teeth.
- Harry gingerly reached up to take the offered... treasure. His eyes went wide when he saw what it was.

- ~ I know little of your kind's mating rituals ~ Kiska rumbled, ~ but the tones of this trinket matches closely those I've seen worn by human females that share your young mate's coloring. ~
- ~ I... She's not my... ~ Harry slowly came to terms with the offered treasure in his hand. ~ Thank you Kiska. ~
- ~ Come along you lot! ~ Kiska called to her children, sounding disturbingly like a large scaly Molly Weasley. ~ Say good bye to your Uncle Harry, we've got to be going! ~

Harry turned to wave at the young dragons when he was hit in the chest and knocked to the ground by a speeding Thumper. ~ Oh, Uncle Harry, I'll miss you so much! ~ The small dragon giggled as she once again slathered his face with her forked tongue.

Harry paused for a moment while he regained the ability to breathe, and to a lesser extent, his will to live. Somehow the fifty pound miniature dragons saw nothing wrong with ramming into a person at better than a dead run. "I'll... miss you too Thumper," he managed to gasp before he was mobbed by all five of the miniature dragons.

~ Come along children, ~ Kiska called again, waiting for her brood to clamber upon her back before launching herself into the sky.

Harry struggled to his feet while he watched in amazement as the huge dragon gained altitude faster than he could ever have managed with his broom, and then seemed to hang in the air for a moment before bursting into flame and streaking away, leaving flaming contrails behind her.

Bloody Hell! Hagrid had said it was amazing to see a dragon doing that odd flaming transportation thing of theirs. Until that moment, Harry had never appreciated the half giant's penchant for understatement.

Harry found Susan waiting for him in the entry hall.

"Your playmate's mum was spotted landing near Hagrid's house," she said with a smile. "I missed you, but I figured that you'd be along as soon as your little friends left."

"Funny girl," Harry said with a smile. "She paid me you know."

"She did?"

"Yep," Harry dug in his pocket, producing the heavy gold chain from which hung an emerald half the size of a hen's egg. "Like it?"

"Harry," Susan gasped, "it's beautiful!"

- "A bit gaudy for me," Harry noted. "It would spoil the lines of this shirt. Would you like it?"
- "Would I like it?" She gasped again. "Harry it's beautiful, but it's too much! I couldn't accept a gift like this!"
- "Oh?" Harry asked in a tone of disappointment. "Ok then. I still don't want it. Kiska said that she thought it would look good on someone with your coloring..." Harry paused for a moment in consideration. "Ginny Weasley's a redhead too, maybe she would like it."
- "Give me that!" Sue said snatching the necklace from his hands before looking deeply into Harry's eyes. "You're sure? Harry this is worth a fortune."
- "Is it?" Harry's grin spread into a fully-fledged smile. "I'm very sure."
- "Help me put it on?" Susan asked handing the necklace back to Harry and then lifting her hair from her neck. Harry move behind his girlfriend and after fumbling for a few moments, mostly due to his being distracted by the view down his girlfriend's blouse, the Gryffindor managed to fasten the clasp of the heavy chain.
- "Merlin, Harry," Susan breathed as she examined herself in the mirror on the wall.
- "So, I'm doing ok in this boyfriend thing am I?" Harry asked. "Better than a nine?"
- "You were all the way up to a nice even ten there for a while," Sue said with her own smile before leaning forward to give him a kiss on the cheek. "But then you had to go lose ground by mentioning giving my necklace to Ginny Weasley. I'm sorry Harry, but you're down to eight and three quarters."
- "Ah," Harry nodded. "So basically, I can't win?"
- "Oh, Harry," Susan sighed as she took his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder as they made their way to the Great Hall. "You're with me aren't you? That's practically the definition of winning."
- Harry could not help but smile wider. He loved her teasing and sense of humor. Susan was right, Harry decided, he **was** winning, and if he was not careful, he might get used to it.
- The pair made the turn into the Great Hall only to find themselves coming face to face with Draco Malfoy. Harry blinked twice trying to reconcile what he was seeing with his image of the Slytherin prince.

- "Merlin, Bones," the blond laughed, "are you still leading Scarhead around by the nose? Or did you get your grip a bit lower?"
- Harry glanced at Susan to see if she was hurt by Malfoy's words, but was surprised to see her struggling to hold back her laughter.
- "What the hell are you wearing Draco?" Susan asked a tone of incredulity in her voice.
- "What? This?" Draco gestured to the leather flying helmet complete with goggles he was wearing. "This is the latest fashion."
- "Latest fashion?" Harry laughed. "Where? Around a 1917 Aerodrome?"
- On either side of Draco, Crabbe and Goyle were struggling to hold in their own laughter, a fact not missed by the blond boy. Both of the bookends earned a savage glare before Malfoy returned his attention to Harry.
- "You know nothing of high fashion Potter," Draco sneered, "as is evidenced to how you're dressed."
- "Sure thing Biggles," Harry laughed, "whatever you say."
- It was obvious to Harry that while the Biggles reference had flown right over the Slytherin's helmeted head, but Draco was utterly sure that he had been insulted. Susan's laughter pushed Goyle over the edge, followed quickly by Victor Crabbe.
- "Damn you, Potter!" Draco growled.
- "Harry Potter may not know much of fashion," Fleur Delacour's lightly accented voice interjected into the conversation, "but I do, and that grotesque waste of good leather is not a current fashion anywhere in Europe. Where did you say this was the height of fashion Little Nothing?"
- Draco looked between Harry and Fleur. Harry imagined that his rival might be trying to decide which of the two the Slytherin hated more. "You know nothing!" Draco screamed before storming from the Great Hall.
- That was the final straw for Harry as he surrendered to his giggles. He and Susan ended up leaning against each other laughing until tears came.

- "Oh My God!" Hanna all but screamed when she spotted Susan's new necklace once the pair were in the dorm room they shared in the Hufflepuff dungeons. "Where did you get that?"
- "From Harry," Susan sighed longingly.
- "I never thought I'd see you so pathetically love sick Sue," Hannah laughed at her friend, with only a hint of envy. If she had only been a few minutes faster, then SHE might be the one on Harry Potter's arm. However, if it was not her, then Hannah was glad that Susan was having a good time. "This is a beautiful piece," She commented lifting the necklace from the tray where Susan had deposited it and held it so that the light from the wall sconce shone through the emerald. "Imagine if it were real?"
- Susan nodded, but did not say anything. Her blush caught Hannah's attention. "This is real?" Hannah asked in a shocked tone of voice as she began to examine the gem even more closely.
- "Yeah, I think so." Susan said quietly. "I've never had anything like that. Do you think I'm only interested in Harry for his money?"
- "Susan, don't be silly," Hannah said blinking in surprise. "You thought he was cute first year when all anyone could see was a ragamuffin in rags."
- "I did," Susan admitted, "though not as much as you!"
- "Hmph!" Hannah huffed. She lifted the gem to examine it in the light yet again. "This is beautiful, when did he get it?"
- "Harry said that the dragon gave it to him."
- Hannah looked from the gem to her best friend, her expression one of concern. "Are you feeling alright Susan? What did you mean 'the dragon gave it to him'?"
- Susan hesitated, but the words came tumbling out. She would trust Hannah with her life after all. "When we watched Harry fighting the dragon, not everything was what it seemed."
- "What do you mean?"
- "It turns out that dragons aren't the mindless beasts everyone thinks they are," Susan explained. "Remember second year when we found out Harry could speak to snakes?"
- "Scared me to death," Hannah nodded. "Ernie soiled himself."
- "Yeah," Susan grinned at the memory of Ernie's humiliation. Hufflepuffs were team players but even a team would rib a member when an opportunity presented itself. "Dragons speak Snake."

"What?" Hannah exclaimed.

"Well, actually snakes speak Dragon according to Harry." Susan amended. "Dragons understand English too. The Horntail recognized that Harry was a speaker and offered him a deal. The dragon would lose the fight for the right price."

"Harry cheated?"

"No!" Susan protested shaking her head. "The rules don't even address the possibility of making a deal with a magical creature. In fact, the rules don't even seem to consider the possibility that any magical creature is intelligent enough to make a deal with. When Harry retrieved his egg, the Horntail's eggs hatched and Harry was the first thing they saw."

"Wow," Hannah breathed. "I was watching the whole time and I never even imagined... But what does that have to do with anything?"

Susan sighed. "Evidently a hatchling dragon bonds with the first living thing they see. So all five of them bonded to Harry."

"But..." Hannah was starting to wonder if she had been lucky that Susan had found Harry first. Exposure to the boy had seemingly driven her best friend around the bend. "Ok, pretending for the moment that what you're saying makes the slightest bit of sense, what does it mean that the baby dragons bonded with Harry."

"They love him. He's their 'Uncle Harry'"

Hannah blinked, and then stood up and placed the necklace down where she had found it. "Get your robes on; I think we need to go to Madam Pomfrey so that she can take a look at you."

"Hannah, I am serious. I was there when they mobbed him. I watched five miniature dragons lick Harry all over his face and arms, just like little fire-breathing puppies. The dragon mother came to Harry to have him babysit the little ones."

"Babysit?" Hannah sat down on her bed and looked at her friend with concern. "Susan, listen to yourself."

"I know how crazy it sounds Hannah," Susan protested. "But I saw it happen. Harry said that the dragon gave him the necklace for his trouble."

"Susan."

"Do you think I'm enjoying sounding like a crazy person Hannah? Like I said, I know what it sounds like, believe me, I know. But is this really any more insane than the thought that one of our classmates could go toe to toe with a dragon, and not only survive, but win?"

"Well no..." the blonde hesitated.

"Look, I was involved with the second task..."

"I was watching," Hannah nodded. "Harry did some big spell that no one I know of could tell me what it was."

"Harry did a potions-based light show that he got from one of his father's best friends. That's all it was, a light show."

Hannah frowned. "Then how did he..."

"Harry made a deal with the Merfolk. He traded something called 'peanut butter' for me."

Again Hannah blinked. With a Muggleborn mum, she knew exactly what peanut butter was. "Let me get this straight. You claim that Harry made a deal with a dragon, adopted a clutch of baby dragons, made a deal with the Merfolk to retrieve you for bloody peanut butter no less, and was paid with that huge emerald for babysitting a clutch of dragons and you're wondering if you were dating him because of his money?"

"That does sound marginally insane," Susan agreed.

"I think," her friend said quietly, "that the two of you are utterly mental. You might as well be mental together." Hannah pondered for a moment. "Does Harry even have any money?"

Susan's brow furrowed for a moment. "Now that you ask, I don't really know." Her expression brightened. "I'm **not** a gold-digger. I'm just insane!"

"And that's at least a little bit better," Hannah snarked.

Charlie Weasley entered Constance Beaumont's office at a dead run. "Boss! Kiska's back, and she's got her brood with her."

An expression of relief flickered across Beaumont's features. She had not been looking forward to informing the Reserves' Board of Directors that one of their endangered Horntails had disappeared with all five of her offspring.

