

Harry led the Beauxbatons delegation across the sloping lawns of Hogwarts, grateful for the crisp autumn air after the paper-saturated atmosphere of the Great Hall. The morning sun painted the grounds in golden light, almost making him forget that he'd been up since dawn plotting mischief with his godfather.

"And to your left," Harry announced with the practiced cadence of a tour guide, "you'll find a perfectly ordinary field that has been transfigured into at least seven different disaster zones during my time here. Highlights include a rogue Venomous Tentacula invasion in my second year and what Professor Sprout euphemistically called 'the Great Mandrake Misunderstanding' last spring."

Margaret, the petite brunette who seemed the most receptive to his commentary, giggled. Several others looked uncertain whether he was joking. Fleur, walking slightly apart from the group, rolled her eyes but didn't comment.

Harry led them toward a smaller field adjacent to the Quidditch pitch, where six waist-high hoops of varying diameters floated at different heights above the ground. Each hoop glowed with a different color, shifting occasionally in position.

"This is the Wandball field," Harry explained. "It's not as popular as Quidditch, but it's excellent practice for precision spellwork."

"We have this at Beauxbatons as well," one of the boys—Jean-Philippe, if Harry remembered correctly—said with a slight air of superiority. "Though we call it Cerceau Magique."

"Magical Hoop," Harry translated with a nod. "Considerably more elegant than 'Wandball,' I'll grant you."

"How is it played?" asked Sophie, who Harry had noticed was one of the more curious students in the group.

Harry pulled his wand from his robe pocket and pointed to a bucket of small rubber balls near the edge of the field. With a swish and flick, he levitated one ball and guided it smoothly through the red hoop, then the blue, then the yellow, creating a chain of soft chimes as each target was hit.

"The objective is simple—guide your ball through as many hoops as possible in the correct sequence. Each player takes turns adding a hoop to the sequence until someone misses. It requires precise control of Wingardium Leviosa and teaches excellent aim."

He demonstrated a more complex maneuver, sending the ball through a particularly narrow green hoop that was oscillating in a figure-eight pattern.

"More advanced players add their own enchantments to make their opponents' turns more difficult," Harry continued, directing the ball to hover before Fleur. "Would you care to try, Miss Delacour? Unless Beauxbatons doesn't teach ball control."

The challenge was obvious, but delivered with just enough politeness to maintain plausible deniability. Fleur's eyes narrowed slightly at the double meaning.

"We learn precision rather than showmanship," she replied coolly, drawing her wand. Harry released control of the ball, and with a delicate flick of her wrist, Fleur sent it soaring through all six hoops in rapid succession, adding a graceful spiral to its path that made it look like a comet with a silver tail.

Harry wasn't sure whether to be impressed or annoyed. He settled on a bit of both.

"Showmanship has its place," he said, tucking his wand away. "Though I'll admit that was... precise."

Fleur accepted the concession with a slight incline of her head, a gesture so regal it bordered on parody. Harry had to suppress a smile; everything about her screamed "princess," from her perfect posture to the way she managed to make Hogwarts grounds look beneath her notice while simultaneously observing everything with keen intelligence.

As they moved away from the Wandball field, Margaret fell into step beside Harry. "Is it true what they're saying?" she asked. "That you knew the paper ball method wouldn't work?"

Harry adopted his most innocent expression. "Why would I suggest something that wouldn't work?"

"To create chaos," Sophie suggested, joining them.

"Or to laugh at everyone trying," Jean-Philippe added.

"Or perhaps," Fleur interjected from behind them, "to test how gullible Hogwarts students could be."

Harry glanced back at her. "If that were the case, the results would be quite encouraging. But no, my motivations were much purer."

"Pure mischief, you mean," Fleur said.

"I prefer to think of it as a practical lesson in critical thinking," Harry replied. "I merely suggested a possibility. Everyone else chose to test it without questioning the premise."

"So you are teaching... what? To question everything?" Sophie asked.

