

Harry Potter

Harry pulled the invisibility cloak tighter around his shoulders as he followed Hagrid down the sloping lawn toward the Forbidden Forest.

This was mental. Completely mental.

Hagrid lumbered ahead, dressed in what Harry could only assume was his "best" hairy brown suit—the one that looked like it had been borrowed from a very large, very dead bear. The gamekeeper kept tugging at his tie, which appeared to be strangling him, and Harry caught the overwhelming scent of cologne drifting back on the breeze. It smelled like someone had dumped an entire bottle of pine-scented cleaning solution mixed with wet dog onto Hagrid's massive frame.

Why couldn't Hagrid just write a letter? A simple owl would have done the trick. "Dear Harry, the First Task involves something terrifying. Prepare accordingly. Best, Hagrid." Done. Easy. Instead, Harry was currently playing third wheel to whatever this was, invisible and uncomfortable, following a half-giant who was clearly nervous about a date.

A date Harry had to witness. While invisible. This was a new level of awkward, even for Hogwarts.

Hagrid muttered to himself as he walked, adjusting his tie for the dozenth time. "Just be yourself, that's what they say, innit? Be yourself. You're a Keeper of Keys an' Grounds, Professor of Magical Creatures, that's respectable work. An' she likes creatures too, doesn't she? Common ground, that is..."

Harry winced. He felt genuinely sorry for Hagrid—the man was clearly trying his best, and it was sweet in a mortifying sort of way. But Merlin, did Harry have to be here for this?

They reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest just as a tall figure emerged from the shadows. Very tall. Madame Maxime stood at least as tall as Hagrid, possibly taller, wrapped in a dark traveling cloak that made her look imposing and elegant simultaneously. Her hat was adorned with what looked like actual raven feathers, and her face showed polite interest as Hagrid approached.

"Ah, 'Agrid," she said, her accent thick and warm. "Right on time, as always."

"Olympe!" Hagrid's face split into a huge grin, and he sketched an awkward bow that made his jacket creak alarmingly. "Yeh look... well, yeh look beautiful. Like a... like a really tall, elegant... tree?"

Harry closed his eyes. Dear Merlin, someone please strike him down now.

Madame Maxime's lips twitched, but she accepted the compliment with grace. "You are too kind, 'Agrid. Shall we walk? You mentioned something... interesting to show me?"

"Oh, right, yeah!" Hagrid gestured toward the forest path. "This way. It's somethin' special, I promise yeh that."

They started walking, and Harry followed at a careful distance, trying to step quietly despite the undergrowth. The forest path was wide enough that he could stay off to the side, where roots and leaves wouldn't crunch too loudly under his feet.

"So," Hagrid said, his voice a bit too loud and enthusiastic, "I've been meanin' ter ask—how're yeh findin' Hogwarts? Comfortable in that carriage an' all?"

"It is adequate," Madame Maxime replied diplomatically. "Though I must say, the castle itself is quite impressive. So much history in these walls."

"Oh, yeah, loads of history! Been here since... well, centuries, anyway. An' the grounds—I maintain 'em meself, yeh know. Every tree, every bush. Well, not the Forbidden Forest, o' course, that maintains itself, but the rest—"

"You must take great pride in your work," Madame Maxime said, and it sounded genuine.

Hagrid puffed up slightly. "I do, yeah. It's important work, connectin' students with nature, with creatures. Most of 'em are scared o' things they shouldn't be scared of, yeh know? Just takes a bit o' understanding."

They walked in silence for a moment, and Harry saw Hagrid working himself up to something. The big man cleared his throat several times, each one sounding like a small rockslide.

"Olympe," Hagrid started, his voice uncharacteristically tentative. "I've been meanin' ter say... that is, I wanted ter mention... well, yeh've got a real way with magical creatures, haven't yeh? Very impressive, that is."

Madame Maxime's expression showed polite interest. "Thank you, 'Agrid. I 'ave always believed that understanding creatures is essential to proper magical education."

"Right, right, exactly!" Hagrid said, nodding so enthusiastically his beard bounced. "That's what I always say! Well, not exactly what I always say, but somethin' similar, I reckon. Important work, that is. Very important. Educational. An'... an' other things."

He trailed off awkwardly, clearly having lost track of where he was going with this.

"Indeed," Madame Maxime said, graciously pretending that had been a complete thought.

"Beautiful night too," Hagrid added desperately, gesturing up at the sky with a hand the size of a dinner plate. "Stars an' all. Very... starry."

Harry felt a pang of sympathy mixed with intense secondhand embarrassment. At least Tonks and I don't have an invisible fourteen-year-old following us around, he thought. Probably. Then again, with how terrible his luck was, there was probably some invisible stalker he didn't know about yet. Maybe Rita Skeeter had somehow perfected invisibility magic just to make his life more difficult.