"Any idea where she might have gone?"

Charlie shook his head. Weasley had been the one to discover Kiska's deserted lair three days before, and had been tasked with the search that had turned out to be utterly fruitless. Even with the unprecedented disappearance of the Horntail, it seemed it was something about her

return that was causing him so much concern.

"Not a clue boss, but wherever she went, there were Wizards. Her brood have..." Charlie paused as if wondering if what he feared telling Beaumont what he had found would cause more problems than the original disappearance had. "Hell boss, you've got to see it. I saw it and I don't believe it. You'd have me shipped off to a mind healer if I just told you without proof."

Beaumont eyed the big redhead suspiciously. Weasley was a good handler, but he tended to think the dragons were smarter than they actually were. What could possibly have spooked the big man so effectively?

"Alright Weasley, show me what's got your knickers in a twist. You had best not be wasting my time." It took Europe's most senior Dragon Handler a few moments to lock up her paperwork before following Weasley from her office. The pair mounted brooms used to cut the travel time across the Reserve. Together they landed in front of Kiska's cavern lair.

Beaumont was moderately surprised to see a crowd of her other dragon handlers had gathered near the cave and were all watching the big black she dragon playing with her brood.

"Ok," she admitted, "it's not all that common for a mother dragon to play with their little ones, but it's not all that uncommon either. Is this what the fuss is about?"

"No Boss. It's the little ones..." it seemed Charlie was still a bit rattled by whatever was up. "I'll have to show you." The man put two fingers of his left hand to his lips and issued a piercing whistle. One of the miniature dragons peeled off from the others and flew toward Weasley at an amazing rate of speed. The youngster flew right into the big man's chest knocking him to the ground and slathering his face with its... her, tongue.

That was very undragon behavior.

- "When did you teach her that Weasley?" Beaumont asked. "Why did you teach her that?"
- "She didn't get it from me Boss," Charlie said as he climbed to his feet, wiping his face, while the small she dragon sat watching him not unlike a very alert dog. "She came back from wherever Kiska took her little ones doing this. Did you notice the collar?"
- "I've seen dragon's with collars before, it's been about 20 years since any of the keepers fitted any of the dragons for collars. Not your work I take it?"
- "Not mine, and not any of the other lads," Weasley said while shaking his head. "Kiska's brood came back from their trip with them, and each of them evidently has a name. This little princess is 'Thumper'."
- The small dragon evidently recognized her 'name' and responded with a dragon's rumble of pleasure. Beaumont blinked twice. Dragons were never named until they were adults; could one so young understand that it was given a name?
- "What are the others named?" she asked.
- "The little female who seems to boss the others around is 'Juno', the one who is always trying to crawl into your lap is 'Cuddles' and the little shy one is 'Sweetie'."
- "Odd names. What about the male?" Beaumont asked while trying to get a better look at the collar.
- "Well, he's named... Ron."
- "Ron?" Beaumont asked. "What an odd name, not at all like the others."
- "I know," Weasley agreed. "It's funny though, I have a younger brother named Ron."
- "Lots of people have brothers named Ron, Weasley, the world doesn't revolve around your family."
- "I know that Boss," Charlie responded. "But it sure seems to sometimes."

"This just isn't right"

Harry nodded in agreement without tearing his eyes from the Quidditch pitch, or rather what remained of the Quidditch pitch.

- "Oh for goodness sake Ron," Hermione huffed. "All they're doing is growing a hedgerow maze. As soon as the tournament is over they'll have the pitch restored well before the first match next year."
- "That's not the point," Ron protested. "This is the home of so many dreams and aspirations; it's almost... hallowed ground. Using it for something like this is just... wrong."
- From behind the trio an ominous mumbling started.
- "Lk ith mks ny diffc t woo Wedly!"

Harry, Hermione and Ron exchanged confused looks and then turned to face whatever it was that was mumbling. They found themselves facing a figure clad in dark trousers and an orange hoodie with the hood pulled tight obscuring the wearer's face, allowing them to only see a pair of hate-filled grey eyes peering from the darkness.

The identity of the person in the hoodie was only suggested by the fact that he was flanked by Crabbe and Goyle, both appearing to be embarrassed beyond belief by the antics of the wizard in the orange hoodie.

- "Malfoy?" Harry asked incredulously.
- "Yef!" came the muffled response.
- "Why are you dressed like that?" Hermione asked.
- "Sufid Mdbld!" the orange figure murmured. "Ooo wownt unnstd fashn ef id bid ooo."
- Harry looked between his friends. Ron was staring in opened mouth amazement at the muffled Malfoy, while Hermione's brow was furrowed while she attempted to translate the blond git's last muttered statement. If this were not so pathetically sad, it might be hilarious.
- "You!" The lightly accented voice of Fleur Delacour broke into the conversation. "Did you think I wouldn't react to your lies? Did you think at all?
- "Wha?" Malfoy asked cringing away from the angry French witch.
- "This!" she screeched as the shoved a copy of the Daily Prophet into Draco's hands. Harry grimaced at the sight of it. The lead story was that Fleur was only in second place in the Tournament because of her Veela powers and that she was using those powers to have Harry at her beck and call. Susan had thought it was funny, Harry less so.
- Evidently Fleur saw no humor in the situation at all.
- "You gave that horrible Skeeter woman a quote, Little Nothing, you said that I had 'obviously enthralled all the male champions'. You just do not learn from your mistakes do you? If I was using my allure, I certainly wouldn't be in second place over all would I? Perhaps it is time to teach you once and for all to never cross your betters."
- "Ooo cnt!"
- "I can do anything I want Little Nothing. Perhaps I should show you what my allure can do."
- By this time, a small crowd had gathered to view the growing spectacle. Hermione gasped as she seemed realize just what the French Champion was likely going to do, and she began pulling her two best friends away from the scene.
- Ron protests that he was torn between wanting to watch as Malfoy get what he deserved and needing to find out where Draco had scored that stylish Chuddly Orange hoodie were silenced as the wide area effect of the Veela allure washed over him. Harry felt it as well, he watched in amazement as Fleur's appearance shifted from that of a beautiful young woman to a goddess fallen to earth. She almost seemed to glow, her skin flush, her eyes appeared to have grown to almost twice their normal size, wide and unblinking. In short, she became quite possibly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen or imagined.

But...

- Somehow she was... wrong. Harry could not understand just what it was that was wrong about the woman, but despite the young French champion's beauty, she just wasn't... real. Trying to determine just what was wrong he stood well away from the developing incident and narrowed his eyes. Yes, the Fleur was astoundingly gorgeous, but...
- "You," Fleur said, picking one of the larger seventh year Slytherins from the growing crowd. "And you," she continued picking out another. "This foolish child has offended me; could you show him the error of his ways? For me? Please?"
- The pair seemed to consider her request for a moment, and both shook their heads hesitantly as if they had to think very hard for reasons not to fulfill Fleur's every wish, and then she pouted.

"For me?"

- The hulking pair pushed Crabbe and Goyle out of the way and proceeded to grant Fleur's wish over Draco's muffled threats of calling his father. Fleur sniffed at the violence and strode away allowing her allure to fade away from the scene.
- Harry had mixed feelings. As a rule, he did not like the idea of people being controlled, being forced to do violence against their will... on the other hand, it was Draco Malfoy, and honestly, it could not happen to a nicer bloke. He really should try to step in but...
- Harry's inner conflict became moot as the two seventh years came out of their daze and stopped beating upon Draco's body. Greg Goyle looked at the battered form in the orange hoodie in disbelief.
- "Oh my God!" Goyle exclaimed. "They killed Draco!"
- Vinnie Crabbe looked to the two seventh years with mild annoyance in his eyes. "You bastards!"

Lucius Malfoy glared at his wife. "This is entirely your fault."

A sculpted eyebrow rose slightly. "My fault?"

- "Yes," Lucius said as he sat straighter in his chair by the boy's bedside. "Your constant coddling of the boy has made him an idiot."
- "I tried to raise him to be worthy of being a Black," Narcissa sniffed. "I certainly never filled his head with all that 'You're a Malfoy' claptrap, and this mindless pursuit of a young woman who is clearly out of his league is clearly a Malfoy trait. Nothing like that ever happened on my side of the family."
- "A Malfoy trait? What do you mean by that? Nothing like this ever came from my side..." Lucius protested.
- "Your Uncle Slappy?" Narcissa asked in an acid tone. "The man was famous for his outrageous pursuit of women. How many misadventures was he involved in before he was killed by the husband of one of his conquests?"
- "Slappy Malfoy was a Hufflepuff!" The tall blond man said with undisguised loathing. "He would come around and tell me stories of his adventures. Mother never approved. As I matured, I came to see her point. You know very well the last time he was allowed within the walls of the manor was the day of our wedding."
- "Which only goes to prove..." Narcissa said smugly.
- "Don't try and change the subject on me Narcissa. I know what you've done. I don't know how you've managed to hide it, but I know he isn't mine!" Lucius sneered, "Pater Detegit" the man called out with a complex wand movement.
- Narcissa smiled when the glowing letters blossomed over her husband's wand. Y... O... F... L... A... M... S... U... I... C...U... L...
- With a growl, Lucius stormed from the room, leaving Narcissa alone with her son. She rose from her chair and crossed the room to where Draco lay insensate. She reached out and brushed one of the few remaining strands of hair from her son's eyes, and Narcissa sighed.
- Narcissa had not thought of Slappy Malfoy in years. Lucius was utterly correct, Lucretia Malfoy had despised the man, and Narcissa had a sneaking suspicion as to why. Abraxas Malfoy however had doted upon his younger brother. It was only after the elder Malfoy brother had died of Dragon Pox that Lucretia had managed to forbid the younger brother's contact with her son.
- Slappy had been a layabout, a liar and a cad, but unlike his nephew, he had known his way around the bed sheets. A smile crossed her lips as she remembered her wedding night after Lucius had fallen asleep, drunk beyond any attempt at consummation, when the black sheep of the Malfoy clan had found her wandering the halls of the manor in frustration.
- She leaned over to kiss her injured son, as she wondered, not for the first time, if Lucius was aware that 'Slappy' was only his Uncle's nickname, and that Abraxas had actually named his son for his favorite brother.

Harry emerged from a passage into a small clearing, panting as if he had run for miles, mostly because he had. His robes were ripped and smoking in spots from spell and skrewt damage. This entire maze seemed designed to kill people. It was only due to his general policy of running away very quickly from every encounter that he was still alive.

Someday, Harry swore to himself, someday he was going to find a creature that even Hagrid would be frightened by, and then he was going to lock the half-giant in a box with said creature. Someday. Bogarts, Skrewts, all manner of predatory plants, oh yes, he and his friend Hagrid were going to have words.