Harry smiled. "To question especially the things that seem too good to be true. If there were a simple loophole in Dumbledore's age line, don't you think someone would have considered it before?"

"Yet you let them continue even after it was clear it wouldn't work," Fleur pointed out.

"Ah, but by then it had transcended its original purpose," Harry explained as they approached the Quidditch stadium. "It wasn't about getting names in the Goblet anymore. It became about the competition itself—who could create the most impressive failure."

Harry led them through the players' entrance into the stadium, enjoying the way their conversation echoed in the tunnel before they emerged onto the pitch. The Beauxbatons students looked up at the towering stands that surrounded the field, several gasping at the scale of it.

"It's enormous," Sophie breathed.

"Bigger than the one at Beauxbatons," Jean-Philippe admitted reluctantly.

Harry couldn't help the small, satisfied smirk that tugged at his lips. "Hogwarts takes its Quidditch very seriously."

Fleur surveyed the pitch with what appeared to be indifference. "My country has better things to do than teach boys how to catch balls in the air."

"Someone sounds like they've never experienced the satisfaction of a good catch," Harry replied, unable to resist the opening. "There's nothing quite like the feeling of a small, golden ball struggling in your palm after a difficult chase."

Fleur's eyes flashed to his. "Perhaps in England, chasing balls is considered an accomplishment. In France, we set our sights on more... substantial achievements."

Harry grinned, unwilling to concede the verbal match. "As Ravenclaw's Seeker, I can assure you that catching the right ball at the right moment is quite substantial. It's all about timing, focus, and knowing exactly when to... reach out and take what you want."

Fleur looked like she wanted to hex him.

"You are the Seeker for your house team?" Jean-Philippe asked, breaking the charged moment. "You must be very good to play at your age."

"I'm adequate," Harry said with deliberate modesty that fooled no one. "Though I've been told I have excellent... handling skills."

Sophie giggled, while Margaret looked scandalized yet intrigued. Fleur merely raised an eyebrow, clearly unwilling to continue down this particular conversational path.

"I had forgotten that modesty is not a British trait," she said dryly.

"Just as diplomacy doesn't appear to be a French one," Harry countered.

To his surprise, Fleur's lips curved into something almost resembling a genuine smile. "Touché, Mr. Potter."

Harry found himself momentarily distracted by that smile. It transformed her face from merely beautiful to the smile of an angel, but Harry looked the other way. He knew Fleur was attractive, even a blind man could see that, but he would not allow himself to be swayed by her beauty like all the other fools did.

"Would you like to see the aerial view?" he asked, gesturing to the stands. "The perspective from the top row is quite spectacular."

"Will there be more ball-related commentary?" Fleur asked, her tone suggesting she already knew the answer.

"I'll try to restrain myself," Harry promised solemnly. "Though I make no guarantees if the topic of Bludgers comes up."

Cedric Diggory

Cedric Diggory led the Durmstrang delegation through the Viaduct Courtyard, maintaining his practiced tour guide smile despite the fact that he might as well have been showing the stone gargoyles around for all the response he was getting.

"This courtyard connects the main castle to the viaduct," he explained, gesturing to the ancient stonework. "In spring, Professor Sprout brings some of her more docile plants out here. The light is particularly good for Illuminating Ivies."

He paused, waiting for any sign of interest. The Durmstrang students stared back at him, their expressions ranging from vaguely disapproving to actively grim. Krum stood slightly apart from the others, his heavy brows drawn together in what Cedric had initially mistaken for a scowl but was beginning to suspect might just be his default expression.

Like talking to walking, breathing tombstones, Cedric thought, though his smile never faltered. Hufflepuff hospitality had its limits, but he wasn't about to reach them over a bit of stoicism.

"Right then," he continued cheerfully, "if you'll follow me, I'll show you the path down to the Boathouse. It's where the first-years arrive by boat at the start of term. Bit of a tradition."

