**Sought After**

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**Sought After**

by **EiriTheBear**

**Summary**

The Goblet of Fire spits out a fourth piece of parchment, with the name 'Harry Potter' written on it. Harry, alone more than ever, struggles to find strength after the events. Two boys seek to understand him and his plight. Viktor is strong, quiet, but protective, and Cedric, charming, compassionate, and thoughtful. The light that should have spelled Cedric Diggory's death never came, and events were altered through the simple act of reaching out. Sought After, a rewrite into a different timeline, HPGoF onwards. Now on OotP.
Kinsonship

Chapter Summary

Viktor takes a dip and runs into Harry by the Lake. Happens after the Triwizard Tournament champion selection.

The fog around Hogwarts had a less frigid presence than up North, but it was a worthy contender. The cold near the castle didn't bite harshly, didn't seep into the bones like liquid swords, but they made one's skin hard and taut all the same. Viktor, stone-faced yet significantly cross, ached for a dip in the cold waters of the Great Lake. The old headmaster of the school, Dumbledore, didn't deem it necessary to warn anyone about the potential dangers of the Lake during his welcome speech a few weeks ago--which meant that it should be safe--and a bank that plunged deep into the darkness of the waters was but a short walking distance from the shore whereby the Durmstrang ship was docked.

It was night time, and he needed to feel his blood rush through his ears like they did when he flew on a broom, to get his mind off of any and all aggrieving subject matters. A swim came second best when he longed for such a rush. Any normal person would go pale at the thought of diving headfirst into the Great Lake, for fear of freezing to death, but relatively speaking, it was perfectly temperate for the Triwizard champion.

What has gotten him so upset that night was the recent turn-out of the selection of champions for the Tournament. Viktor found it utterly ridiculous to have a fourth contender in a Triwizard tourney, and the mystery surrounding the eligibility of one Harry Potter made it all the more suspicious. His schoolmates couldn't seem to agree more--they wanted a redo of the selection, but the tournament judges informed them regretfully that the Goblet's magic was law, and cannot be overturned.

There had been students under the age of seventeen who wanted badly to contend, but begrudgingly accepted the new rules set by Ludo Bagman and the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Dumbledore was even the officiator of the age line that was drawn around the Goblet, and such magic couldn't be tampered easily, unless the old wizard was in on the whole debacle. That was the word that was going around the Durmstrang cabins, that the old coot was behind all of it, a rumor that further nettled Viktor.

Clad in a set of trunks and an A-shirt, he trudged bare-footed over the pebbles covering the bank, looking for a perfect spot in the water to just ease his way into. The bank transitioned from rocky pebbles to oddly-shaped boulders the size of small Blast-ended Skrewts, and then into grassy patches and shrubs. Viktor found the scenery a bit more pleasant than the harsher ones he was used to—the shores between Ankenes and Bjerkvik were bleak and grey, with barely any vegetation and sunlight even less. It was one of the redeeming factors of the Wizarding school, one that just barely off-set its shortcomings.

He found an ideal spot near a large tree, and without hesitation, plunged right in. The shore ended abruptly into deep waters, and Viktor had crossed the short distance with only a few intent strides before he was treading the water, feeling the iciness stretch over his skin and harden it. His muscles felt relaxed yet alive as they worked to keep him afloat, and all his mental faculties turned instinctual, erasing any thoughts that plagued him. He loved to swim. It was similar to being up in the air, but required much more energy and less balance and concentration. For a while, he just stared up at the
sky, floating placidly, his face the only part of his body breaking the surface.

It would be a full twenty minutes later when he would kick towards the shore again, climbing up the underwater cliffside and ambling towards higher ground. Water dripped from him in rivulets, and his threadbare clothes clung to every muscle in his body. When his eyes cast forwards then, he was surprised to find a person there, sitting by the bank, seeming just as surprised as he was. He took note of the glasses and the reflection of the moon in them, just before realizing who it was. It was Harry Potter, sitting alone in the dark, knees huddled close to his chest to presumably keep himself warm. Viktor blinked at him.

"Hullo," Potter said quietly, peering up at him. Viktor didn't exactly know what to say to the boy, so he just nodded once, smoothing his hands over and behind his head. He should have realized it, but he saw Potter before, only he thought the huddled figure was a boulder, just like the many ones littering the lakeside. The Potter boy seemed taciturn as he remained silent, watching Viktor reacquaint himself with the chill of the night. Viktor didn't mind it--he was so used to being ogled by spectators that one fourteen-year old boy hardly bothered him.

"Do you often sit by yourself in the darkness like this?" Viktor thought to ask, voice heavy with accent, when Potter made no move to acknowledge him any further. The Bulgarian stood there, dripping still, eyeing the boy carefully.