The thought of Rita Skeeter watching him kiss Tonks made Harry's stomach turn uncomfortably. He shoved the thought away and focused on not tripping over a root.

The conversation ahead had shifted to safer topics—Care of Magical Creatures curricula, the differences between Beauxbatons and Hogwarts approaches, favorite magical creatures. Hagrid's enthusiasm returned as he described various beasts he'd worked with, and Madame Maxime asked questions that seemed both polite and genuinely interested.

But Harry noticed something. Beneath the pleasant conversation, she asked questions that seemed casual but were actually probing for information. When Hagrid mentioned the tournament, she steered the conversation that direction smoothly, asking about safety measures, about what precautions were being taken.

She wasn't just here for a pleasant evening walk. She was gathering intelligence.

The trees grew denser as they went deeper into the forest. Harry's nerves started climbing. Whatever Hagrid wanted to show them, it was deep enough in the Forbidden Forest that they'd been walking for nearly fifteen minutes.

Then Harry heard it.

A low, rumbling growl, it felt like the ground was shaking under his boots. Then another, different in pitch. And another.

His stomach dropped.

"Here we are," Hagrid said, sounding proud and excited. "Just through here."

They emerged into a clearing, and Harry's breath caught in his throat.

Dragons.

Four of them.

Harry had seen a dragon before, Norbert, the Norwegian Ridgeback that Hagrid had briefly and illegally owned in his first year. But Norbert had been a baby. These were full-grown.

Each dragon was chained to a massive iron stake driven deep into the ground, thick links of enchanted metal glowing faintly with containment spells. They had enough chain to move, to shift, to spread their wings partially, but not enough to reach each other or to escape the clearing. Harry looked at the dragons. He was no expert in magical creatures, but three of them seemed to be around the same size between one another. One was green with brown

scales around the head, one was silver with ice-like wings, and another was yellow with pale yellow wings, but the fourth dragon was not like the others.

This one was clearly larger than the other three, it had thorns growing from the back of its head, its scales were dark like coal, and its wings were a dark red color like blood, its tail had spikes growing from each side of it, and this dragon had fifteen people around it, making sure it wouldn't escape, while the other three had ten for each one.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Hagrid breathed, his voice full of awe and genuine affection.

He'd known the First Task would be difficult. Dangerous, even. Champions had died in previous tournaments, that was historical fact. But knowing something would be difficult and standing in front of four full-grown dragons were two entirely different things.

"Oh my," Madame Maxime said, and for the first time, she sounded genuinely surprised. "These are for the Task?"

"Yeah!" Hagrid's enthusiasm was palpable. "Magnificent, aren't they? Got 'em brought in special from the dragon reserve in Romania. Charlie Weasley—Ron's brother, yeh might've heard of him—he's one o' the handlers. Helped get 'em settled."

"They are quite impressive," Madame Maxime agreed, but she sounded genuinely worried now. She took a step closer, studying the dragons. "Tell me, Hagrid, are the champions meant to... kill them?"

Hagrid looked absolutely horrified. "Kill 'em? No! Merlin, no! I'd never allow that! These're beautiful creatures, they are! Endangered, some of 'em! It'd be barbaric!"

Relief crossed Madame Maxime's face, and Harry felt a similar surge of relief. At least he wouldn't be expected to commit dragon-slaughter.

"Then what is the Task?" Madame Maxime asked.

Hagrid, bless him, didn't seem to notice he was being interrogated. He pointed toward the nests. "See those golden eggs? One for each champion. The dragons're protectin' 'em—they're broodin', see? Very protective when they're broodin'. The champions've got ter get past the dragon an' grab the golden egg. That's it. Get the egg, get out."

"And the rules?" Madame Maxime pressed gently.

"Well, they can use any magic they want, 'cept fer the Unforgivables, o' course. That'd be right illegal. An' no outside help—has ter be the champion alone. But other than that..." Hagrid shrugged his massive shoulders.

"However they can manage it."

Harry's mind was racing, trying to process the implications. Get past the dragon. Grab the egg. Get out. Simple in theory. Absolutely terrifying in practice.

The Aqua Scutum training with Tonks suddenly felt both very fortunate and very inadequate. Water was fire's natural enemy, yes. A water shield could theoretically handle dragon fire. Could being the key word. Shield versus dragon fire wasn't even close to fair odds. That was like bringing a kitchen knife to a sword fight. Sure, it was better than nothing, but...

"Which dragon for which champion?" Madame Maxime asked, still in that casual tone.

"They'll draw lots," Hagrid explained. "Day of the Task. Each dragon's got a number, an' they'll pick 'em random-like. Fair, that way."

Fair. Right. Because randomly assigning teenagers to fight dragons was the definition of fair.