He led them toward the stone staircase that wound down the cliff face toward the Black Lake. One of the Durmstrang boys—Poliakoff, if Cedric remembered correctly—glanced over the edge and made a grunt that might have been approval. Cedric counted it as a conversational victory.

"The stairs can be a bit slippery in winter," he warned, "but there's a charm on the handrail that prevents ice buildup. Courtesy of Professor Flitwick after the Great Sliding Incident of '89."

Not even a hint of curiosity about what the Great Sliding Incident might have entailed. Cedric was beginning to wonder if they even understood English, though Karkaroff had assured Dumbledore they did.

As they reached a bend in the path that offered a view of the Quidditch pitch, Cedric noticed movement on the field below. A group of blue-clad figures was making its way across the grass, led by a familiar dark-haired boy.

"Looks like Potter's showing the Beauxbatons students the Quidditch pitch," Cedric remarked, more to himself than his silent companions.

To his surprise, Viktor Krum moved to the edge of the path, his eyes fixed on the distant figures. "Potter. He is the Seeker, yes? For Ravenclaw?"

Cedric blinked, momentarily thrown by the sudden question after what felt like hours of one-sided conversation. "Er, yes. Harry's Ravenclaw's Seeker. Has been since his first year."

"Is he good?" Krum asked, his accent thickening around the simple question.

Cedric leaned against the stone balustrade, considering how to answer. Professional pride warred briefly with honesty before the latter won out.

"Better than me," he admitted. "And I'm not bad. We had a match last year—Hufflepuff against Ravenclaw. Worst conditions I've ever played in. Raining so fucking hard you could barely see the goalposts, much less the Snitch."

The Durmstrang students had gathered closer now, seemingly interested despite themselves. Krum's dark eyes remained fixed on the distant pitch, but Cedric could tell he was listening intently.

"On top of that," Cedric continued, warming to his story now that he had an audience, "we had Dementors patrolling the school grounds at the time. Nasty business with an escaped prisoner."

"Dementors?" a Durmstrang girl asked, her voice sharp with surprise. "At a school?"

"Ministry decision," Cedric said vaguely, not wanting to get into the whole Sirius Black situation. "Anyway, in the middle of the match, a group of them floated onto the pitch. Horrible timing. Harry and I were neck and neck chasing the Snitch when they started heading straight for him."

"The Dementors target him specifically?" Krum asked, his brows drawing even closer together.

"They do," Cedric nodded. "Something about him attracts them. Never got the full story. But here's the thing—Harry doesn't just dive for cover like any sane person would. He pulls out his wand, still on his broom mind you, and casts a full Patronus."

"At thirteen?" another Durmstrang student asked skeptically.

"Saw it with my own eyes," Cedric confirmed. "This massive silver stag just erupts from his wand and charges the Dementors. Drove them all back while I kept chasing the Snitch."

He shook his head, a rueful smile playing at his lips. "Should've known better. Harry somehow manages to outfly the remaining Dementor, cast that Patronus, and still reach the Snitch before me. Caught it practically right under my nose. I've never seen flying like it."

Krum was now watching him with disguised interest. "This Potter—he has professional aspirations?"

Cedric laughed. "Harry? No, I don't think so. Quidditch is just another thing he happens to be unnaturally good at. His real talents are in Defense Against the Dark Arts and Charms. The Patronus wasn't a fluke, he's been casting sixth and seventh-year spells since before his voice broke."

"And he is still so young," Krum murmured, turning his gaze back to the distant pitch, where Harry was now leading the Beauxbatons students into the stadium.

"Would you like to see the pitch?" Cedric offered, sensing an opportunity to finally engage his group. "We've got time before we need to head back for lunch."

To his relief, Krum nodded. "Yes. I would like to see where this Potter flies."

As they changed direction and began walking toward the Quidditch stadium, Cedric felt a small surge of gratitude toward Harry. Trust Potter to find a way to break the ice without even being present. If nothing else, it would give him something to talk about besides ancient stonework and traditions that nobody seemed to care about.