Potter shrugged. He didn't look all too excited like Viktor thought he should. Diggory certain did, as did Delacour. Viktor's eyes trailed critically over the boy, sizing him up. Naturally, he didn't expect much from a fourteen-year old boy. He had a slight frame, and his hair was a mess. Viktor supposed it was a style, but he couldn't fathom how anyone could pretentiously dishevel themselves that way, so it must have been a naturally-occurring look. All in all, Harry Potter looked owlish and nonthreatening, like he belonged more in a library than in a magical contest.

"I was hoping to be alone for a few moments," Potter said tonelessly, finally looking at him again. Viktor felt his presence then, in his green eyes and his curious gaze. There was something to be said about wizards with commanding looks, and Harry Potter owned one. It was calm and enrapturing, without ever being imposing or overbearing. Viktor blinked. Harry Potter didn't seem fazed to be in the presence of Bulgarian superstar seeker Viktor Krum, but then it occurred to Viktor that Potter was a celebrity in his own right, even more so than he was. He didn't know what to think of that, except how positively self-centered he must be, to be thinking of such things.

"You are thinking of the tournament," Viktor asked, but it was posed more as a statement of a fact more than anything. He didn't make a move to sit or make himself comfortable He just stood there, like a stone statue, eyes looming over Potter.

"Fuck the tournament," Harry said with a sigh, casting his eyes down to his side and taking a pebble with his fingers. He turned it in his hand absently. "Hermione--a friend of mine--told me how dangerous it was for the Ministry to revive the tournament. She said students have died competing in it."

Viktor found his reaction to be quite telling, and certainly unexpected. His thick eyebrows furrowed together. Along with everyone else, he thought that Potter had found some means to put his name in the Goblet of Fire, tempted by eternal glory and fame. "You put your name in the Goblet of Fire."

Potter shook his head in a manner that Viktor could only pin as frustrated. "Everyone says that, but I didn't put my name in it. And I didn't get anyone to do it for me, either. I don't want to be a 'champion'. I've got enough problems without everyone talking and the press breathing behind my back."
Viktor wondered how a boy could look so small and vulnerable, yet seething with rage at the same time. He was stumped. If Potter didn't put his name in the Goblet, then who did? With the boy's troubled expression. It seemed as if he didn't know, either. Viktor felt it prudent not to ask. The boy was sitting in the dark, alone, looking out into the Lake. If that wasn't an image of an ostracized boy, he didn't know what was. He wondered if he should just leave, let the boy be alone with his thoughts. But he knew deep down what Potter was feeling. It was the look of one who was unceremoniously shoved into the limelight, the look of someone who was the object of everyone's gossip. Viktor was familiar with that look. It was an expression he often wore when he had no one to turn to. Nobody could quite understand the pressure of being someone like him, and he often went off alone like what Potter was doing, to contemplate and ruminate on his more-often-than-not accursed fame.

Viktor felt an unexpected surge of sympathy, then, for the boy who was huddled under the moonlight. Why shouldn't he believe Potter when he said he didn't put his name in the Goblet? It was certainly uncharacteristic of someone who looked to be exhausted with the public eye. Potter didn't seem like an attention seeker, nor did he look like someone who paid attention to his celebrity status. He was just a student, a boy who was a victim of circumstance. It just so happened that he had a certain air about him, too. All of these factors resulted in a boy primed to be a poster boy of triumph, to be put on a pedestal. But Viktor knew that the kind of celebrity status was a double-edged sword, and Potter seemed to be bearing the brunt of the negative side of his fame.

Viktor grunted. "There is no use thinking about it over and over. Just do the best you can to survive." He sounded harsh and unhelpful, but he could literally think of nothing to say to make the boy feel a little bit better about himself. He could have easily said 'stop being a girl' and would have dealt the same blow. He shook his head, looking down on his feet. He sighed. "I'm sorry. I do not know vot to say to make it all seem less difficult ... but I know how it feels, to haff people whisper behind you. Back in Bulgaria, one wrong move and I haff the whole Vizarding country soiling my name. And then, it only takes a Snitch in my hand to vin their hearts back again. People are fickle, Potter. Think not of how to please others. Think only of yourself and your survival."

He seemed to have said the right words, then. Potter looked at him oddly, like he was considering telling him some well-kept secret, but Viktor cast it off as a look of acknowledgement and nothing more. Viktor wasn't an expert on feelings and emotions, and didn't offer false pretenses that he did or tried to be. He just said what it was that was on his mind and delivered it with monotone, to remove any presumption of subjectivity in his answers. It has worked for him most of his life, and people have learned to trust him to be honest, sometimes brutally so.