Harry tried to imagine facing the Hungarian Horntail. That massive black beast with bronze spikes and a temperament that made hippogriffs look cuddly. His mouth went dry.

"And these golden eggs," Madame Maxime continued, "they contain something?"

"Clues fer the next Task," Hagrid said proudly. "Open the egg, find out what's comin' next. Clever, that. Keeps 'em on their toes."

"Very clever indeed," Madame Maxime murmured.

They stood there for a few more minutes while Hagrid enthusiastically explained dragon behavior patterns, feeding habits, and various other facts that were probably meant to be helpful but mostly just emphasized how incredibly dangerous these creatures were. The Chinese Fireball could shoot actual fireballs up to fifty feet. The Hungarian Horntail's tail spikes could pierce armor. The Swedish Short-Snout's flame was hot enough to melt stone.

Wonderful. Just wonderful.

He needed to tell Hermione. And Tonks. Together, if possible. He couldn't prepare for this alone. Hermione would research everything about dragons, find their weaknesses, compile strategies. Tonks would help him train, would know what spells might actually work, would keep him from doing something stupid like trying to stun a dragon.

He had people who would help. That was something. That was more than some champions might have.

"I should return to my students," Madame Maxime said eventually. "It grows late, and tomorrow is a busy day."

"O' course, o' course," Hagrid said quickly. "I'll walk yeh back."

"That would be lovely, 'Agrid."

They turned to leave, and Harry carefully stayed where he was, letting them get ahead before he started following. The last thing he needed was to bump into one of them or step on a branch at the wrong moment.

As they walked away, Hagrid's voice carried back through the trees. "So, er, Olympe... would yeh maybe want ter do this again sometime? Not with dragons, necessarily, but..."

"Perhaps, 'Agrid. We shall see."

Harry waited until they were well ahead before moving. He took one last look at the dragons. The Hungarian Horntail was watching him—or watching where he was, somehow. Its eyes seemed to track his position despite the invisibility cloak. Dragons were supposed to have keen senses. Maybe it could smell him, or sense his body heat, or detect him in some other way humans didn't understand.

It growled, and Harry decided he'd seen enough.

Fleur Delacour

The Hogwarts library was quieter than Fleur expected for a weekday evening. Back at Beauxbatons, the library would be packed with students until curfew. Here, though, only scattered groups occupied the tables between towering shelves.

Fleur moved through the space with grace as usual, her pale blue uniform drawing a few glances that she ignored with the ease of long habit. She wasn't here to socialize or to intimidate. She was here to gather intelligence.

Her conversation with Madame Maxime still lingered in her mind, an uncomfortable weight. A basilisk. At twelve years old. With a sword. The words should have been absurd, should have been dismissed as British fairy tales meant to inflate their precious Boy Who Lived. But Dumbledore himself had confirmed it, or at least hadn't denied it, and that meant something.

It meant Harry Potter was either incredibly lucky or incredibly skilled.

Fleur needed to know which.

Her eyes swept the library systematically, cataloging the occupants. Ravenclaws clustered near the Charms section, their heads bent over what looked like tournament analysis charts. A pair of Slytherins sat far in the back, speaking in low, angry tones. And there, near the windows overlooking the grounds—

Perfect.

A group of Hufflepuffs. Four of them, mixed boys and girls, fourth and fifth years based on their textbooks. They were Cedric Diggory's house, which meant they would have opinions about both Hogwarts champions. Opinions Fleur could use.

She approached, letting them notice her before she reached the table. The conversation died as they looked up, their expressions shifting through surprise, wariness, and in one case, an unfortunate slack-jawed stare that made Fleur want to roll her eyes.

She kept her allure carefully neutral. Too much would make them useless. She needed them coherent.

"Pazdon," Fleur said, sounding more French than usual when she was speaking English. "Would you mind if I join you? I am trying to practice my Eenglish, and per'aps learn more about 'Ogwarts. It is... very different from Beauxbatons."

The girl closest to her—dark hair, round face, exchanged glances with the others before nodding. "Of course. We don't mind."

"You are very kind." Fleur slid into the empty chair, arranging her robes. She set her hands on the table, empty of books or parchment. "I 'ope I am not interrupting important studies?"

"Just comparing notes for Herbology," one of the boys said. He had sandy hair and looked like he desperately wanted to say something clever but couldn't think of what. "Professor Sprout assigned an essay on venomous tentacula breeding habits."

"Ah, yes. A fascinating subject." Fleur had no interest whatsoever in venomous tentacula, but she smiled warmly. "Professeur Sprout, she is your 'Ead of 'Ouse, yes? I 'ave 'eard she is very dedicated to 'er students."

That got them talking. Hufflepuffs, Fleur had observed, loved discussing their house and their Head of House. They launched into enthusiastic descriptions of Professor Sprout's teaching methods, her fairness, her talent with plants.