Perhaps the tour wouldn't be a complete conversational wasteland after all.

Harry Potter

Harry was just finishing his explanation of his first match to an attentive Sophie when he spotted Cedric approaching with his group of Durmstrang students. The contrast between the delegations couldn't have been more striking—where the Beauxbatons students moved with graceful animation, the Durmstrang contingent marched like a military unit on parade, expressions set in what Harry could only describe as "professional grimness."

Cedric was maintaining a cheerful monologue that appeared to be bouncing off his audience like spells off a dragon's hide. Harry suppressed a smile. Even Cedric's legendary charm seemed to be meeting its match.

"Harry!" Cedric called out, relief evident in his voice. "Just showing our Durmstrang friends the grounds. Thought they might like to see the Quidditch pitch."

"Perfect timing," Harry replied. "I was just explaining to our French visitors how Quidditch is played by people who can actually catch things." He shot a quick glance at Fleur, who responded with a delicate eye roll that somehow managed to look elegant rather than childish.

Cedric's relief at finding conversational reinforcements was palpable. "Let me introduce you properly. This is Viktor Krum, Durmstrang's champion-to-be."

Harry extended his hand to the famous Seeker. Krum was even more intimidating up close—stocky and powerful, with heavy eyebrows that gave him a perpetually intense expression. His handshake was firm.

"The Viktor Krum?" Harry said, unable to completely hide the Quidditch enthusiast in him. "Your Wronski Feint in the World Cup final was incredible."

"Mister Cedric here says you are quite good at playing Quidditch, is that true?" Krum asked, sounding a little excited.

"Cedric exaggerates," Harry said modestly, though he felt a twinge of satisfaction at the interest that appeared in Krum's eyes. "I've been lucky."

"Luck does not catch Snitch when Dementors attack," Krum replied with surprising seriousness. "Diggory tells story of your flying. Very impressive."

Harry shot Cedric a questioning look, to which his friend responded with an innocent shrug. Behind them, Harry could feel Fleur's attention sharpening like a cat noticing movement in the grass.

Before Harry could respond, a Durmstrang girl with striking dark red hair stepped forward from the group. She was tall and willowy, with high cheekbones and intelligent amber eyes that studied Harry.

"I am Ekaterina Sokolova," she introduced herself. "Is it true you produce Patronus Charm at thirteen?"

"It's true," he admitted. "Though it wasn't perfect at first."

"But full corporeal Patronus?" Ekaterina pressed. "Not just mist?"

"A stag," Harry confirmed. "Silver, about this tall." He indicated with his hand approximately how large his Patronus stood. "Professor Lupin taught me because the Dementors seemed particularly drawn to me."

"Why were Dementors at school?" Sophie asked, looking horrified. Several of the Beauxbatons students murmured in agreement, clearly shocked.

"Ministry decision," Harry said briefly. No need to get into the whole escaped-godfather situation. "Not one of their better ones."

"In my country," Ekaterina said, her eyes fixed intently on Harry, "Patronus Charm is taught in final year only. Most never achieve corporeal form. You must have exceptional magical core to channel such power so young."

Harry shrugged. "I had good motivation. Dementors aren't exactly pleasant company."

"Is impressive nonetheless," she insisted, taking a step closer. "Perhaps you could demonstrate sometime? I would very much like to see."

Harry noticed Fleur looking at the Russian girl in a strange way, a look Harry had seen often in other girls when a girl spoke to him. He wondered why Fleur was giving Ekaterina *that* look.

Krum had been watching this exchange with quiet interest. "You are also entering Duelling Race, da? Diggory says you are very skilled with wand."

"Planning to, yes," Harry confirmed, noticing that Fleur had moved slightly closer to their conversation, her attention no longer feigned disinterest.

"You will face difficult competition," Ekaterina said, though her tone suggested she found the prospect exciting rather than discouraging. "Durmstrang students begin duelling in first year."