- Then, as he stood still in the clearing, Harry saw movement once again, and then he heard Viktor Krum from the center of the clearing.
- Ask your questions Sphinx, I have a competition to win!" the Bulgarian proclaimed.
- "Very well. The question is in three parts, answer each and you may pass, fail to answer any of them and pay..." the huge lioness with a woman's face smiled, "a price. Your first question; what is your name?"
- "I am Viktor Krum."
- "What is you quest?" she asked.
- "I seek the Triwizard Cup." Viktor confirmed.
- "And what," the sphinx asked with a wry grin, "is your favorite color?"
- "Blue!" Viktor answered before his eyes went wide after realizing what he had said. "No! I meant green!"
- "Sorry," the sphinx laughed. "Your first answer was wrong. Goodbye Viktor Krum"
- Harry watched in amazement as the sphinx waved her left front paw and Viktor was launched into the air, the professional Quidditch champion screamed as he soared through the air falling to the ground out of sight beyond the hedge with a sickening crunch.
- "Ah, you've got to love the classics," the sphinx laughed to herself as she pulled what appeared to be a magazine from a bag near her hindquarters. Harry eased his way closer and saw that the magical creature was working her way through what appeared to be a Sudoku

puzzle.

Harry took another step closer and his foot came down on a stick that broke with a sharp snap.

The sphinx looked up from her puzzle in surprise. "Well done champion, few have the talent to sneak up on me."

Harry stepped backwards from the magical creature. She had her long, almond-shaped eyes focused on Harry as he gathered his courage and approached. Harry raised his wand in a quaking hand, hesitating. The sphinx didn't crouch like a cat ready to attack, rather she had put her magazine away and was pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress. Then she spoke, in a sultry voice.

"You are very near your goal, champion. The quickest way is past me."

"So... any chances of you letting me by?" Harry asked quietly, "please?" said Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be, but wondering if sphinxes liked peanut butter.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my questions three. Answer all three and I let you pass. Answer wrongly and your life becomes interesting. Remain silent – I will let you walk away from me unscathed."

Harry fought not to smile. Who knew that Dudley's fascination with Monty Python would ever have come in handy? At least the sphinx was not asking riddles like the books all said they did. He had never been any good at puzzling things out, which was Hermione's thing, not his.

"Okay," he said. "Ask your questions."

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and asked:

"What is your name?"

"Harry Potter,"

The sphinx perked up. "Harry Potter? Seriously?"

"Uh, yeah," Harry answered, somewhat surprised by her reaction. "Is that the second guestion?"

"No, sorry, it just surprised me to find Harry Potter here," she said starting to babble, "Oh – My – God! I mean I knew you were part of the tournament, but I never dreamed that..."

"What is the second question then?" Harry asked realizing for the first time that being a Boy Who Lived fangirl might not be limited to humans.

"Oh, sorry," the sphinx blushed through her fur, an odd effect. "What is your quest?"

"Mostly to survive this insanity," Harry answered truthfully.

"Good answer," the sphinx affirmed. "And now your final question: What is black and white and read all over?"

Harry blinked. Surely not... but... Oh, to hell with it he decided. How much could the fall hurt, really?" "A newspaper."

"Yes!" the sphinx exulted. "I also would have accepted 'magazine', and speaking of magazines," she produced the magazine she had been working the puzzle from, and Harry was more an a little shocked to find that his face filled the cover. "Could I bother you for an autograph?"

"Sure," said Harry, and, amazed that he had somehow gotten away with it again. After hastily scribbling his name, Harry carefully edged past the sphinx and made his way to the far side of the clearing. Just as he reached the exit, he heard the Sphinx speak behind him

"Welcome Champion, you may pass if you can answer my questions three. Answer all three and I will let you pass. Answer wrongly and your life becomes interesting. Remain silent – I will let you walk away from me unscathed."

Harry paused to see who might be following him.

"I'm ready," Cedric's voice carried from the darkness.

"What is your Name?"

"Cedric Diggory," the tall Hufflepuff answered.

"What is your quest?"

"I seek the Triwizard Cup!"

"And your last question;" the sphinx asked, a sly look of amusement in her eyes, "Under the Dewey Decimal system, what class would the study of languages be indexed under?"

Cedric blinked. "That would be the 400 class."

The sphinx blinked twice. "That's... that's right. How did you know that?"

"When you're dating Hermione Granger," Cedric chuckled, "you just have to know that sort of thing."

As he headed deeper into the maze, Harry just had to laugh.

Harry wiped the blood from his eyes and stumbled onward. He had survived four more of the maze's traps, including a strange golden mist that somehow inverted gravity.

He had to be close by now; he just had to be... Hermione's trusty 'point me' charm had his wand telling him he was bang on course; as long as he did not meet anything too horrible, he might have a chance...

Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. "Point Me!" he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and pointed him to the right-hand one. He dashed up this one and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a pedestal a hundred yards away. Suddenly a dark figure hurtled out onto the path in front of him.

Harry felt the possibility of winning slipping from his fingers. Cedric was going to get there first.

The tall Hufflepuff was sprinting as fast as he could toward the cup, and Harry knew he would never catch up, Cedric was much taller, stronger, had much longer legs...

That was when Harry spotted a huge... something over the hedge to his left, moving quickly along a path that intersected with the one he and Cedric were on. Whatever it was, it was moving so fast Cedric was about to run into it, and Cedric, his eyes on the cup, had not seen it...

"Cedric!" Harry shouted. "Look out!"

Cedric must not have heard him, or else the Hufflepuff thought that Harry was trying to distract him from the prize, the young man ran full bore throat first into an extended leg of a gigantic spider, knocking the breath from his body and dropping the young man to the ground insensate, his wand flying from his grasp and disappearing into the brush.

The Acromantula regarded the fallen Hufflepuff for a moment before spotting Harry, and immediately started barreling toward the boy faster than any eight-legged creature should be able to.

"Stupefy!" Harry shouted, his wand bucking in his hand; the spell hit the spider's gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good it did, he might as well have thrown a stone at it; the spider jerked, scuttled around, and continued its rampage toward Harry.

"Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy!"

It was no use - the spider was either so large, or so magical that the spells were doing no more than annoying it. Harry had one horrifying glimpse of eight shining black eyes and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

Harry was pinned to the ground by the massive front legs; struggling madly, he tried to kick at the spider; his legs connected with nothing. Harry experienced gut clinching terror as the spider lowered its pincers closer to his face

His horror at the sight of the pincers only inches from his face was not abated in the slightest when he spotted a small pink bow on the side of the huge spider's head.

Harry was sure that his revenge on Hagrid was about to be put off forever, when he heard something that he never expected to.

"I'm Missy Aranea, Mr. Potter, from News of the Magical World. Do you have a comment for my readers on winning the Triwizard Tournament?"

"What?" Harry asked incredulously.

"I'm Missy Aranea, Mr. Potter, and I'm a reporter for the News of the Magical World."

Harry stared into the closest of the huge spider's eight eyes and tried to wrap his mind around being interviewed by an eight-legged Rita Skeeter. Could his life possibly get any weirder?

"I haven't won yet," he protested.

"A trifle," the spider huffed, clacking her massive mandibles mere inches from his face while producing a quill and notepad from... somewhere. "The French human was incapacitated by one of the skrewts," she said checking what appeared to be notes, "the Bulgarian broke his leg after the third time he failed at answering Brenda's questions,"

"Brenda?" Harry asked, still trying to believe the situation in which he found himself.

"The Sphinx, a marvelous girl, she throws the best parties."

- Harry reflected that, no, it was extremely unlikely that his life could possibly get any weirder. "Oh, ok."
- "And the other English human did himself damage when he ran into me. You're a shoe in." Missy concluded.
- "And you want a quote?" Harry asked.
- "Yes," the spider affirmed.
- "Uh, I'm proud to be representing Hogwarts and hope that everyone survives this insanity."
- "Wonderful!" the spider enthused, "now, could I get a picture of you taking the cup?"
- "Sure," Harry agreed, knowing that he would agree with anything that would get the spider off his chest. "Excellent idea."
- After he managed to stand, Harry made his way over to check on Cedric. The seventh year was starting to moan, which Harry took as a sign that he was going to be OK. He waited a few moments while Missy set up her camera.
- "Alright, big smile, take the cup as I take the picture. Ready?" she asked.
- "Yeah," Harry agreed.
- "Alright, on three. One, two, and now!"

Harry grabbed the handle of the Triwizard Cup just as he was blinded by the camera's huge flash.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling color, and Harry's only thought at that moment was that he was not surprised in the least. It had just turned out to be that kind of day.

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Triwizard Tales Voldemort Reborn.

Part Five: Voldemort Reborn.

Susan, Hannah and Hermione sat side-by-side waiting in the darkness for the final task to be finished. It was only the anxiety of not knowing how Cedric and Harry were doing that kept spectating this final event from being utterly boring.

There had been a short period of amusement, not long after Harry had entered the maze, when there had been a confrontation between Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy. Draco had chosen a seat directly in front of Ron and upon sitting had lowered the hood of his cloak, which allowed a huge rainbow colored mass of tight curls to escape.

There was silence throughout the student section of the stand for several seconds as the sight of the Slytherin prince's newest head covering sank in. Ron had reached out and tapped Draco on the shoulder. "Down in front."

Turning his head to face Weasley, Malfoy asked in his most imperious tone, "Excuse me?" The individual strands of the aforementioned multi-hued mop continued to move in hypnotic spirals for several seconds after Draco's head had stopped moving, spoiling the effect of his attitude.

"Look, I can't see the field; can you do something about your hair?" Ron paused, peering at the rainbow afro in suspicion. "Speaking of your hair, have you done something different with it? You look different somehow Malfoy."

In the seats behind him, George and Fred Weasley exchanged guilty glances as they observed first-hand the results of Ron having been their principle test subject for pranks just a few too many times.

"I've done nothing different," Draco spat, busily employing that tactic favored by the Malfoy clan for generations; Deny, Deny, Deny.

"Really?" Ron asked. "I could have sworn you looked different somehow, but anyway I can't see the field with your hair in the way."

From there the discussion between the two rivals had descended into what some generous souls might have called violence. The pair pushing each other a few times before beginning what could only be called, an epic slap fight. The twins and Draco's bookends made a few halfhearted attempts into stopping the embarrassing altercation, before all four backed off when a furious Professor Flitwick came thundering up the bleachers to confront the battling pair. After several moments of attempting to calm the situation, the crowd was treated to the Charms instructor grasping both of the fighters by their ears, and escorting them away, all the while chastising them for 'embarrassing Hogwarts' with their childlike behavior.

The waiting became worse by the minute until at the 83-minute mark when red sparks sprayed into the sky over the maze. The instructors clustered for a moment before Professor McGonagall, easily identified by her tartan sash, entered the maze, only to emerge a few minutes later levitating a badly burned Fleur Delacour.

"Merlin," Susan breathed as the runic arrays showed, in graphic detail, the wounded French champion being levitated into the medical tent. "How horrible! I wouldn't have thought a Veela could be burned."

"I'm sure Professor Dumbledore knows what he's doing," Hermione said, trying mightily to convince herself. "The staff must have taken precautions to keep anyone from getting hurt. Fleur probably just lost her concentration for a moment."