Fleur made appropriate noises of interest, asked follow-up questions, and slowly built rapport.

After several minutes of this, she judged the moment right.

"I 'ave also 'eard," Fleur said carefully, "zat your 'ouse champion is performing very well. Cedric Diggory, yes? 'E was most impressive in ze Dueling Race."

They lit up like she'd cast a Cheering Charm on the entire table.

"Cedric's brilliant," the prefect girl said warmly. "He's been our Quidditch captain for two years now, and he was able to win against the Gryffindor last year. Fair and Square."

"He's fair, too," another girl added. She had blonde hair pulled back in a practical braid, her face was bright red. "Never abuses his position as prefect. Actually helps people instead of just taking House points."

"And he's talented," the sandy-haired boy contributed. "Top marks in most of his classes. Brilliant at Transfiguration especially."

"He represents everything Hufflepuff stands for," the prefect concluded with obvious pride. "Loyalty, hard work, fair play. If anyone deserves to be Hogwarts champion, it's Cedric."

Fleur nodded thoughtfully. None of it was surprising—she'd already observed most of Cedric's qualities herself. Talented, yes. Fair, certainly. But also predictable, conventional, lacking the creative spark that separated good duelists from truly dangerous ones.

Still, he had his house's complete support. That counted for something.

"E is fortunate to 'ave such loyal supporters," Fleur said. Then, with careful casualness: "And what of ze ozzer 'Ogwarts champion? Ze younger one—'Arry Potter?"

The warm, enthusiastic expressions vanished, replaced by something harder. Darker.

"Potter," one of them muttered, making the name sound like a curse.

"He's a cheater," the girl said flatly. "Put his own name in the Goblet somehow, even though he's underage."

"Always seeking attention," the blonde girl added. "Can't go five minutes without being the center of everything."

"Breaks rules constantly," another voice chimed in. "Thinks being famous means he can do whatever he wants."

"Thinks he's special," the sandy-haired boy said bitterly. "Walks around like he's better than everyone else."

They were talking over each other now, a chorus of grievances that blended together into a wall of accusation. Fleur let them vent for a moment, watching with analytical detachment. This was useful information, but not in the way they thought.

When they finally paused for breath, Fleur tilted her head slightly. "Zese are serious accusations. But tell me, besides entering ze Triwizard Tournament, what exactly 'as 'e done?"

The Hufflepuffs looked at each other. Opened their mouths. Closed them. The dark-haired girl frowned, clearly trying to think of specific examples. The sandy-haired boy shifted uncomfortably.

Fleur waited, her expression pleasantly curious, giving them time to articulate whatever concrete grievances they had.

The silence stretched awkwardly.

Finally, one of the girls, a younger one with freckles, spoke up hesitantly. "There was the incident in second year. At the Dueling Club."

"Oh, right," the blonde girl latched onto this eagerly. "He attacked Justin with a snake. Ordered it to attack him."

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," the dark-haired girl clarified, her voice hard. "One of our housemates. Potter spoke to the snake in Parseltongue and set it on Justin. Everyone saw it."

Fleur's interest sharpened immediately. "E is Parselmouth? Ze ability to speak wiz serpents?"

This was genuinely valuable information. Parseltongue was rare, exceptionally rare. From what Fleur knew, the ability was very rare in France, so rare that the last Parselmouth in France died over two centuries ago, besides that, Fleur knew Parselmouths were known in Asia as healers of poison, and in China, they were known to be able to speak to the Grand Elder Snake, a creature Fleur has never seen or met before. For Harry Potter to have this ability...

"Yes," the sandy-haired boy said, looking slightly vindicated by her reaction. "Dark magic, that is. Snake language. Everyone knows only dark wizards can speak it."

Fleur was almost tempted to tell them that Parselmouth was used for good in other places, but she decided against it; there was no point. "Tell me more about zis incident," Fleur prompted, leaning forward slightly. "What 'appened exactly?"

The Hufflepuffs exchanged glances, and Fleur caught a flicker of uncertainty in some of their expressions. But the dark-haired girl pushed forward.

"It was during a Dueling Club meeting," she explained. "Professor Lockhart started a duelling club that year, and after a whole mess in the room, they decided to go round after round, and not everyone at once, Potter and Draco were the first and Draco conjured a snake, and it got loose somehow. It went after Justin, and Potter... he spoke to it. In that hissing language. Parseltongue."

"And zen?" Fleur asked.

"And then the snake stopped," the blonde girl said quickly. "But only because Potter told it to! He controlled it!"

Fleur processed this carefully. "So ze snake was going to attack zis Justin, and Potter spoke to it, and zen it stopped attacking?"

"Well... yes, but—"

"So 'e told ze snake not to attack?" Fleur's voice was still perfectly pleasant. "He stopped it from 'urting your 'ousemate?"