"And Beauxbatons students begin in ze second," Fleur interjected smoothly, inserting herself into the conversation. "Though we focus on form and precision rather than... brute force."

The slight emphasis on the last two words was unmistakable. Harry fought back a smile as he recognized the territorial marker being laid down.

"Brute force?" Krum's heavy brows drew together. "Durmstrang teaches efficiency. Why use ten spells when one strong spell will do? Is practical approach."

"Practical doesn't win duels against someone who can predict your every move," Jean-Philippe chimed in, standing slightly taller. "Beauxbatons focuses on elegance because it's effective."

"Elegance doesn't stop stunning spell to chest," another Durmstrang boy countered gruffly. "We train for combat, not dance recital."

Sophie gasped. "How dare you! Our dueling techniques are based on centuries of refined magical theory!"

Ekaterina stepped forward, her amber eyes flashing. "And our techniques are based on survival in harshest conditions. Perhaps you would like demonstration?"

Harry noticed several wands being gripped a bit tighter than necessary and stepped between the groups. "I think we're getting a bit carried away. Different schools, different approaches—that's the whole point of this tournament, isn't it?"

Cedric moved to stand beside him, his easy smile defusing some of the tension. "Harry's right. Besides, the Duelling Race will settle this debate better than words ever could."

"Speaking of which," Harry glanced at his watch, "it's nearly lunchtime."

The Beauxbatons and the Drumstrang gave each other one last look before turning to walk back into the castle, with Harry and Cedric following behind.

Cedric fell into step beside him, leaning in to whisper, "Interesting day?"

"You could say that," Harry murmured back. "Since when are you telling people about my Patronus?"

"Since I needed something to break the ice with walking statues," Cedric replied under his breath. "You're welcome, by the way."

"I think," Harry said slowly, "you may have accidentally started something."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Cedric replied cheerfully. "Though usually it's you causing the chaos, not me."

Harry couldn't argue with that.

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The Great Hall sounded like a beehive as Harry took his seat at the Ravenclaw table. Dinner had been a rushed affair, with most students more interested in the upcoming selection than in their food. Even the house-elves seemed to have acknowledged this by serving simpler fare than usual—dishes that could be easily abandoned mid-bite when the moment of truth arrived.

"Five Galleons says it's Angelina for Hogwarts," Terry Boot was saying, tallying up a complex betting chart he'd created. "Two-to-one odds on Warrington, five-to-one on Diggory."

"Put me down for Diggory," Harry said, sliding his coins across the table. "And another two on Krum for Durmstrang, though I doubt the odds are worth it."

Terry snorted. "Krum's at one-to-one-point-two. You'd make more interest leaving those Galleons in your vault for a day."

"Some bets are just about being right," Harry replied with a shrug. He glanced toward the Hufflepuff table where Cedric sat, outwardly calm but betrayed by the way he kept adjusting his prefect badge. "Besides, I have inside information."

"What, that Cedric's good-looking and popular?" Anthony Goldstein rolled his eyes. "Shocking insight, Potter."

"That he's better than people give him credit for," Harry corrected. "Which, ironically, is why the Goblet will choose him—because everyone underestimates him."

His gaze drifted to the Beauxbatons students, where Fleur sat surrounded by her schoolmates. Unlike Cedric, she made no attempt to hide her confidence. She sat with perfect posture, occasionally responding to her peers with the air of someone who considered their admiration a matter of course rather than something to be pursued.

At the Durmstrang table, Krum hunched over his plate, seemingly oblivious to the attention directed his way.

The clinking of metal against crystal drew everyone's attention to the staff table, where Dumbledore had risen to his feet. The Headmaster's expression was one of contained excitement, his blue eyes twinkling like stars.

"The moment has arrived," Dumbledore announced, his voice carrying effortlessly across the now-silent hall. "The Goblet of Fire is ready to make its decision."