Hannah nodded in agreement while Susan looked at her two friends as if they had lost their minds. All year long, the Champions had been subjected to horrible dangers and the majority of the students still thought that the tournament was safe. It had never occurred to her that Hannah and Hermione shared in that delusion. Still, Harry had a plan. He hadn't told her what it was, but he had a plan, Susan was sure of it. No one who could make deals with Dragons and Merfolk could possibly be inconvenienced by a mere hedgerow maze.

At the 107-minute mark, the murmuring of the crowd was broken by an odd sound, one that Hermione associated with the cartoons she had watched as a child. A sort of low pitched 'TWANG!' That unusual sound was followed by the sight and sound of a screaming Viktor Krum arcing through the air over the hedgerows. The three girls exchanged looks.

"Was that part of the task?" Hannah asked, while trying to figure out exactly what a flying Krum might mean.

"I don't know," Hermione answered truthfully. "I can't imagine what that might..." That was when the bushy haired Gryffindor spotted Susan's calm demeanor. "You aren't worried."

"Harry," Susan said quietly, "has a plan."

"A plan?" Hermione asked incredulously. "He's got a plan?"

"Harry has had a plan for every task in this contest," the redhead said simply. "I don't know what, and I don't know how, but he's going to be fine." A grin puled at the edges of her mouth. "And he's going to win too."

- "Sue!" Hannah protested, "I know you think he was talking to dragons and the Merfolk, but you can't possibly believe…"
- "Talking to dragons?" Hermione interjected, "what do you mean by that?"
- "Harry is a parselmouth as you well know," Susan said quietly. "Dragons speak parseltongue."
- "But..." Susan could see that Harry best friend was conflicted between what she had read in her textbooks and her belief in Harry. "Dragons are supposed to be mindless beasts."
- "And snakes are erudite conversationalists?" the redhead asked.
- "Well, no but..."

TWANG!

- The three girls' eyes flashed to the maze in time to see a screaming Viktor Krum once again flying in a ballistic arc over the maze.
- "Why the hell is he doing that?" Hannah asked.
- "I don't think he's doing it on purpose," Susan said before nudging her fellow 'puff. "Check Chang out."
- "Crying again?" Hannah snorted. "The bint was like a waterworks when she dumped Cedric, and now she's sobbing for Krum when he flies without a broom?"
- "You'll forgive me," Hermione smirked, "if I find the idea of Cho breaking up with Cedric to be a good thing."
- "Yeah, you would," Hannah snarked.
- "My love life aside," Hermione sniffed. "Are you seriously expecting us to believe that Harry can talk to dragons?"
- "Hermione, you are brilliant, but sometimes I think you're blind. What is more likely, that Harry can talk to dragons or Harry could defeat a dragon with the magic he knows?"
- "Well... I suppose what you're saying makes some sense..." Hermione said hesitantly.
- "Tell her about Harry's nieces and nephew," Hannah said with a grin.
- "Nieces and nephew?"
- "Hermione," Susan said lowering her voice though she was sure no one was listening to them, "do you remember the rumors back in March about dragons being seen near the Forbidden Forest?"
- "Yes," the brunette replied cautiously.
- "At the first task, the Horntail's eggs hatched just as Harry was retrieving his golden egg. He was the first living thing the hatchlings saw, and they bonded to him."
- "Bonded to him?" Hermione asked, "What does that even mean?"
- "According to my insane friend, the little dragons all think Harry is their uncle."
- Hermione paused for a moment while taking that bit of information in and comparing it to what she had managed to learn about dragons. "That doesn't make the slightest bit of sense."
- "That's what I told her," Hannah agreed. "Personally, I think associating with your friend Harry had driven her 'round the bend. You should see the necklace Harry gave her, telling her he got it for babysitting the little dragons."
- "A necklace?" Clearly, Hermione decided, the Hufflepuffs were not as stable as their reputations would lead one to believe.

TWANG!

- Again, Viktor's flailing form flew through the air over the hedges.
- "Ok," Hannah pronounced. "He's got to be doing that for the fun of it now."
- A weak spray of red sparks appeared over the hedgerows. That left only two competitors in the maze.

Soon, it was going to happen soon.

Barty Crouch Jr. stood transfixed standing apart from the other professors, in the shadows of the towering seats, trying and failing to use Moody's magical eye to see what was going on behind the hedgerows. Karkarov had been just too protective of his champion and Crouch had been unable to get close enough to Krum to put the boy under the Imperius, so his plan 'B' had fallen to the side.

It really did not matter, one way or the other; his master would be regaining a body this night. The Dark Lord had said that he wanted Potter, but he would settle for any of these children. First the Veela had failed and was removed from the maze, and then Krum had broken his leg. That left Potter and Diggory alone in the maze. His Master would reward Crouch for his work, of that Barty was sure, but to get Potter... His Master

wanted that prize beyond all others.

His left hand tingled for a moment, the signal that it was time to renew his polyjuice dosage. Crouch fished out his flask from the pocket he kept it in; raising it to his lips he discovered it to be empty.

Had forgotten to refill his flask after his last dose?

A feeling of panic gripped his mind, as he tried to calculate the time he had left in this form. To extend his supply of polyjuice to its fullest, he had only given himself a one minute buffer between doses. A chill ran up his spine as he realized that he has wasted almost half that time trying to deal with the shock. He backed further into the shadows, and removed Moody's eye. There was no way he would make it back to his quarters before he changed, and being blinded when his real eye came back would only hinder his escape. He was struggling with the straps that held the wooden peg to his hip for much the same reason when the change started.

- "Do you need help with that Professor?" a sultry voice asked, startling Crouch, who looked up as he felt his face resume its normal shape.
- "Who are you?" the voice screeched. "Incarcerous!"
- The man stood upright as the ropes began encircling his body. He began struggling when another spell was cast.
- "Petrificus Totalus!" Crouch's limbs stiffened inside the ropes that now bound him head to foot and he pitched forward face down onto the ground. The paralysis prevented him from screaming as his leg attempted to return and was crushed by the peg leg strapped to his torso. Crouch found himself being roughly rolled onto his back, and a pair of strong hands gripping the lapels of his robes, and his body was lifted from the ground. Into his frame of vision came the enraged face of his tormentor.
- "Who are you?" Seventh year Hufflepuff Hope Gwinn's enraged visage demanded. "And what have you done with Professor Moody?"
- "Miss Gwinn? What are you doing?" Minerva McGonagall's voice broke through Crouch's haze of pain.
- "This man was impersonating Professor Moody Professor," the girl said, allowing Barty to fall to the ground so that his body rolled allowing him a view of the maze as the hedgerows suddenly withered away to nothing, signaling that someone had taken the cup.

Inside his paralyzed, damaged body, Barty Crouch Jr. rejoiced. He had won. His Master would be reborn!

The first indication that the tournament was over was a sudden flash of light from the runic displays, then the audience was treated to the sight of the hedgerow withering away, followed immediately by Hagrid rushing onto the pitch to retrieve his creatures.

All eyes were drawn to the gleaming white pedestal in the middle of what had been the maze, and the huge acromantula near it, that was busying itself scurrying off. Near the pedestal, a haggard Cedric Diggory was struggling to his feet.

"Cedric!" Hermione cried out.

- "That's my son!" Amos Diggory called from the VIP section. "My Cedric has won the Triwizard Tournament!"
- However, the way the now upright Cedric hung his head showed to the crowd that Amos was not correct in his assumption.

Susan bolted to her feet, her face white, her earlier confidence gone. "Where's Harry?

Harry felt his feet slam into the ground; his left leg gave out, and he fell, face down into a puddle of some foul smelling liquid. Released from the portkey paralysis, Harry's hand spasmed as he fell, allowing the Triwizard Cup to bounce away. Spitting out a mouthful of what he sincerely hoped was mud; Harry raised his head in an attempt to take in his surroundings.

"What the hell is happening to me now?" he screamed out to the world.

Harry climbed to his feet, and looked around.

He had apparently left the Hogwarts grounds completely; having obviously traveled miles... perhaps hundreds of miles... because even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. He found himself standing in a gloomy and overrun graveyard; the outline of what appeared to be a small church was just beyond a large tree to his right. A hill rose to his left. Harry could just make out what looked to be a large and imposing building on the hillside.

No one had said anything about the cup being a portkey. Harry paused for a moment to wonder why it seemed that every time he was introduced to a new form of magical travel only a few months later it would be used on him without as much as a by your leave.

Shaking off that thought, Harry looked around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. Was this supposed to be part of the task?

If so, it did not make much sense. Only one of the Champions could have taken the cup, unless some of them decided to share the cup for some stupid reason. So why would the contest continue after the cup was taken? None of this made the slightest bit of sense.

That was when he noticed something... or someone moving in the mist. Bitter experience had taught him that this could not possibly be good. Squinting tensely through the darkness, Harry watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily toward them between the graves. Harry could

not make out a face, but from the way it was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and wearing a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to obscure his face. As the figure got closer, Harry saw that the stranger seemed to be cradling something it his arms... perhaps a baby... or was it merely a bundle of robes?

Harry lowered his wand slightly as the figure stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six feet from him. For a second Harry and the short figure simply stared at one another.

Without warning, Harry's scar exploded with pain. It was agony such as he had never felt in all his life; his wand slipped from his fingers as he put his hands over his face; his knees buckled; he was on the ground and he could see nothing at all; his head was about to split open.

"Crucio!"

There was a certain joy in the infliction of pain. That was a lesson Tom Riddle had learned in the orphanage so long ago. A smile spread across the face of the newly reborn Dark Lord. The boy's body convulsed against the ropes holding him in place. Potter had never experienced the pain curse before, but despite that, the boy did not scream. Voldemort was sure that the gag was at least part of the boy's grunting silence, but it was good to find that his victim had at least some fight in him.

Voldemort released the curse, and watched as the boy hung limply in the ropes that bound him to the headstone of Voldemort's father, yet still managed to maintain a disconcerting eye contact with his torturer. Looking into those bright green eyes Voldemort had to chuckle. The night was ringing with the sound of the Death Eaters' laughter. They had not been laughing earlier when Voldemort had used the same curse upon several of them, but they seemed to find the boy's pain hilarious.

"And to think, some of you believed that this boy destroyed me. Only a fool would believe that this boy could have ever been stronger than I," Voldemort lectured his Death Eaters. "But there will be no question in any one's mind. Harry Potter escaped me by luck alone. Now I will demonstrate my power by destroying him, in front of you all. There will be no mother to die for him this time. No Dumbledore to hide him away. I am not without compassion however; I will give the boy a chance. He will be allowed to fight me, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. You will have to wait for your meal just a little longer, Nagini," he proclaimed.

The snake looked up from where it lay, seemed to roll nonexistent shoulders in a manner that suggested a shrug, and then returned its attention to what appeared to be a magazine of some type. Voldemort blinked. Was his familiar *reading*? No, he could not allow himself to be distracted, not now. Still, the Dark Lord wondered how a language such as Parseltongue could possibly have a written form considering the vast majority of the creatures that used it were for the most part were unable to manipulate the world around them.