The freckled girl bit her lip. The sandy-haired boy shifted in his seat.

"He set it on Justin in the first place," the blonde girl insisted.

"Did you see 'im do zat, because you said zis Draco was ze one who conjured ze snake?" Fleur asked. "Did anyone see 'im command ze snake to attack before commanding it to stop?"

More uncomfortable silence.

"The snake was conjured by Draco," the dark-haired girl said finally, defensively. "Not by Potter. But the way he spoke to it, the way everyone reacted—it was terrifying. People were afraid of him after that."

Fleur filed this away. Fear, then, rather than evidence. Fear of an ability they didn't understand, fear of something associated with dark magic, fear that turned into assumption and resentment.

Before she could probe further, another student spoke up—the sandy-haired boy, his voice hot with frustration. "It's not just that. He's always been like this. Always has attention on him, always in the middle of everything. Acts like he's something special when he's nothing. Just lucky."

"The Boy Who Lived this, the Boy Who Lived that," the blonde girl added bitterly. "We're all tired of it. He's not special. He just happened to survive a curse when he was a baby."

Fleur stared at them, genuine puzzlement crossing her face. This didn't make sense. She spoke before she could think better of it, her carefully constructed diplomatic approach slipping.

"But... Ze Boy 'Oo Lived, it is a title given to 'im by ze adults when 'e was just a baby, oui?" She looked from face to face. "For surviving ze Killing Curse—somezing zat made You-Know-'Oo disappear?"

The Hufflepuffs shifted uncomfortably.

"Ow is any of zat 'is fault?" Fleur continued, still genuinely confused.

The dark-haired girl flushed red. Her mouth opened, closed, opened again. No words came out.

The sandy-haired boy looked down at his hands. The blonde girl's jaw worked, but she remained silent.

Fleur saw it then, clear as crystal. This wasn't about facts. This wasn't about real grievances or actual wrongs. This was jealousy, pure and simple. She could understand their anger towards him for cheating to enter the Tournament; that much was clear, but she had asked what he had done before that Tournament, and yet they had given her a lot of nothing.

"I see," Fleur said quietly. She stood, smoothing down her robes. "Sank you for speaking wiz me. You 'ave been most... informative."

The Hufflepuffs looked at each other, clearly sensing they'd lost some kind of argument they hadn't realized they were having. The prefect's flush deepened.

"We should get back to studying," she muttered.

Fleur inclined her head politely. "Of course. I weesh you well wiz your essay on ze tentacula."

She walked away before they could regroup or ask why she'd wanted to know about Harry Potter in the first place. Her footsteps were silent on the library floor as she moved between the shelves, putting distance between herself and the table.

Disappointing. That had been disappointing.

She'd hoped for concrete information, for actual intelligence she could use to assess the threat Harry Potter might pose. Instead, she'd gotten emotional reactions and unfounded accusations. The Parseltongue ability was valuable to know, yes, but the incident itself sounded like Potter had protected someone rather than attacked them.

She needed to learn more; this was not enough, so if Hufflepuffs would not be helpful, perhaps she needed to talk with someone who knew Harry personally. She wondered who it could be; she had no idea who his friends were. The only one she had noticed spending time with him was the girl with hair like a lion's mane. Still, if she asked her, there is a chance she would not give her information; this is why she had asked the Hufflepuffs, but she had forgotten to account for the fact that their information will be based as hell, so that left her with only one option: she needed to find information from someone in Gryffindor.

The Slytherins would not help, she had seen their childish badges, they would not give any useful information, the Ravenclaws, perhaps, but there was still a chance they simply had no information besides what the public knows. So Gryffindor it is.

The Next Day

The knock came earlier than Fleur expected.

She surfaced from sleep slowly; she could not remember what she had dreamed, but she remembered seeing crimson eyes staring back at her in a dark place. The pale morning light filtering through her window suggested it was barely past dawn, far too early for any reasonable summons.

The knock came again.

Fleur sat up immediately, sleep vanishing like smoke. Her headmistress wouldn't come personally unless something was important. Very important.

"Entrez," Fleur called, reaching for her robe even as the door opened.

Madame Maxime filled the doorway, her enormous frame making the already-large carriage entrance look almost normal-sized. She was fully dressed, her traveling cloak wrapped around her shoulders, her expression serious and purposeful.

Fleur's heart beat faster. This was it. The information she'd been waiting for.

"Madame," Fleur said, standing and composing herself. Her hair was probably a disaster, her nightclothes rumpled, but she kept her spine straight and her expression alert. "Bonjour."

"Fleur." Madame Maxime closed the door behind her and moved to the center of the small bedchamber. She didn't waste time with pleasantries. "The First Task involves dragons."

Fleur's eyes widened slightly, but she maintained her composure. Of course. Of course, it would be dragons. The British loved their spectacle, loved their danger, loved pushing boundaries until they became absurd.