With a theatrical wave of his hand, Dumbledore extinguished most of the candles in the Great Hall, plunging the room into semi-darkness. The Goblet's blue-white flames now cast an eerie glow over expectant faces, transforming familiar features into masks of anticipation.

Harry couldn't help but appreciate the stagecraft. Dumbledore understood the value of presentation. The Goblet's flames danced hypnotically, drawing all eyes like moths to its glow.

"Any moment now," Dumbledore murmured, just loudly enough to be heard.

As if responding to his cue, the Goblet's flames suddenly flared crimson, shooting sparks into the air. A tongue of flame erupted upward, bearing a charred piece of parchment that Dumbledore caught deftly in his hand.

The Headmaster held the parchment at arm's length, reading by the Goblet's light. "The champion for Beauxbatons," he announced, "is Fleur Delacour!"

A storm of applause broke out, particularly enthusiastic from the male population. Harry clapped along, watching as Fleur rose from her seat with that same regal confidence he'd observed earlier. There was no surprise in her expression, only satisfaction, as if the Goblet had merely confirmed what she had known all along.

"Called that one," Harry murmured to Luna as Fleur glided toward Dumbledore.

"She has the most nargles," Luna agreed. "Champions always do."

Harry wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that, so he simply nodded as though it made perfect sense.

The Goblet flared red again, and a second piece of parchment shot into the air.

"The champion for Durmstrang," Dumbledore read, "is Viktor Krum!"

More applause, accompanied by unsurprised murmurs. Krum rose from his seat with none of Fleur's grace but with a solid, immovable presence. He nodded curtly to acknowledge the applause, then followed the path Fleur had taken toward Dumbledore and through the door behind the staff table.

The hall fell silent again as the Goblet's flames turned red for a third time. This was the moment the Hogwarts students had been waiting for—their champion, their representative against the foreign schools.

The flames shot high, expelling the third piece of parchment. Dumbledore caught it and held a dramatic pause before reading, "The Hogwarts champion is... Cedric Diggory!"

The Hufflepuff table erupted into cheers loud enough to shake dust from the enchanted ceiling. Cedric's face registered genuine shock before breaking into a broad smile as his housemates pounded him on the back and shoulders.

"Called that one too," Harry said with satisfaction, making a mental note to collect his winnings from Terry later. "Hufflepuff's first real chance at glory in decades."

Cedric made his way to the front of the Hall with the slightly dazed expression of someone who couldn't quite believe his good fortune. As he passed the Ravenclaw table, his eyes met Harry's, and Harry gave him a thumbs-up and mouthed, "Told you so."

Cedric grinned and continued on, disappearing through the same door as the other champions.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called happily as the applause for Cedric finally died down. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real—"

Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him. The Goblet of Fire had turned red once more, its flames shooting up unexpectedly. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, Dumbledore reached out and seized the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore.

Harry felt an odd prickling sensation at the back of his neck, a familiar precursor to trouble that he'd learned to recognize over the years.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out, "Harry Potter."

This is Bullshit Harry cursed under his breath.

The silence that followed Dumbledore's announcement was absolute, as if someone had cast a massive Silencing Charm over the entire Great Hall. Harry sat frozen, the prickling sensation at the back of his neck now a full-blown alarm. All around him, faces turned in his direction—some confused, others accusatory, a few impressed.

"I didn't put my name in," he said quietly to Luna, who was watching him with her usual dreamy expression.

"Of course you didn't," she replied simply. "The Wrackspurts around the Goblet were completely different from yours."

Before Harry could respond, Dumbledore's voice cut through the silence. "Harry Potter. Harry, please come up here."

Harry rose slowly from his seat, conscious of the weight of hundreds of stares. He straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin, meeting the eyes that challenged him. If there was one thing he'd learned in his years at Hogwarts, it was that appearing confident—even when you weren't—was half the battle.

"I didn't enter," he said clearly as he approached the staff table, his voice carrying in the silent hall. Dumbledore's eyes, usually twinkling with warmth, now studied him with penetrating intensity.