"Now untie him, Pettigrew, and give him back his wand."

The rat animagus gestured with his wand, freeing Potter, who scrambled to his feet as soon as he was released.

There was a moment, perhaps, when the boy looked like he might have been considering running for it, but his legs shook in fear as he stood on the overgrown grave, as the Death Eaters closed ranks, forming a semicircle behind their lord.

Pettigrew searched the area where Harry had collapsed from the pain in his scar and returned with Potter's wand, which he thrust roughly into the boy's hand without meeting his eye. Then Pettigrew returned to his place among the watching Death Eaters.

"You have been taught how to duel Harry Potter?" said Voldemort softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness.

The boy said nothing, but nodded.

"Excellent," Voldemort enthused while wondering just when a fourteen year old would have taught dueling. Not that it mattered, the boy was about to die. "We bow to each other. Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. "Come now, the particulars must be observed... Dumbledore would like you to show manners... Bow to the man who will kill you, Harry..."

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemort's lipless mouth was smiling. Potter bent slightly as well, the boy also maintained eye contact. Some part of Voldemort's mind approved. The boy knew he was going to die, but rather than cower he was facing it like a man.

"Very good Harry," Voldemort said softly, "you face me, straight-backed and proud, the way your father died... Now, we duel."

Voldemort raised his wand, smiling when he was the boy doing nothing that might defend against the Dark Lord's attack. Before casting, he noticed that the boy's eyes were no longer locked with his own, but were focused somewhere behind the Dark Lord.

"What the hell is that?" Potter screamed pointing with his left hand, a look of terror on his face.

Voldemort and all of his Death Eaters whirled in place to defend against whatever had so distracted the boy and they found... nothing. Confused, but still on guard, the Dark Lord called out, "There is nothing there Potter. What did you see?"

Silence answered Voldemort. "Potter?" he asked again as he returned his attention to Harry Potter.

Only to find the view of the boy running as if the hound of hell were nipping at his heels.

The reborn Voldemort blinked marveling at the audacity of the boy before raising his wand. "Take him," he ordered his Death Eaters, "but do not kill him, the boy falls to my power!"

Harry tried to ignore the injuries he has sustained in the maze, as well as the residual pain of Voldemort's Cruciatus, and concentrated on putting as much distance between himself and the Death Eaters as possible. All around him pulses of light showed that they were trying to stop him, though rather than giving chase; they stood their ground and cast spells at him.

Wizards.

Harry jinked around a large ornate tombstone when an orange curse he didn't recognize hit the stone, fracturing it. The upper half of the statue of some woman fell from its pedestal and onto Harry, pinning him to the ground. Before he could even begin to free himself, a Cruciatus Curse again hit him. The pain was so extreme, he no longer knew where he was... it was like knives of electricity were piercing every inch of his skin, his head was surely going to burst with pain, but somehow he knew that he couldn't scream, he wouldn't give the bastard the satisfaction.

And it stopped. Harry struggled to sit up, his legs still pinned under the fallen statue; his entire body shaking uncontrollably.

"Afraid to face me Harry?" Voldemort asked from where he stood, not having moved from his original position, "Perhaps you need a little help? Would you like this to all be over Harry? It could be you know, it would be so simple for me to end your little life. Just think, no more pain, no more fear. Would you like that Harry? Ask me to end it. Ask me."

Harry did not answer. If he was going to die, he wouldn't do it with a whimper. Those pitiless red eyes were telling him that death was coming, and there was nothing he could do about it... but he was not going to play along. He was not going to obey Voldemort... he was not going to beg...

"So far I've demonstrated the Cruciatus curse to you Harry," said Voldemort softly. "I believe a famous young man such as you should know all three of the Unforgivables. Before I re-introduce you to the Killing Curse, I've heard rumors that you have a certain resistance to the Imperius curse. Let us see how you like mine. Ask me to end your life Harry. Imperio!"

Harry felt a sense of wellbeing wash over him. It was as if his mind had been wiped of all worry... It was such a delight, not to think, not to fear, it was as though he were floating, dreaming... just ask... just ask... just ask...

I will not, he heard himself say, in the back of his mind, I will not surrender to anyone, ever... I won't do it, I won't say it...

Just ask...

"Fuck you!"

Those emphatic words burst from Harry's mouth; the shout echoed through the graveyard, and the dream state was gone as if it had never existed. Harry hissed in pain as the aches that the Cruciatus Curse had left all over his body rushed back to the fore, as the realization of where he was, and whom he faced returned as well.

"Fuck me?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now horrified that anyone would so defy their Dark Lord. "You dare to defy me Harry, even now? You cannot run from me any longer Harry. Does your defiance mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry?"

Harry lay pinned behind the ruined headstone and knew that it was over. There was no hope... no one to help. He watched as Voldemort raised his wand and took aim. It had not been that bad a life. Sure, the Dursleys were arses, but he had gotten to know Hermione, Ron and the Weasleys, and he had gotten to fly. He had done magic. He had met Susan. He had danced with Susan, he had kissed Susan and she had kissed him. Harry pushed an image of Susan's face to the front of his mind, her eyes, her lips, the taste of her...

Voldemort was ready. "Avada Kedavra!"

A jet of green light issued from Voldemorts wand. Harry watched as it arced across the distance that separated them. This was it. Would it hurt to die?

"Where is Harry Potter?" Susan demanded.

- "Miss Bones, you should go back to the castle with the rest of your classmates," Albus Dumbledore said calmly, his eyes twinkling.
- "Bugger that," the redhead spat. "Where is Harry? What are you doing to find him?"
- "Susan Amelia!" Auntie Amelia said, shocked at her nieces' language. "Respect your elders."

"Bugger that as well, Auntie." Susan swore hotly. "My elders have subjected my boyfriend to facing a Dragon with no training; to retrieving me from the lake when he couldn't swim by making him believe that if he failed I would die, and you forced him into a maze on the bloody castle grounds where he disappears because you bloody idiots never noticed that a Death Eater was impersonating someone who was supposedly one of both of your oldest friends? What precisely am I supposed to be respecting?"

"Susan!"

"Sadly Amelia," Dumbledore interrupted, "Miss Bones is correct, we have all failed our students badly this year. Miss Bones... Susan, already your Aunt's aurors have determined that the Triwizard cup was a portkey, and they are toiling to unravel the trace of that device."

"But until then, Harry is alone, facing Merlin knows what."

The old man had nothing to say to that, so he just nodded sadly.

"Fine. If he doesn't come back, I'm going to make sure the world knows who is at fault here." The young woman turned on her heel and marched back to her friends. The three of them were plainly ignoring the order to return to the castle, as were the three remaining champions.

Harry watched as the burst of green energy seemed to crawl toward him. Any second now, it would be over. If only...

A burst of white-hot flame intercepted the killing curse in midflight. The Killing curse may not be shielded against, but it turned out that dragon fire disrupted the curse utterly. There was a thundering smash as an enraged twenty-five ton Hungarian Horntail landed between Harry and the Death Eaters.

~ Who dares? ~ Kiska roared. ~ Who dares threaten one under my protection? ~

The Death Eaters cowered before the enraged dragon, but Voldemort stepped forward ~ Stand down Dragon ~ he bellowed in response. ~ This matter does not concern you! ~

~ I say Harry Potter is my concern Little Wizard, he is family. You, on the other claw, are not. ~ She responded. ~ Run away now, and I may let you live. ~

Harry found himself wondering why Voldemort had decided that screaming at a dragon was a good idea. The raven-haired wizard was startled when a jet-black horntail the size of a Clydesdale horse landed next to him. ~ Uncle Harry, are you all right? ~

- ~ Sweetie? ~ He asked.
- ~ This is why you should not go out without Auntie Susan, ~ she said, throwing the statue from his body with a swipe of her massive fore paw while keeping her eyes fixed on the Death Eaters. ~ Look at the trouble you've gotten into without her. ~
- ~ You have to get out of here Sweetie, ~ Harry said as he climbed to his feet. ~ These men will kill you. ~
- ~ They might try, ~ the dragon sniffed. ~ Mum has a plan. ~
- ~ You do not seem to be running Little Wizard, ~ Kiska thundered. ~ Are you that anxious to die? ~

"Kill the dragons!" Voldemort barked to his Death Eaters.

It took a moment, but the Death Eaters seemed to decide that they were more frightened of their reborn master than they were of the two dragons before them. Lucius Malfoy stepped forward and raised his wand.

And died messily when a blood red dragon the size of a horse, swooped in from above with claws slashing. ~ First you fools hurt my Uncle Harry, and then you threaten my MOTHER? ~ The Dragon roared. ~ Make your peace with your maker wizards, for now you face the wrath of Ron! ~

Thumper landed hard, crushing a pair of Death Eaters beneath her feet before gutting a third with a sweep of her tail spikes. ~ The wrath of Ron? Wouldn't you frighten them more if you went by your real name Flaming Fart? ~

Juno swooped in to a landing, cutting a Death Eater with a silver forearm in half with the boney leading edge of her left wing. ~ Pick on Ron later Thumper. I've taken care of one of the wizards that hurt Uncle Harry, but the others are getting away! ~

A curtain of flame engulfed the fleeing Death Eaters, snuffing their lives before they even realized they were under attack. Cuddles swooped down for a landing. ~ No they aren't. Hi Uncle Harry, we're here to rescue you! ~

The Dark Lord Voldemort stood stock still trying to understand what had happened. One moment, freshly reborn, he had been about to kill the child somehow responsible for his spending almost a decade and a half as a wraith, then a dragon appeared speaking Parseltongue, and then another dragon landed, and almost before he could blink his Death Eaters were slaughtered by what appeared to be a family of the beasts.

How did Potter get allies among the dragons?

When did dragons become intelligent enough to coordinate an attack like this? How were they speaking Parseltongue? Everyone knew that dragons were mindless beasts. How had it all gone so wrong?

Harry finished being messily sick behind one of the tombstones. The sights and smells of the eviscerated Death Eaters had gotten to him.

With an empty, yet still queasy stomach, Harry stood and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his Triwizard uniform, once again taking in the results of the short, yet vicious, battle. Dead Death Eaters were everywhere, with body parts strewn everywhere. He felt his gorge rising again, but fought it down. He turned to face the only surviving enemy in the graveyard.

