

Harry Potter

"Nothing," Tonks said, flicking a pebble across the frozen fountain with her thumb. "A month of digging, and we've got a Goblet, a name, and a great steaming pile of no idea."

The Transfiguration courtyard was empty apart from the two of them, which was precisely why Harry had chosen it. December had turned the old fountain into a sculpture of ice, and frost furred the stone benches, though neither of them felt it through their warming charms. Tonks sat perched on the back of the bench with her boots planted on the seat, her hair the pale blue of the winter sky above them.

"Madam Bones has half the Department on it," she continued, her voice dropping into something more serious. "My boss doesn't sleep much these days, and Amelia Bones on no sleep is a force I wouldn't wish on a dark wizard. But I won't lie to you, Harry. We've got nothing. No trace on the Goblet, no witnesses, no magical signature that leads anywhere. Whoever did it knew exactly what they were doing."

"What about Moody?" Harry asked.

Tonks snorted. "Moody's found six plots this month. Five of them involved his own breakfast. The man sees assassins in his porridge, and even he can't find the one assassin we actually know exists." She shook her head. "He's no help at all. Just keeps growling about constant vigilance and glaring at people's shoes."

Harry sighed, tipping his head back to look at the grey sky. Somewhere out there was a person who had fed his name to an ancient magical artifact and bound him to a tournament that had already thrown him at a Hungarian Horntail, and a month later, the combined might of the Ministry had produced precisely nothing.

"Then I'll start looking into it myself," he said.

"Absolutely not," Tonks replied at once. "You've got a Tournament trying to kill you, a Duelling Race you refuse to lose, homework you're definitely not doing, and now a Ball to survive. Leave the detective work to the people who get paid for it." Then her expression shifted, the seriousness melting into something far more dangerous, and the tips of her hair began to turn pink. "Speaking of the Ball. Who are you asking?"

"Tonks."

"Let me guess," she went on, grinning now. "The Veela one. The absolutely, criminally gorgeous one. The one who hung Malfoy upside down in front of three schools, which, by the way, I've had described to me four separate times and it gets better with every telling."

Harry gave her a long, flat look.

"I haven't asked her," he replied. "And..." He hesitated, turning his wand over in his fingers. "I don't think I will. I might not go at all, honestly."

Tonks gasped so theatrically she nearly toppled off the bench.

"You can't just not go! You're a champion! Champions open the dance, Harry, it's tradition. There'll be music and photographers and Bagman shouting at everyone through an amplification charm."

"You're really selling it," Harry said dryly. "A castle full of people who spent a month calling me a cheat, all dressed up and pretending they didn't. The only ones who never did were Cedric, Susan, and Luna. Forgive me if I'm not desperate to waltz for the rest of them."

"Then ask Luna."

"Luna's going with the Longbottom boy. Apparently he asked her by the greenhouses and the Wrackspurts approved of him immediately."

"Huh." Tonks considered that, then shrugged. "Well, I wouldn't mind going with you."

Harry raised an eyebrow at her.

"You're very beautiful," he said carefully, "but you're almost my sister."

"Same to you, squirt," Tonks replied, rolling her eyes. "We'd just dance. Dancing doesn't mean we have to do the other thing." She waved a hand vaguely. "Besides, you're still a bit young for the other thing anyway."

He was about to tell her exactly what he thought of that assessment when a voice came down the corridor behind them.

"Arry."

Both of them turned. Fleur Delacour was crossing the frosted stones toward them, her blue cloak drawn close against the cold, her breath fogging silver in the air. Something in Harry's chest did the tightening thing it always did, and he ignored it with the ease of long practice.

Tonks let out a soft, low whistle.

"Blimey," she whispered, leaning toward him. "She's even more beautiful up close. No wonder you fro..."

"Don't," Harry muttered.

Fleur stopped a few paces away, and her eyes flicked once between the two of them.

"I 'ave been looking for you all around ze castle," she said.

"Can't be that hard," Tonks replied cheerfully. "Just follow the sound of trouble. Works every time."

Fleur glanced briefly at her, not knowing who she was, or how to talk with her, so Harry decided to break the ice between them.

"Fleur Delacour, Beauxbatons champion," he said, gesturing between them. "This is Tonks. Auror, family, menace."

"In that order," Tonks agreed.

"Enchantée," Fleur replied politely. Her eyes lingered on the bubblegum hair. "Ze pink. From ze First Task. You were in 'is box, shouting."

"Loudest one there," Tonks said proudly.

"So," Harry said, turning back to Fleur. "What can I do for you?"

Fleur's hands tightened briefly on the edge of her cloak.

"I was 'oping to speak wiz you," she replied. "Privately."

"Say no more." Tonks was off the bench in an instant, stretching her arms above her head with the air of someone who had urgent business elsewhere. She made it five steps before pausing and calling back over her shoulder. "Oi, Harry. Nearest broom closet's to your left. Third door past the tapestry. Very roomy."

"Goodbye, Tonks," Harry groaned, his ears heating.

She sauntered off whistling something jaunty, her hair cycling smugly through three shades of pink, and Harry watched her go until she disappeared through the archway. Only then did he turn back to Fleur, and only then did he notice.

Her eyes were faintly rimmed with red.

Has she been crying? he wondered to himself. Fleur Delacour, who verbally dismantled headmasters from a hospital bed, who had not so much as blinked while a dragon rained fire on her. He wondered what could make her cry.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Fleur drew a slow breath.

"I want to apologize."

"Apologize?" Harry asked lightly, his hands sliding into his pockets. "Whatever for?"