"Through the door, Harry," Dumbledore directed, his voice neutral.

Harry nodded once and strode past the staff table, through the door into a smaller chamber where the three champions stood in a loose circle. Cedric's expression brightened when he saw Harry, then quickly shifted to confusion.

"What is it?" Fleur asked, looking Harry up and down. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

Before Harry could answer, the door burst open behind him. Ludo Bagman entered, his boyish face flushed with excitement.

"Extraordinary!" he exclaimed, grabbing Harry's arm. "Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen... lady," he added, approaching the other champions. "May I introduce—incredible though it may seem—the fourth Triwizard champion!"

Krum's heavy eyebrows drew together. Cedric looked from Bagman to Harry with growing concern.

Fleur, however, laughed—a silvery sound without humor. "Very funny joke, Meester Bagman."

"Joke?" Bagman repeated, bewildered. "No, no, not at all! Harry's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

Fleur's eyes narrowed dangerously as she turned to Harry. "Of course it did," she said, her accent thickening with anger. "Monsieur Potter cannot stand to be anything less than exceptional, can he? Always needing to prove he is better than everyone else."

"That's not what happened," Harry replied evenly, though his pulse quickened at the accusation. "I didn't put my name in."

"Then 'ow else did it get there?" Fleur challenged, taking a step closer. "I have known you for one day, and I already can tell that you love the attention, and you love making jokes, perhaps this is all just a big joke to you."

"If I wanted attention," Harry countered, "I could achieve it far more efficiently than subjecting myself to potentially lethal tasks. Perhaps with another paper ball demonstration."

Krum remained stoically silent, but his dark eyes moved between Harry and Fleur with obvious interest. Cedric stepped forward, placing himself slightly between them.

"Harry wouldn't have done this," Cedric said firmly. "If he says he didn't enter, then he didn't."

The door opened again before Fleur could respond. Dumbledore entered, followed by Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, McGonagall, Snape, and Professor Flitwick.

"Madame Maxime!" Fleur said immediately, striding over to her headmistress. "Zey are saying zat zis arrogant boy is to compete also!"

Madame Maxime drew herself up to her full, considerable height. "What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?"

"I'd rather like to know that myself," Karkaroff said, his smile stiff and cold. "Two Hogwarts champions? I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions."

"It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff," Snape said softly, his black eyes glittering with malice. "He has been crossing lines since he arrived here. Just like his father—"

"That's quite enough, Severus," Professor Flitwick's high voice interrupted. The diminutive Charms professor moved to stand beside Harry. "Mr. Potter is one of my most capable students and has never shown any inclination toward such flagrant rule-breaking. I suggest we hear his side before making accusations."

Harry shot his Head of House a grateful look.

"Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

"No, Professor," Harry said firmly.

"Did you ask an older student to do it for you?"

"No." Harry's gaze was steady. "I had no interest in entering the Tournament."

"But of course he is lying," Madame Maxime declared.

"The evidence suggests otherwise," Flitwick countered. "Mr. Potter publicly demonstrated methods to circumvent the age line yesterday—methods he knew would fail—specifically to create chaos. Why would he do that if he had actually succeeded in entering?"

"Misdirection," Snape suggested silkily. "Creating the perfect cover for his actual method."

"You're giving me rather more credit for cunning than usual, Professor," Harry remarked, unable to resist. "I'm flattered."

Snape's eyes flashed dangerously. "You see, Headmaster? Potter's arrogance knows no bounds."

"I prefer to call it self-defense," Harry replied evenly. "And Professor Flitwick is right—why would I publicly spotlight ways to cheat and draw attention to myself if I was actually planning to enter illegally?"

"Potter makes a logical point," McGonagall said reluctantly.

Dumbledore turned to Mr. Crouch, who had been standing in the shadows, his face half-hidden. "Barty, you are our expert on the rules. What do you say?"