- "How did you do it Potter? How did you enslave these dragons?"
- Draconic laughter filled the air. "Enslaved? What makes you think I did anything like that?" Harry asked.
- "How else would they obey your commands?"
- "You haven't heard me issue a single command," Harry pointed out. "Kiska and her family are not my servants, they are my friends."
- "But how did you teach them parseltongue?" the Dark Lord demanded.
- "Teach them?" Harry asked incredulously. "Do you mean to tell me that you never even tried to speak to a dragon? I didn't teach them anything. Here is a news flash for you. Dragons don't speak snake, snakes speak a bastardized version of dragon."
- "But they're beasts!"
- "They're people," Harry said dismissively. "Dragons speak, and laugh and have dreams. They're just bigger than us."
- "Fine Potter, you have me captured, but do you really think you can hold me? That your pitiful Ministry will be able to confine me?" Voldemort laughed. "I have a body again, and I will be free! Sooner or later your guard will be down and I'll end you." Voldemort extended his arms to the side, his wand held loosely in his right hand. "I surrender."
- Before Harry could speak, Kiska rumbled. ~ The problem, little wizard, is that you are not Harry's prisoner, you are mine. ~
- ~ Meaning what, Dragon? ~ The Dark Lord asked.
- ~ Meaning, I do not take prisoners. ~ With those words, Kiska unleashed her fire breath, incinerating the reborn Dark Lord. The massive she-dragon then turned her attention to the Dark Lord's familiar. ~ Will we be continuing this fight snake? ~
- Nagini immediately lowered her head in submission, ~ Don't bother on my account, ~ she hissed. ~ I never really liked the human in the first place, he always wanted me to eat his defective followers, and you can imagine what they would taste like. You've done me a favor really. ~
- Harry ignored the conversation between dragon and snake while never taking his eyes off of Voldemort's corpse. The Dark Lord's body lay on the ground; lifeless with no hint of the vaporous wraith he had witnessed leaving the burning body of Professor Quirrell first year. Could it really be over?
- Before he could dwell on it, he found himself mobbed by the young dragons.
- ~ Uncle Harry, are you all right? ~ One called as she galloped up to him. Harry somehow knew that this one was Thumper. ~ You were in so much pain! ~
- ~ Uncle Harry, we were so worried. ~ One of the others added.
- ~ Who was worried? ~ Ron scoffed. ~ Not me, I just wanted into the fight! ~
- ~ Don't listen to him, Uncle Harry, Ron was the one who was the loudest about coming to help you," Thumper said, ~ Flaming Fart was sooo worried about you. ~
- ~ I was not! ~ Ron said butting his head into Thumper's side. ~ The only thing that worried me was that one of you clumsy idiots might have hurt him when you tried to protect him. ~
- "Uncle Harry was fine," Sweetie said, a hint of pride in her voice. "I was with him after all."
- ~ Thank you all, ~ Harry said, trying to head off a fight, ~ you all saved my life. ~
- ~ It is what one does for family, ~ Kiska said simply. ~ We had best be going, all the magic that was expended here is sure to attract attention. That metal object, ~ she gestured toward the Triwizard cup where it lay in the tall grass, ~ seems to be imbued with same wizard travel magic used to move me and my clutch to your school. It should get you away from here Harry. ~
- ~ That's what got me here. ~ Harry admitted. ~ I think you're right though, I doubt the Ministry would take kindly to the idea what you killed these people, no matter what kind of monsters they were. Thank you again. ~
- ~ Come along children, ~ Kiska said. ~ We will visit Harry another time when there is less threat of being attacked. ~
- ~ Uncle Harry, ~ Cuddles said quietly... or at least as quietly as a two ton dragon could manage. ~ Maybe you could come visit us. ~
- ~ I'd like that Cuddles, maybe I can work something out... ~ Harry suddenly found himself flat on his back being licked by a forked tongue as long as his arm and twice as thick.
- ~ I miss you so much Uncle Harry, ~ the dragon sobbed. The saliva assault on Harry was joined by her sisters while Ron stood to the side rolling his eyes.
- ~ It is time to go children, ~ Kiska insisted. ~ We really must be going before more wizards arrive. ~
- ~ Yeah, come on, ~ Ron agreed. ~ It's all you can eat water buffalo night, and I don't want to miss it. Later Uncle Harry! ~

~ Bye Uncle Harry, ~ the girls chorused as they launched themselves into the air following Ron and their mother. Harry lay on the ground and watched the six dragons make the jump into the Dragon's travel technique, each of the doing it individually this time rather than riding on their mother's back, and he started to laugh.

He still hurt all over his body, and suspected that he was injured far worse than he knew, but damn, his life was weird. It took most of ten minutes until he had enough control of himself to struggle to his feet, still giggling. Harry limped over to the Triwizard cup, and stooped to reach for it when he realized that there was no way in hell the Dursleys would ever allow him to go to Romania to visit his dragons. He paused and thought for a moment, and then he limped over to where the Dark Lord had fallen. Truth be told, there was not a lot left of the man, dragon fire being what it was, but there was a piece that might be useful in proving his story.

He picked up his proof and hobbled over to the second thing he wanted to take with him. He shoved his proof under his left arm and hefted the second by grabbing a handful of hair and dragged it toward the cup.

Upon reaching the cup, Harry made sure he had a good grip on his evidence and grabbed onto the cup. For the second time that day he felt the sensation of a hook behind his navel and his feet left the ground.

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Triwizard Tales Survival and Aftermath

Harry's feet hit the ground hard and he once again found himself sprawled face down on the ground. Well, he reflected, at least it was dry tall grass this time. Fighting against the quaking that still plagued his muscles from Voldemort's cruciatus, he struggled to his feet.

Back at Hogwarts, he noted as a sense of relief washed over him. Had anyone noticed his arrival?

"Harry!" Susan shrieked.

Well, that answered that. Harry looked up to see that Susan was running toward him from the stands as fast as she could.

In Susan's wake were Hermione and his fellow champions. From a slightly different angle, he saw Dumbledore, the Minister of Magic, Susan's aunt Amelia and the rest of the judges also heading in his direction.

It occurred to Harry that he ought to figure out what he was going to tell everyone. He could not just tell them all the truth after all. Doing so would open him up to possible punishment for colluding with Kiska to win the first task, and letting the Ministry know that a specific group of dragons killed so many wizards would likely have some officious idiot ordering the death of Kiska and her brood.

Well, he told himself, he had most specifically not wanted to be in this stupid tournament, and he had pretty much lied, cheated and traded on his celebrity through the whole thing. Perhaps his best course of action was to keep right on with the skill set that had worked for him so far.

If Harry had learned nothing else from Vernon Dursley he had learned that the best way to avoid having to explain yourself was to accuse the person who might have taken exception to whatever it was you needed to explain.

So, the plan was to lie. Lie hard, lie fast, and lie constantly. That and blame Dumbledore.

"Harry!" Susan cried again as she wrapped herself around her boyfriend.

Harry hissed in pain as she did so.

"Oh..." Susan backed away from him, actually looking at him for the first time. "Did I hurt you?"

"Only a whole lot," Harry admitted while reaching to wrap his good right arm around her shoulders. "I don't mind a hug, just not across the ribs. Sue, I'm about to be really stupid, just go along with what I say, ok? I'll explain later."

Susan's eyes were wide at his words, but she nodded as the others neared.

"Bloody hell Harry," Cedric said as he arrived with Hermione's hand in his. "What happened to you?"

"Harry?" Hermione asked her eyes wide as she had seen what Harry had brought with him. "Is that?"

"Harry," Dumbledore interrupted as he approached. "Where were you taken?"

"You!" Harry spat. "You lied to me."

"What?" Harry's reaction startled the old man.

"All of you. There are only three tasks you said," Harry glared at the assembled judges. "Take the cup and it's over, you said. Why didn't you tell me about the *fourth* task? You came up with another task because there were four of us didn't you? I told you all I didn't put my name into the cup, I didn't want to do this, but you just had to spring a surprise on the one of us stupid enough to actually take the cup, didn't you?"

"What do you mean 'fourth task'?" Madam Maxime asked.

"The bloody fourth task, everything that happened to me after I took the stupid cup!" Harry exclaimed. "Minister, I think you should hold a public inquiry about this."

"What are you talking about Harry?" Fudge asked fumbling with his bowler hat at the very mention of a public inquiry.

"They had the fourth tasks set up to force whoever took the cup to have to fight a reincarnated Dark Lord Voldemort," Harry said, really getting into the fiction he was spinning for the audience. "They used my blood to reform his body," Harry showed everyone the still oozing wound on his left arm, "and then he hit me with at least two cruciatus curses."

"The Dark Lord was reborn?" Headmaster Karkaroff demanded, clutching at his left forearm.

"For about half an hour," Harry shrugged. "Don't worry though, it's taken care of."

- "NO!" Fudge exclaimed. "Lord Thingy is dead."
- "I know," Harry said with a puzzled look on his face. "I just told you it was taken care of."
- "No," the Minister protested, "He died thirteen years ago."
- "More or less," Harry agreed. "And he did it again tonight. Ask the Headmaster and the rest of the judges. They're the ones that set it all up. I mean how else could the Triwizard cup have turned out to be a portkey?"
- "We did no such thing Harry," Dumbledore protested. "It was..."
- "Oh, right, it never happened." Harry said working himself up to a rant while scooping his proof from the high grass. "And this isn't Voldemort's arm, and it isn't holding his bloody wand! Honestly Minister, are you going to let them get away with this?"
- "Lord Thingy's arm?" Fudge said, backing away in horror. "And his wand?"
- "Yeah," Harry agreed nodding vigorously. "I don't know how they did it, but they set it up so that Voldemort was reincarnated for their stupid fourth task."
- "Lord Thingy is back?"
- "For about half an hour, yeah. Long enough to call his Death Eaters to him and to start throwing curses around. What kind of task is fighting a Dark Lord? I mean he came out of the cauldron looking all snakey and stuff." Harry waved the severed arm in the Minister's face. "Seriously Minister, just look at this thing. Does that even look remotely human?"
- "Keep that away from me!"
- "If you think this is bad, you should have seen it when it was still attached to his body and casting curses at me." Harry said his eyes wide. "Now, that was scary, let me tell you."
- "Harry..." Dumbledore attempted to interrupt.
- "Oh, no," Harry said, swinging the wand holding hand of the severed arm into the Headmaster's face before waving it at all of the judges. "You lot set this whole thing up. You all made me compete when you knew quite clearly that there was no way I could get past Headmaster Dumbledore's age line around the Goblet of Fire. You made me face a dragon, you tried to kill Susan in the lake, never asking if I could swim, you made me go into that maze full of some really horrible creatures, and then your Triwizard cup took me to Voldemort. Minister, you've got to do something about this!"
- "Dumbledore!" Fudge shouted, "what is all this?"
- "Mr. Potter, where did the portkey take you?" Amelia Bones interrupted her Minister, "the longer we wait, the colder the trail becomes, we may never find those who were waiting for you when you were taken."
- "I have no idea where I was taken Madam Bones," Harry admitted. "But they aren't going anywhere. I'm pretty sure they're dead."
- "Dead?" Amelia blinked. "How did they die?"
- Harry hesitated. What to say? "Voldemort wanted to prove to his people that he was more powerful than I was, and wanted to duel me. So Peter cut me loose from the tombstone he had tied me to and gave me back my wand."
- "Peter?" Olympe asked. "Who is Peter?"
- "Oh," Harry slapped his forehead, and turning to search in the high grass. "I almost forgot. Peter Pettigrew."
- "Harry," Amelia said gently, "Peter Pettigrew was killed by Sirius Black the day after your parents were killed."
- "No he wasn't," Harry said. "And I don't appreciate you saying bad things like that about my Godfather."
- "Your Godfather?" Amelia asked. "Sirius Black is your Godfather?"
- "Yeah," Harry acknowledged stooping over to lift his second piece of evidence from the ground with a grunt of pain. "And here is what's left of Peter Pettigrew."
- Fudge shrieked at the sight of Pettigrew's upper torso. In short order, his shriek was joined by similar sounds from Fleur and Susan. Hermione looked like she was going to be sick, but she was not surprised by the half traitor as she had been staring at him since she arrived on the scene.
- "You'll note the Dark Mark on his left arm?" Harry said allowing the half corpse to fall to the ground. "Minister, you've got to do something about the horrible injustice that was perpetrated against my Godfather by your predecessor. Surely a hero of law and order like you can fix all this."
- "Peter Pettigrew? Peter Pettigrew was a Death Eater?" Fudge gasped, backing away from the bisected torso, a look of revulsion on his face.
- "You were telling us what happened Mr. Potter," Amelia reminded them all.
- "Oh, yeah. Peter cut me down and gave me back my wand, and then Voldemort wanted to duel. I distracted him, and ran for it. That made all the Death Eaters start casting all kinds of spells at me, and well; I ended up trapped under some kind of statue, and then the dragons came.
- "Dragons?" Fudge squeaked.