"Thank you," Potter said quietly, peering up at him again as he ran a hand through his hair. "I appreciate that."

Viktor gave him a nod and a smirk, before turning on his heel and walking back to the ship. "Don't thank me yet," he said without looking back. "Ve still haff a tournament to compete in." It was the first of many times he would offer his advice to the young man, and certainly not the last in which they would feel kinship.
Camaraderie

Chapter Summary

Cedric wonders, on occasion, how Harry's mind works, and why he acts the way he does despite everything that's happening to him. Happens before the First Task and after the Yule Ball.

There was a lot to be said about the first Hogwarts champion of the Triwizard Tournament. Cedric Diggory was tall, muscular, and extremely attractive. He was at the top of his class, and he seemed to be a shoe-in for champion as far as Triwizard champions went. However, he regarded the tournament with little interest, not because he was undermining the prestige of it, but because he was better off simply not being at risk of dying in some freak accident. It was, frankly, just another obstacle in his life.

So why did he put his name in the Goblet of Fire?

Why? Because he had always been a victim of all kinds of pressure familiar to a teenager. Parents, friends, school—each played a part in making sure Cedric was as perfect as he seemed. A title of Triwizard Champion would add to the many reasons why he'd. But he was far from flawless; he was just the same as all the others, blindly staggering through life, hoping to do what he ought to do and be as good of a person as one ought to be.

He was sitting in the courtyard, attempting to study but failing in that regard, because his fellow Hufflepuffs had found him, and surrounded him in a tight little circle of self-importance. Cedric should have protested any company, told them to bugger off because he really need to catch up on his schoolwork, but there was almost no pleasing his friends, and exercising any authority over them would only end in more problems. Of course, he wasn’t a pushover by any means, but indulging the whims of his friends had always been an important part of his relationship with them.

However, the one thing he did not indulge them in was wearing the stupid badge on his chest, the ones being distributed around school saying, 'Potter Stinks'. As far as he was concerned, Harry Potter was not like what any of the rumors were saying. His brief experiences with the other teen had left upon Cedric the impression that Harry was quite unassuming a Wizarding celebrity, and was very much unaware of what his presence did to people.

He had admittedly been starstruck when they were formally introduced during the Quidditch World Cup. It had been hard not to openly stare, manners considered and all that. The Boy-Who-Lived had always been part of every children's bedtime stories, and Cedric's childhood was no different. To see the scar on Harry's forehead made every childish fantasy he harbored seem all the more real, much more exciting than the thought of magic being real. Harry had been friendly enough, quiet, at least until he opened his mouth and said something. That had been when Cedric realized that Harry was more than just your ordinary wizard. He held a certain air about him, a charm that didn't come from magic, and he did not lord it over others like the Malfoys or abuse it like the Minister.

When Harry approached their group alone, Cedric was almost surprised. Harry was never alone, at least, that was what he noticed by observation. He was always with his friends Weasley and Granger, but it seemed as if they were nowhere in sight, and Harry was walking from class to class without accompaniment. His fellow Hufflepuffs jeered and taunted and threw stupid little insults at
the unexpected fourth champion, but Harry seemed to ignore all of them, keeping his eyes locked on Cedric. The Hufflepuff's interest was piqued. Wasn't Harry at all bothered by everyone?

"Can I have a word?" Harry spoke, briefly glancing at Cedric's friends for a moment before looking back at him again. Cedric raised an eyebrow, just as his friends redoubled their efforts with their jibes.

"Alright," Cedric replied, setting his book down and standing up. "Mate," Cedric warned, holding his hand up as one of them stepped forward. "I'll only be a moment," he told them, as he walked to where Harry went, under the shade of a holly tree. Harry looked disturbingly unperturbed by Cedric's friends and their words and insulting badges, but Cedric sought to apologize for them anyway.

Harry beat him to the punch.

"Dragons. That's the First Task," he said.

Cedric's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"They've got one for each of us," Harry nodded. Cedric furrowed his eyebrows, suspicion creeping into him. Why would Harry seek him out and tell him about the task when it was a competition? If he knew something that Cedric didn't, wouldn't it be to his advantage?

"And erm, Fleur and Krum, do they ..." he started, sidling closer. Harry blinked.

"Yes," Harry replied with a shrug and a look over his shoulder.

"Right." Cedric followed his eyes to where his Hufflepuff friends were, jeering at Harry still.

The Gryffindor already made to leave, but Cedric grabbed his arm without thinking. "Hey listen--about the badges ... I've asked them not to wear them--"

"Don't worry about it," Harry brushed off, and soon he was out of sight, leaving a confused Cedric behind him.

Dragons. The first task was about dragons. He didn't know what was going to happen, but the task was less than a week from then, and he had no idea how to deal with a dragon.