"Don't." Her voice was sharp like glass, interrupting him. "Do not act like zat. Not with me. Please."

For a moment, Harry considered keeping the mask on anyway. It was a good mask. It had gotten him through a month of whispers and badges and charmed chairs, and it cost far less than honesty did. But her eyes were red, and she had said please, and so he let it drop.

"Fine," he replied, and his voice came out harder. "Why would you want to apologize?"

"Because I acted stupid." She lifted her chin, looking right into his soul. "My 'ole life, people 'ave judged me because of my blood. Because of what it means to be Veela. Boys who look at me and do not see me. Girls who whisper before I 'ave said a word. Zey did not know me. None of zem ever knew who I was. And still zey judged me, all of zem, wizout knowing anyzing at all." Her hands curled at her sides. "I swore I would never do zat to another person. Never. And zen your name came out of zat Goblet, and I was no different from ze rest of zem. I judged you guilty ze moment I set my eyes on you. Ze moment Bagman said you were ze fourth champion, I saw a cheat. I did not ask. I did not wait. I simply decided."

"So that's what this is," he said. "You made a mistake, you say the words, you set it right, and we're done."

"Non." Fleur shook her head, and there was no defensiveness in it, only a flat, unflinching honesty. "I made ze mistake. Zere is no setting it right. I can say all ze words I want, and zey will not change zat I judged you guilty when you were innocent. Words do not undo a monz." She paused, and her voice dropped lower. "My words will not do much. I know zis. But for what it is worz... I am sorry, 'Arry. I am sorry I saw you as guilty."

Harry was quiet for a long moment. The wind moved through the bare branches above the courtyard wall, and somewhere far off, a bell rang the hour.

Harry stood very still, listening. Some old, tired part of him wanted to hold on to the anger, the way he'd held on to it with Anthony and Padma and every Ravenclaw who had come crawling back after the First Task. He remembered her voice in the champions' chamber, cold as the courtyard stones. *I will not lose to a cheat.*

"Why didn't you wear the badges?" he asked at last.

Fleur blinked. "What?"

"Malfoy's badges. Potter Stinks." He watched her face carefully. "The entire school wore them. Some thought they were funny. Some actually believed them. Most just wanted an excuse to laugh at me, and it was never really about supporting Cedric at all. Your lot got offered them in the corridor. You handed yours straight back. Why?"

"Because ze badges were stupid," Fleur replied, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Only a childish person would wear such a zing. If I 'ad worn one, it would not 'ave proven you guilty. It would only 'ave shown everyone zat Fleur Delacour was a child."

A short breath escaped Harry, not quite a laugh.

"After the First Task," he said, "they all came back. My so-called friends. Congratulating me, clapping my shoulder, wanting everything to go back to normal like nothing ever happened. They'd known me for three years, and they still saw me guilty in a heartbeat." He met her eyes. "You'd known me for a day. You didn't know me at all."

"Zat does not justify it," Fleur replied firmly. "I did not know you, non. But I knew, better zan anyone in zis castle, 'ow quickly people judge wizout knowing anyzing. I 'ave lived it since I was a little girl. Of all people, I should 'ave waited. I should 'ave asked. And instead I did ze same as everyone else, because..." She faltered, and for the first time since she'd crossed the courtyard, her composure slipped. "Maybe because it was easier. Or maybe because of... ozzier reasons."

She did not explain what the other reasons were. Harry noticed the color rising in her cheeks and decided, with heroic restraint, not to ask.

"Zat is all I wanted to say." Fleur drew herself up, chin lifting, though her eyes stayed on his. "And... I 'ope zat one day, you can look at me again ze way you did ze day we met."

Harry considered her for a long moment. He thought of that first day, the carriage and the winged horses, the riddle she'd solved before he finished reading it, the way she'd stood in the Ravenclaw common room and called a thousand years of history small. Strangers, circling each other with sharpened words, each waiting for the other to flinch.

"I don't want to look at you the way I used to," he said.

Hurt appeared in her eyes, but it quickly disappeared; Harry saw it still.

"Because that would make us strangers again," Harry continued. "Strangers who annoy each other."

The hurt in her expression stilled, then slowly rearranged itself into something far more careful.

"Zen," she asked quietly, "what do you want to look at me as?"

"As something more than that."

He walked toward her as he said it, closing the distance until only a pace of frosted stone remained between them, and he watched, with no small satisfaction, as Fleur Delacour turned a little red. His heart was hammering hard enough that he half suspected she could hear it, and somewhere in the back of his mind, Cedric's voice said, *some things are worth breaking the rules for.*

"I'll accept your apology," Harry said. "On one condition. You have to do something for me."

A smile tugged at the corner of Fleur's mouth and her eyes began to gleam.

"Oh?" she replied. "And what could zat be? What could ze Great 'Arry Potter possibly want from me?"

"Go to the Yule Ball with me."

Fleur's smile bloomed like a flower in summer, and Harry decided that whatever happened for the rest of the year, that smile had been worth a month of badges.

"Oui," she said. "I will go wiz you." Then she raised a single finger, and the imperious princess returned as though she'd never left. "On one condition of my own. You must know 'ow to dance, 'Arry Potter. Champions open ze ball, and I refuse to be trampled in front of zree schools."

"I can catch a Snitch in a rainstorm," Harry replied. "I can't dance a single step."

Fleur laughed, and Harry really liked that sound. He decided immediately that he wanted to hear it again.

"Zen it is settled," she said, her eyes sparkling. "I will teach you. We begin tomorrow."

Harry thought of Tonks, and the broom closet joke, and the fact that he would never, ever hear the end of this.

He found he didn't care.