"Yeah, a family of Welsh Greens I think. At least that is what they looked like... I was mostly trying to hide. They must have been nesting in the area and were attracted by all the magic being thrown around or something," Harry said, hoping that he was telling enough of the truth that the manufactured parts of the story would not be noticeable. "The dragons sort of killed all the Death Eaters before the big one barbequed Voldemort where he stood."

- "Barbequed?" Fudge asked.
- "That's a sort of Muggle cooking technique," Amelia said authoritatively. "It involves roasting whole animals in forest fires."
- "Uh," Harry hesitated, wondering where Susan's aunt had gotten that idea. "Ok, sure. Then one of the smaller ones found me, and I guess that I wasn't a threat or it wasn't hungry or something, so the dragons left me alone and flew away."
- "But..." Olympe Maxim seemed to search for the proper words. "Why did you bring... that?" she asked pointing at the severed arm.
- "All the other tasks had use trying to retrieve something," Harry answered having anticipated this question. "The egg, a hostage, the cup. I figured that you wanted something from your 'secret task'. So, I brought the biggest piece of Voldemort I could find."
- Amelia's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid, Mr. Potter that parts of your story don't seem to make much sense."
- "Now Amelia," Dumbledore began.
- "What do you mean Madam Bones?" Harry asked as innocently as he could manage, recalling another bit of wisdom from the mind of Vernon Dursley. Authority demands sincerity. Once you can fake that, you're golden.
- "You specifically said that 'it was taken care of', now you're telling us that it was a family of dragons?"
- "Oh," crap Potter, Harry thought, THINK. "Well, ok, maybe I didn't take care of them myself, but the dragons probably wouldn't have reacted if they weren't throwing all that magic at me. Maybe I can't really claim responsibility for rekilling Voldemort, but I think I can claim the credit."
- "Hmm," the head of the DMLE said. "And then there was your claim of escaping the Dark Lord by 'distracting him'. Do you really expect us to believe that you managed to 'distract' the most focused evil wizard in the last half century sufficiently that you might escape?"
- Harry focused his eyes on the ground, and then looked up guiltily. "Well Madam Bones..."
- "We're waiting Mr. Potter."
- Harry sighed and nodded. "I guess you caught me," he said, before his eyes went wide and his face paled. He pointed beyond the small crowd and screamed, "What the hell is that?"
- Instantly the witches and wizards pivoted to face the oncoming danger, their wands out and defensive spells on their lips, while the Minister took pains to position himself behind the Chief Mugwump. They immediately realized that they did not know what the boy had seen.
- "What was it Harry?" Dumbledore asked.
- "Speak up Mr. Potter, what did you see?" Amelia demanded.
- "Harry?" Cedric asked as the 7th year turned to look for his friend, only to see the younger boy moving away from the crowd as quickly as he could with Susan's hand in his. It took only an instant for the Hufflepuff to understand what had just happened, and begin to laugh.
- "What do you find so funny Mr. Diggory?" Dumbledore asked, still on guard.
- "I'm not sure, but I think," Cedric said with a wide grin, "that Harry just demonstrated his technique for distracting 'focused' wizards."

- As soon as they rounded the corner of the castle, Harry slowed to a stop, and leaned against the stone wall with a small whimper of pain.
- "Are you alright, Harry?" Susan asked worriedly.
- "Yeah," Harry nodded as he leaned over panting with his hands upon his knees. "I just need to see Madam Pomfrey as soon as I can."
- "Well, let's go then!" the redhead insisted.
- "Just a second," Harry pleaded. "Let me catch my breath. Do you think they bought it?"
- "Bought what?"
- "The story I told," Harry replied. After shoving himself away from the wall and taking her hand, he started limping toward the nearest castle entrance. "It was mostly true... Not the fourth task stuff of course, but the rest of it."
- "Was it bad?" She asked, dreading the answer.
- "Would telling you I thought of you when I thought I was going to die sound like a cheesy pick-up line?" Harry grinned.
- "Oh, yes Harry, I so believe that. Pull the other one. It's got bells on it."
- Harry grinned, not sure if he was happy she didn't believe him or not. "It was Kiska and her brood that saved me."

"Kiska? But why did you..."

"Voldemort called for his Death Eaters as soon as he was reborn. They were all there when Kiska and her little ones showed up. Of course the little ones' are bigger than most horses now, but still. The Death Eaters didn't stand a chance... including Malfoy's dad. I didn't want some idiot in the Ministry deciding that the dragons that killed the poor unfortunate Imperius victims needed to be put down."

"I see," Susan said. "I think you made the right choice."

Harry stumbled and Susan moved to support him, preventing her boyfriend from falling on his face. "No more stalling Potter, you're going to the Hospital wing if I have to stun you and levitate you myself."

"Wow," Harry said through clenched teeth. "And I thought Hermione was bossy."

"Watch it mister."

"Help me!"

Harry and Susan exchanged a look at the sound of the unknown voice.

"Help me! Please?" The plaintive voice came again, "my father will reward you! Please help me!"

Harry and Susan started moving again, following the pleading voice to one of the entrances to the castle. Protruding from the doorframe at approximately head level was a rainbow colored mass of... well, not hair, but something that sort of resembled hair much the same way a leather bag sort of resembled a human lung.

Again, Harry and Susan exchanged a look. Harry noticed a look of recognition wash across Susan's features.

"Draco?" she asked.

"Bones?" The voice asked. "Oh thank Merlin. Bones, you just have to help me! I'm stuck."

"What's wrong Malfoy?" Harry asked, wondering just how one went about being stuck in a doorway. "How are you stuck?"

"Potter? Oh hell."

"How are you stuck Draco?" Susan insisted.

"My... My... It's my hair. My hair is too big for the doorway. I tried to go through without my hood up and now I'm stuck!"

"Well, take the wig off Malfoy," Harry snorted.

"Wig?" Malfoy sputtered. "Are you mad Potter? I'm not wearing a wig."

"Not wearing a wig?" Harry asked reaching out to handle the rainbow hued mass. "You've got Day-Glo rainbow nylon growing out of your head now Malfoy?"

The only response from the Slytherin was silence.

Susan placed a hand on the Slytherin's shoulder. "Come on Draco, talk to us so we can help."

"Fine. I can't take the wig off. Goyle kept pulling on it, so I used a family sticking charm. But that damned dwarf Flitwick confiscated my wand after I thrashed your pal Weasley, Potter."

Harry quit trying to figure out why a family would have a proprietary sticking charm and looked to Susan. "Draco hurt Ron?"

"No, not really, they sort of slapped at each other a few times is all. It was kind of sad really." Susan drew her wand. "What sticking charm did you use Draco, I'll cancel it."

"I'm not revealing any Malfoy family spells to you Bones."

Susan paused for a moment. "Alright Draco, We'll let someone know you're here then."

"Hurry it up!" Draco commanded. "My father will hear of it if you delay in any way!"

Harry started limping towards the next door into the castle with Susan at his side. "Who should we tell?"

"I don't know," Susan shrugged. "If I remember, I'll find someone after I get you to the Hospital wing. Maybe Lavender Brown or Parvati Patil... I don't know, they might be interested." Harry laughed and Susan offered him an evil grin. "I don't know who that git thinks he is, trying to order me around."

Harry woke up staring at the ceiling of the Hospital Wing, and feeling far better than he had in a while. Madam Pomfrey could be a bit vindictive with her foul tasting potions if you were silly enough to come in to her hospital ward actually needing medical attention, but damn, she did good work.

He took a deep breath testing his ribs. Perfect. No pain at all. Harry idly wondered how long he could hide out in the Hospital wing and avoid the repercussions of what he had done upon his return.

"Feeling better Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

Crap. Evidently, there was no hiding from the repercussions. Harry sat up in the bed to find his Headmaster sitting in a chintz chair at the foot of his bed. "Much Professor. Madam Pomfrey is very good."

"You caused quite a stir yesterday Harry," Dumbledore said. "Not five minutes after you left us so dramatically Madam Bone's Aurors managed to trace the portkey that took you to Voldemort. I accompanied Madam Bones to the crime scene. There was quite a bit of carnage. And there was far too much evidence that you were cursed far more than you indicated when you spoke of the event, and Madam Pomfrey's diagnosis of your injuries confirmed that beyond any doubt."

- "I was trying not to dwell on it," Harry admitted.
- "So tell me Harry, do you truly believe I set up the rebirth of Voldemort as part of a Triwizard task?"
- "No sir, I was pretty sure you didn't. However, I figured that I needed to get the Ministry's attention to get Sirius exonerated. Without the distraction, I figured the Minister would probably sweep it all under a rug."
- Dumbledore sighed. "I wish you had trusted me to deal with Sirius' situation Harry.
- "I have trusted you for most of a year Professor," Harry pointed out. "Sirius still had a 'Kill on Sight' order out on him yesterday."
- "He did." the Headmaster admitted.
- "So now, the boy who lived who is also the winner of the Triwizard Tournament, and has killed Voldemort, again, has appealed to the Minister with evidence that Sirius is innocent. How can that go wrong?"
- "I can think of many ways, but in truth, you got very lucky Harry. Cornelius has rescinded the death order, and is going to be announcing Sirius' being cleared tonight when he awards you your prize money and eternal glory for winning the tournament."
- The good news about Sirius brightened Harry's outlook for a few seconds, but more than a little guilt replaced that feeling. "Do we really have to have a ceremony Professor? I mean everyone put so much effort into each of the tasks..."
- "Are you feeling guilty about what you had to do to win Harry?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling.
- "A bit," Harry admitted.
- "I've been paying close attention to your actions since the first task Harry," Dumbledore said quietly. "I am still not clear on what transpired between you and the dragon, but it is clear that you forged some kind of relationship with the creature, and if Hagrid is to be believed with her hatchlings. Should I assume that the current Ministry order to put down the rogue Welsh Green dragons will be sadly unfulfilled?"
- "Yeah, I guess so."
- "I suspected as much. Then the long conversation I had with Clahcktahnk concerning his acquisition of a large quantity of a certain delicacy confirmed the suspicion I had formed after the first task. Rest assured Harry, you did not violate a single rule. Each of the competitors sought and used advantages throughout the tournament. Indeed the only person who should be disappointed in his actions from this tournament is me."
- Several seconds of silence passed between the two wizards, until Harry once again broke it. "Do I have to go back to the Dursleys?"
- "With Sirius' pending exoneration," the Headmaster temporized, "I would say, no. I would not think that you will need to darken the door of #4 Privet drive ever again."