Crouch looked up, his face oddly stiff. "The rules are clear. Those whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the Tournament."

"Even if zey cheated?" Fleur demanded.

"Even then," Crouch confirmed. "The contract with the Goblet is magical and absolute. Those chosen must compete or suffer the loss of their magic. Permanently."

A heavy silence followed this pronouncement. Harry felt a cold weight settle in his stomach. Loss of magic, essentially becoming a Squib, was a fate worse than death to many wizards.

"I still maintain I didn't enter," Harry said into the silence. "But it seems I have no choice but to compete."

"Convenient," Fleur said coldly.

Harry turned to her, meeting her angry gaze directly. "Trust me, Delacour, if I'd wanted to enter, I wouldn't have needed to rely on whatever convoluted method someone used to enter my name."

Fleur's eyes flashed. "So you admit you know how to cheat ze age line?"

"I admit I know there are probably a dozen different ways to circumvent it," Harry corrected. "I also know that bypassing Dumbledore's magic would require considerable power and skill—likely beyond any student here, including myself."

"E is right," Madame Maxime admitted grudgingly. "The age line was powerful magic."

"Which suggests," Flitwick added, his voice sharp with concern, "that whoever entered Mr. Potter's name is no student, but someone with considerable magical ability and concerning motives."

Karkaroff laughed coldly. "How convenient! Now Potter has provided himself with the perfect excuse!"

"Igor," Dumbledore said warningly.

"Don't you 'Igor' me!" Karkaroff's face was red with fury. "You have violated the rules from the start! First this age line that apparently does nothing, and now two champions for Hogwarts! I have half a mind to leave now!"

"Empty threat, Karkaroff," Moody growled, stumping into the room. Harry hadn't noticed him enter. "Your champion can't leave. He's got to compete, just like Potter. Binding magical contract, remember? Convenient, eh?"

"Convenient?" Karkaroff echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Someone put Potter's name in that Goblet knowing he'd have to compete if it came out," Moody explained, his magical eye whirling. "Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die for it."

"We all know Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn't discovered six plots to murder him before lunchtime," Karkaroff said loudly. "Apparently he is now teaching his students to fear assassination too."

"There are those who'll turn innocent until proven guilty on its head," Moody retorted. "But I say, there's a first time for everything."

"How this situation arose, we do not know," Dumbledore said, addressing everyone in the room. "It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the Tournament. This, therefore, they will do."

"Ah, but Dumbly-dorr—"

"My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it."

Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak. She merely glared. Karkaroff looked equally furious. Snape was livid.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" Bagman said, rubbing his hands together with excitement. "Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we?"

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie. "Yes," he said, "instructions. Yes... the first task..."

Harry listened as Crouch explained that the first task was designed to test their daring, that they would face it armed only with their wands, and that it would take place on November twenty-fourth. When Crouch finished, Karkaroff immediately took Krum by the arm and steered him out of the room, muttering in rapid Bulgarian. Madame Maxime placed her hand on Fleur's shoulder and guided her toward the door.

Fleur paused at the threshold, looking back at Harry. "I will not lose to a cheat," she said coldly. "Regardless of how you got in, you will regret competing against me."

Harry met her gaze steadily. "I didn't cheat, Delacour. But I look forward to proving that actions speak louder than accusations."

Her eyes narrowed fractionally before she turned and swept from the room, her silvery hair swinging behind her.

Dumbledore looked at Harry and Cedric. "I suggest you both go up to bed. I am sure your houses are waiting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of an excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise."

Cedric nodded and glanced at Harry. Harry saw worry in his friend's eyes, but also solidarity. They left the chamber together in silence, emerging into the now-deserted Great Hall.

"So," Cedric said finally as they crossed toward the entrance hall, "we're playing against each other! It's last year Quidditch all over again!!"

"I guess so," Harry replied, "though I still have no idea how this happened."

"I believe you," Cedric said firmly. "For what it's worth."