"Dragons," Fleur repeated, keeping her voice level. "Of course they would choose something so... dramatic."

"Four of them," Madame Maxime continued, watching Fleur's reaction with sharp eyes. "One assigned to each champion. Each dragon is guarding a nest containing multiple eggs. One egg in each nest is golden, that is your objective. You must retrieve the golden egg and escape."

Fire magic—dragon fire was legendary, hot enough to melt stone, sustained enough to overwhelm most shields. Protective instincts—brooding dragons were notoriously aggressive, would defend their nests with lethal force. Confined space—presumably an arena of some kind, limited room to maneuver.

"Are we meant to kill them?" Fleur asked.

"Is not written in the rules, so you have the option to kill them, but that would be suicide. You must get past the dragon, retrieve the egg, and get out. That is all."

"And the rules?" Fleur pressed. "What magic is permitted?"

"Everything except the Unforgivable Curses," Madame Maxime said. "Those would result in immediate disqualification and criminal charges. Outside help is also strictly forbidden—you must face the dragon alone. But beyond that..." She shrugged her massive shoulders. "However you can manage it."

Fleur nodded slowly, processing. "Do we know the breeds? The size of the arena? Time limits?"

"Four different breeds," Madame Maxime confirmed. "Which champion faces which dragon will be determined by random selection on the day of the Task."

As for the arena—" She paused. "The details are still being finalized. I know it will be outdoors, likely with spectator seating. Beyond that, information is... limited."

"Deliberately limited," Fleur said.

"Yes." Madame Maxime's expression was grim. "They want the champions unprepared, reacting rather than executing planned strategies. More dramatic that way."

Everything for the spectacle.

Fleur stood and moved to her window, looking out at the Hogwarts grounds. Somewhere out there, four dragons waited. Four different breeds, four different fighting styles, four different sets of strengths and weaknesses.

"Do not try to overpower it," Madame Maxime said, her voice firm. "You cannot win a contest of raw magical strength against a full-grown dragon. Attempting to do so will get you killed."

"Then I must outsmart it," Fleur said.

"Exactly." Madame Maxime's expression showed approval. "Fire-resistant charms, certainly. Evasion tactics. Speed and agility over brute force. Perhaps creative solutions—environmental magic, misdirection, anything that gives you an advantage without engaging the dragon directly."

Shield charms layered and reinforced. Transfiguration to create barriers or distractions. Possibly illusion magic if she could manage it under pressure. The key would be staying mobile, staying unpredictable, never giving the dragon a stationary target.

"Do the others know?" Fleur asked. "About the dragons?"

Madame Maxime's lips thinned. "I was not the only one in the forest last night. I saw Karkaroff leaving the area as I departed. So Krum knows, certainly."

"And Potter?"

"Potter..." Madame Maxime paused, considering. "Hagrid has a soft heart and poor judgment when it comes to students he cares about. I would assume Potter knows, yes. Through one means or another."

Fleur nodded slowly. So three of the four champions had advance warning. Only Diggory might still be in the dark, and even that was uncertain.

"You have nine days to prepare," Madame Maxime said. "You may use the Beauxbatons library, practice in private—not where others can observe and potentially learn your tactics. I suggest focusing on defensive magic primarily, with offensive options as secondary measures."

"I understand, Madame."

"All of France is watching, Fleur." Madame Maxime's voice took on that particular weight it always did when invoking national pride. "No pressure, but—"

"I understand," Fleur repeated, cutting her off as gently as she dared. "I will not fail. France will be proud."

Madame Maxime nodded, satisfied. "Good. I will leave you to prepare."

She left without saying another word.

The door closed behind her headmistress with a soft click.

Fleur stood in the silence of her bedchamber, still in her nightclothes, her hair a disaster, her heart beating steady and sure in her chest.

Dragons.

She moved back to her bed and sat on the edge, her hands folded in her lap. Her mind was already organizing, categorizing, planning. She needed to research dragon breeds, identify their individual weaknesses. She needed to practice her shield work until it was perfect, not just good. She needed to plan for multiple scenarios—what if she drew the most aggressive breed? What if the arena was smaller than expected? What if her primary strategy failed?

But beneath all the tactical planning, another thought intruded.

Harry Potter had killed a basilisk at twelve years old.

A basilisk wasn't a dragon. Different creature, different dangers. But still—how did a child fight something like that and survive? Not just survive, but win? What kind of person developed those instincts, that capability, at such a young age?

Fleur shook her head sharply, pushing the thought away. "It doesn't matter. I have my own dragon to face."

Potter's history, Potter's abilities, Potter's mysterious immunity to her allure—none of that mattered right now. What mattered was that nine days later, Fleur Delacour would walk into an arena with a dragon and walk out alive with a golden egg.