- Three hours after the ceremony that had Harry awarded the 1000 galleon prize and the title of Supreme Champion of the Triwizard Tournament; the four champions were gathered in the unused classroom they had claimed for a final meeting.
- "I have to know," Viktor slurred. He had brought along a generous amount of what he claimed as his favorite beverage, something called 'slivovitz' that he claimed to be 'rakia made with the plums', whatever that was.
- Whatever it was, Harry found it to be a bit strong for his taste.
- "I have to know," Viktor continued, having collected his thoughts again. "What was final question from the Sphinx?"
- "She asked me what the Dewey Decimal class for languages was," Cedric laughed. "I was lucky that Hermione made me learn the system."
- Viktor shook his head. "Twang!" He said.
- "Twang?" Harry asked
- "That is sound I hear in my nightmares," Viktor said sadly. "Three times I was asked a question, three times I was wrong, and three times, Twang! I fly without a broom. Even about my favorite color. Pathetic. Had I been asked your question... Twang."
- "She asked me a riddle, 'What is black and white and read all over?' A newspaper."
- "I do not understand." Fleur said. She had brought along a bottle of wine, French of course, and had taken pains to ensure that Harry had learned how to appreciate it.

- "Nor do I," Viktor admitted.
- The champions shared a laugh.

"Twang!" Viktor said sadly.

- "I never got that far," Fleur said sadly. "Damned skrewt."
- Stupid things got me too," Harry admitted. "At least twice."
- "I heard," Cedric interjected, "that they want to make a fourth task a permanent part of the tournament."

"t's a child's riddle. A newspaper is black ink on white paper, and the past tense of read is 'read'."

- "Wonderful," Harry said, leaning back in his chair. "At least it won't be us ever again." He raised his left hand until it was well over his head. "I've had it to here with eternal glory."
- "Well," Viktor smiled. "It won't be us... You're still in school..."
- Harry blinked when he realized Viktor was right. "Bloody hell."

- "I'm not sure this is a good idea,"
- "Lighten up Amy," Sirius said. "Harry says it's perfectly safe."
- "Don't you dare call me Amy, Sirius Black, and don't you forget that Harry Potter went into a stadium to face a nesting Horntail. I'm not sure he even understands what the word 'safe' even means."
- "I have to say that it's an honor to have you here Madam Bones, it's not often we get such high ranking visitors here." Constance Beaumont said, all the while working out how this visit might be parlayed into an increase in her funding.
- "We're escorting our wards to visit the dragon Harry faced for the tournament." Amelia explained. "I hope that finding that particular dragon is possible."
- "It is," Beaumont agreed. "And here comes your guide."
- Charlie Weasley approached at a trot. "You wanted to see me Boss?"
- "Yes Weasley, a few visitors from Britain. You're to take them out to Kiska's cave and provide security."
- Charlie blinked. "Kiska's cave? Are you sure that's a good idea?"
- "It will be fine Charlie."
- "Harry?"
- "Just conduct the tour Weasley," Beaumont said dismissively. "Our guests have been made aware of the dangers."

- "Harry," Charlie said as the party made its way into the small valley that housed Kiska's cavern. "Look I know you fought Kiska once, and even survived somehow, but mate, I'm telling you, you don't want a rematch."
- "Relax Charlie," Harry laughed. "The very last thing I would ever want to do is fight a dragon. This is just a visit. You need to learn to trust more."
- "I can hardly manage to get my folks to visit me, and here you are, wanting to visit a dragon," Charlie noted. "You can see how odd this looks."
- "Honestly Mr. Weasley," Susan said. "You don't need to worry; Harry isn't looking for a fight."
- "Call me Charlie, please, I hear 'Mr. Weasley' and I start looking for my father," a smile crossed his lips. "Or maybe my older brother. Bill has always thought he was so cool, but I always thought he was a bit stiff."
- "I'll have to let Bill know that the next time I see him," Harry laughed. "This is just a visit."
- "Harry, no one 'just visits' a dragon," Charlie said. "I don't know what you think you know, but trust me, Kiska isn't going to be happy to see you."
- "Charlie," Harry grinned at the older man. "Ron always told me how laid back you were. Today I've learned that Bill Weasley, the coolest man on the planet is in all actuality a 'bit stiff' and that Charlie Weasley, the easiest going man on the planet actually worries too much."

Charlie stopped dead in his tracks. Worries too much?

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"This is the valley," Charlie said. "It appears that the Horntail family is either in their cavern or out hunting. There are several other dragons out today. There is a bonded pair of Welsh Greens over there... you can just see the female spreading her wings so that the male can groom her. The Welsh Green is the only specie of dragon that mates for life, Esmeralda and Emerson have been together for almost two centuries. Up on that hill there, is one of the oldest dragons on this reserve, Tusks, a male Romanian Longhorn."

A piercing bellow filled the air. "And that is the call of a male Horntail in flight. The researchers say that the call is the dragon's way of locating his home from the air."

- "What do you think it means?" Susan asked innocently.
- "Well, I think he's just having fun."
- "We can always ask Harry."
- "Ask Harry?" Charlie repeated noticing for the first time that his youngest brother's best friend was no longer with the group, and wondered where the boy might have gotten off to. "Why would you think Harry would know?"
- "Two reasons," Susan grinned. "First is Harry can speak to dragons."
- "Miss Bones," Charlie said kindly, "no one can speak to dragons. Oh, there's the male horntail." The Dragon Handler pointed out the huge red flying creature.
- "Sure they can't," Susan grinned at the older man. "The second reason is that Harry is riding on Ron now."
- "Ron? Who told you that the dragon's name is Ron?"
- "Harry told me," Susan explained. "I got a little sick watching him eat, Ron I mean... Ron the dragon, not Ron your brother, so I missed it when Harry named them."
- "Harry named them?" Charlie asked incredulously before looking up. "Harry is riding Ron?"
- "See that Amy?" Sirius asked. "That's my godson up there."
- "And that's my niece who's bamboozling the Dragon handler." Amelia pointed out. "And don't call me Amy."
- Ron the Dragon swooped low over the sightseers, with Harry Potter on his back, holding on with both arms and whooping with joy in harmony with the dragon's call.
- "I think you're right about the doing it for fun," Susan noted to Charlie who was staring after the dragon in shock.
- "No one rides a dragon," Charlie muttered. "It's impossible."
- "Charlie old boy, I think you'll find that my Godson does the impossible with annoying regularity," Sirius snarked. "He even got Amy here to loosen up a bit."
- "I've still got my wand Sirius Black," Amelia said in a dangerous tone. "You remember my wand don't you, the one I used on you so often when you were a trainee? All me Amy again and I'll see to it you meet my wand again."
- "She loves me you know," Sirius confided in Charlie. "That's just her way of showing it."
- "Are you people insane?" Charlie demanded. "Harry is *riding* a bloody Horntail, one of the most dangerous dragons in the world!"
- "There's no reason to be jealous," Susan laughed. "If you want a ride, all you have to do is ask."

After an hour of playing with the dragons in the air, at one point leaping from Ron to Thumper in mid-flight, Harry landed, only to have Susan rush up to him and smack him on the arm.

- "What were you thinking?"
- "What?" Harry asked, surprised by his girlfriend's actions.
- "You were at least a thousand feet in the air and you jumped from one dragon to another? Are you trying to kill me?" Susan smacked Harry again. "Don't you ever do that again!"
- "Alright, alright," Harry grumbled, while trying to ignore the draconic laughter. ~ Hush you lot! ~ He called up to the circling dragons.
- "Harry?"
- "Yeah Charlie?"
- The second oldest of Arthur Weasley's sons searched for the proper words. "You can speak to dragons?"
- "Yeah."
- "And they aren't mindless beasts?"
- "Good lord no," Harry laughed. "They're people. Big, scaly, and extremely dangerous, but people. Kiska considers herself the Queen of the world, and I, for one, am not going to argue with her, Sweetie and Cuddles are about as little girlish as a pair of dragons can be... Juno is bossy as hell, and Thumper is a scrapper who doesn't take crap off anyone."
- "What about Ron," Charlie asked. "And why did you name him 'Ron'?"

- "Ron is bound and determined to take over as the ruler of the world as soon as Kiska steps down. He wanted to be named Reddeth or Smaug."
- "So why did you name him for my little brother?"
- "Well," Harry grinned, "have you seen the way either of the Rons eat? I mean, seriously, if there were ever twins separated at birth..."
- "Yeah, ok, I can see that," Charlie laughed. "But..."
- Charlie's words stopped when Ron and Thumper landed next to the pair of wizards with a rush of wing driven wind.
- ~ What does the red furred servant want Uncle Harry? ~ Thumper asked.
- ~ They're talking about me, I heard them, ~ Ron said proudly. ~ That's because I'm the best, and everyone knows it. Even the servants. ~
- ~ This is Charlie, ~ Harry explained. ~ I think he'd like to fly with you like you did with me. ~
- Charlie stepped back at the sound of Harry hissing at the dragons, his first visceral reaction to the sound of a parselmouth speaking. However, he calmed himself when Harry laughed, and the dragons showed signs amusement. That was when he noticed the evil grin crossing the younger man's face.
- "What's going on Harry?" He asked before he squawked when the female's head shot forward on her long neck and grasped him at his torso, lifting him into the air and dropping him onto her back. "What have you done Harry? What is she doing?"
- "Just taking you for a little flight Charlie!" Harry shouted as Thumper lifted from the ground. "If she gets too rough, just smack her!"
- Ron stood next to Harry for several moments as the pair watched Thumper and Charlie's flight. ~ You know Uncle Harry, ~ Ron said. ~ I could probably steal Charlie away from her... I could give him a real ride. ~
- ~ Have fun, ~ Harry laughed. ~ Just don't hurt Charlie. ~
- Susan approached and her arms encircled Harry's waist from behind as the pair watched the red dragon's approach to intercept his sister and Charlie.
- "Charlie's going to hurt you, you know that right?"
- "Hurt me?" Harry laughed. "Don't be silly, I've got dragons."

AN: And so ends my crack filled Triwizard tournament. There might be a sequel, but not soon. A lot of people seemed to like this one. Thanks for all the reviews.