Everything else was a distraction.

She stood, moving to her trunk. Time to prepare. Time to prove that Beauxbatons' champion was worth the faith France had placed in her.

Time to show everyone—Madame Maxime, the other champions, all the watching eyes—that Fleur Delacour was more than just beauty and bloodline.

She was a witch. A damn good one.

And she would not fail.

Harry Potter

Harry pushed open the door to their hidden classroom. He'd barely slept, his mind replaying images of dragons breathing fire, of Hagrid's enthusiastic obliviousness to the danger he'd revealed.

Both Hermione and Tonks were already there.

"Harry," Hermione said. "You said it was urgent."

"What's going on?" Tonks asked, straightening from her lean. "Your note said we both needed to be here."

Harry closed the door behind him and took a breath. No point in drawing this out.

"The First Task is dragons."

The words fell into the silence like stones into still water.

Hermione went pale. Actually pale, her normal color draining away until her freckles stood out starkly. "Dragons?"

Tonks said something that would have made Ron blush, a creative string of profanity that questioned the tournament organizers' intelligence, parentage, and personal hygiene in increasingly inventive ways.

"Dragons," Harry confirmed. He moved further into the room, suddenly exhausted despite the morning hour. "Four of them. Different breeds. Each one guarding a nest with a golden egg. The task is to get past the dragon, grab the egg, and get out alive."

"Dragons?!" Hermione's voice pitched upward. She started pacing, her hands going to her hair in that way that meant she was either very worried or very angry. Possibly both. "They're having you fight dragons?!"

"That's—that's insane!" She whirled to face him. "Harry, dragons are—they're—" She started ticking things off on her fingers. "Fire breath hot enough to melt stone. Teeth that can pierce armor. Claws like swords. Tails that can crush bones. Wings that create windstorms. And they're intelligent! Some breeds are as smart as humans!"

"I know—" Harry tried.

"This isn't just dangerous, this is completely mental!" Hermione's voice kept rising. "You're fourteen! They can't possibly expect you to—"

"But they are, Hermione," Harry said gently, cutting through her panic with calm he didn't entirely feel. "So we need to prepare."

Hermione stopped pacing, her chest heaving like she'd run up several flights of stairs. Her eyes were bright with what might have been tears or fury or both. "This is wrong. This is so wrong."

"Safer tasks my arse," Tonks muttered darkly. Her hair had gone from pink to an angry red. "I was told the tasks would be challenging but appropriate for age. Dragons aren't appropriate for anyone except professional dragon handlers!"

"Tell us everything," Tonks said. "How do you know? What exactly did you see?"

Harry explained it all, following Hagrid to the forest, Madame Maxime's presence, the four dragons chained in the clearing, each guarding a nest. He described the breeds as best he could remember them. He detailed the rules: everything permitted except the Unforgivables and outside help.

"Madame Maxime was there," Harry finished. "So Fleur knows by now. And I saw Karkaroff running toward the Durmstrang ship when I was leaving. So Krum probably knows too."

"What about Diggory?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Maybe not? I don't know. Hagrid might tell him, or he might not." Harry shrugged helplessly. "Either way, three out of four champions have advance warning."

Hermione had stopped pacing. Now she stood very still, her jaw set in that way that meant she'd shifted from panic to determination. "I'll find everything I can on dragons. Everything. Weaknesses, behavior patterns, successful defensive strategies documented from previous encounters. There has to be something in the library, the Restricted Section—"

Her eyes were already distant, mentally cataloging books she'd seen, references she could pursue.

"I can get you Ministry resources too," Tonks offered. "Dragon handling protocols from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Not supposed to share them outside official channels, but fuck it. This is life or death."

Hermione looked at Tonks with surprise, then gratitude. "Thank you. That would be... that would help enormously."

"You're incredibly lucky we started training Aqua Scutum," Tonks said, turning back to Harry. Her expression was grim but focused. "The water shield. Remember?"

"Of course I remember," Harry said. "We've been practicing it for—wait." His mind caught on something. "Moody suggested that spell specifically, didn't he? You said he told you to teach me that one."

Tonks's eyes widened slightly. "He said Durmstrang students train extensively in fire magic. And that Veela can throw fire when angry. He said—" She stopped, staring at Harry. "It's like he knew."

"Did Moody know about the dragons?" Hermione asked sharply.

They all looked at each other.

"Can't prove it," Tonks said finally. "And it doesn't matter now. Point is, Harry's got a defense against dragon fire that most people wouldn't think to use." She turned to Hermione. "It's a rotating water barrier. Absorbs heat-based attacks, vents the energy as steam. Sixth-year spell normally."

Hermione nodded. "Good. What else?"

"Let's assess what we're working with," Tonks said, falling fully into instructor mode. "Harry, you've got several advantages. The water shield, which you've practiced enough to cast reliably. Creative tactical thinking, you proved that in the dueling race. Experience facing dangerous creatures."

"The troll in first year," Hermione added quietly. "The basilisk in second year. The Dementors last year."

"Small size," Tonks continued. "Which is actually an advantage in evasion. And your flying skills from Quidditch."

"Intelligence," Hermione said firmly. "Ability to think under pressure. Willingness to use the environment creatively rather than relying on raw power."

"And a support team," Tonks finished, gesturing between herself and Hermione. "Us. Which most champions don't have, not like this."

"In a situation like this, where you're at a clear disadvantage, you play to your strengths," Tonks said. "Don't try to overpower the dragon. You can't. Don't try to fight it head-on. You'll lose. Use what you're good at that the dragon isn't."

Harry thought about it. What was he good at that a dragon wasn't? What advantages did a fourteen-year-old wizard have against a massive, fire-breathing, magically-resistant creature?

Then it hit him.

"Summoning things from outside the field isn't against the rules," Harry said slowly, the idea growing in his head like a plant.

Both women looked at him.

"The rule is no outside help," Harry continued, his words coming faster as excitement built. "No other people helping. But objects... objects aren't help, they're tools."

Hermione's eyes went wide with understanding. "You could summon your Firebolt!"

"Exactly!" Harry turned to face them both, his heart racing. "It's my biggest advantage. Dragons can fly, yeah, but they're not agile. They're massive and powerful but not quick. I can outmaneuver a dragon in the air. Stay out of range of its fire, of its claws—"

"Circle above it, wait for an opening, dive for the egg," Tonks finished, and she was grinning now, that fierce competitive grin that made her look dangerous. "That's brilliant. That's exactly the kind of thinking that wins."

"But you'd need to master the Summoning Charm perfectly," Hermione said. "The range would have to be significant, your Firebolt will be in Gryffindor Tower, the arena's likely to be somewhere on the grounds. That's hundreds of feet at least."

"I can practice," Harry said. "I've used Accio before, just never at that range."

"We'll practice," Tonks corrected. "Starting now. But we also need backup plans. What if the Summoning fails? What if there's anti-Summoning wards on the arena?"

"Shield while summoning," Hermione said. "He'll be vulnerable during the casting. And shield while flying—can you cast the water shield on a broom, Harry?"

"I... don't know. We've never tried that."

"We'll try it," Tonks said firmly. "And we need to work out evasion patterns in the air. How to grab the egg without landing if possible. How to—"

"You'll need to know your dragon's breed," Hermione interrupted. "Different dragons have different abilities, weaknesses. If we know which one you're facing before the task starts, we can prepare specific strategies."

Tonks looked at Hermione with genuine respect. "You think like an Auror."

Hermione's cheeks went pink, but she looked pleased. "I think like someone who doesn't want Harry to die."

"Right," Tonks said, taking command. "Division of labor. Hermione, you research dragons. Everything you can find. Compile weaknesses, create tactical briefings for each of the four breeds Harry described. I'll train Harry in the Summoning Charm, perfect his water shield, and practice evasion tactics. Harry, your job is to master both spells and stay focused. Don't panic, don't overthink. Just learn the magic."

"We meet again tonight," Hermione added. "Progress report. Share what we've found."

"Agreed." Harry looked between them. "Thank you. Both of you."

Hermione moved first, crossing to Tonks. "Thank you," she said quietly, meeting the Auror's eyes. "For helping him."

Tonks's expression softened. "Of course. He's..." She glanced at Harry, and something passed across her face. "Important."

Hermione noticed the glance. A small, knowing smile curved her lips. She turned to Harry. "You're lucky to have her."

Harry felt his neck heat up. "Yeah. I know."

Tonks's hair went from red back to pink, brighter than before.

"Right," Hermione said briskly, breaking the moment before it could get more awkward. "I'm going to the library. I'll send you notes by owl as I find things." She moved to Harry and hugged him tightly, fierce and brief. "You can do this. I know you can."

"Thanks, Hermione."

She nodded to Tonks, respectful and warm, then turned and left. The door closed behind her with a soft click, and suddenly Harry was alone with Tonks.

The silence stretched for a moment.

"She's brilliant," Tonks said finally. "I can see why you trust her."

"She's my best friend," Harry said. "Has been since the first year. Hermione's... she's special."

Tonks looked at him. "She cares about you. A lot."

Harry shifted uncomfortably, sensing an implication he didn't want to address. "Not like—we're just friends. Really."

"If you say so." But Tonks's tone suggested she wasn't entirely convinced. She pushed off from the wall. "Right. Let's practice Summoning. We have until tomorrow, and you need to be able to call that Firebolt from anywhere on the grounds."

Harry pulled out his wand, grateful for the shift back to practical matters. "I'm ready."