Under the pretense of going to research (on the beasts), Cedric took his book and his bag from underneath his friends' noses and ran off to the library. In truth, he was a irritated about their treatment of Harry, and couldn't stand another moment with them. The teen only sought to help. He was being more loyal to Cedric than his friends have ever been. A certain amount of respect started to bubble in him then, for Harry and his considerate nature.

Yet, he was still unsure of what to make of the other male. Cedric guessed that Harry was evening out the playing field. If Fleur and Krum knew about the dragons, and Harry hadn't told him about it, then he would be the only one going into the First Task completely unaware. He supposed that he should be appreciative--Harry had other goals in mind than winning the tournament.

It made him unhappy for the lad. Those badges were everywhere, and everyone but a few Gryffindors close to Harry's group was wearing them. Cedric wouldn't have been able to handle it if everyone in school started wearing 'Cedric Stinks' badges. He wondered if the students even cared, even a tiny bit, about what Harry felt. if he felt bullied or annoyed or upset by the others' behavior. Right then he knew for sure that Harry didn't put his name in the Goblet of Fire. No one would ask for this sort of treatment. Harry didn't bask in the attention it got him, he shied away from them. Nor
did he look disappointed that his supposed plan to garner more attention backfired.

He then wondered if Harry even cared at all. He had never seen a boy so resilient, so indifferent to mockery. Cedric supposed it came with the celebrity upbringing, but he couldn't help think it was something more than that, something worth looking into. Maybe it all came down to integrity, or a thick-skinned nature. Maybe he was putting on a brave face. He was a Gryffindor after all. Whatever the case, Cedric wanted to find out what was in Harry Potter's head.

The one benefit of being able to go first during the First Task was that he was able to watch everyone else deal with their dragon.

His Swedish Shortsnout was no easy task to overcome, and Cedric had to Transfigure a rock into a Labrador to distract it. It worked, to a certain extent, and the dog gamboled about as the dragon chased it, with Cedric hurriedly making a grab for the golden egg. But the dragon soon lost interest and honed in on him again.

He was in the Infirmary for a few days afterwards, being treated for having part of his face burned. He wasn't so vain as to worry about what he would look like afterwards, but at least Madame Pomfrey managed to restore his face completely with some magical orange paste and aloe vera.

Viktor Krum handled his dragon differently. Naturally, dragon hide was impervious to magic, and so Krum had to make use of his environment. He shortened the dragon's chain using a variation of the Diminuendo charm, and Transfigured various boulders into thick, high walls around the dragon to block its spitfire. He almost got a nasty burn maneuvering around the fire-breathing creature, but he managed to block himself and the golden egg off from the flying lizard.

Fleur on the other hand had used the Hypnos spell, putting her dragon to sleep by hitting it in the eyes, but was docked points for getting her skirt burned off when the dragon snored. It was rather unfortunate, too, seeing as Fleur would have taken the lead if she left the Task unscathed. As it were, she ended up in fourth place, behind Cedric.

Harry landed in second place, after employing the use of a simple yet, ingenious spell. Cedric had looked over towards Krum's area and found that the Bulgarian had also been impressed. Harry had Accio'ed his Firebolt into play, and flew around the stage, dodging any attempt to fell him by the Hungarian Horntail. Things took a turn for the worse when the dragon broke its chains and trailed after Harry all around the castle grounds, and everyone had their heart in their throats—including Cedric.

The burst of cheer and applause from everyone was deafening, when Harry's sputtering Firebolt brought him back to the stadium with a grin on his face. He got his golden egg then, and Cedric, to his surprise, was very much satisfied with the turn of events.

He was unable to cast aside any thought of the lone Gryffindor, especially after his performance during the trial.

After that ordeal, the badges nearly disappeared from all over school, only being worn by certain Slytherins, and Harry Potter was the talk of town once again. Although Krum finished first, Harry had looked spectacular on his broomstick, using a tactic that would have occurred more naturally to
the Bulgarian seeker than the fourteen-year old bespectacled boy. He gained some popularity from it, enough to balance out everyone's suspicions at having a fourth champion. Harry seemed to regain the company of his friends, although he looked no different from when he didn't have them at his disposal.

Cedric found the thought oddly comforting, even though it was wrong to think. He shouldn't think that Harry looked better off alone, but Cedric found that Harry's friends drowned out the male's intriguing presence, and also consequently made him unapproachable during meals or free period.

He finally managed to corner the boy between classes, less than a month after the Yule Ball. They were on the bridge that connected the path from the entrance hall towards the greenhouses.

"Potter!" he called after the young man. Harry turned to him, cheeks flushed and nose red from the cold, swimming in his robes and scarf. Cedric smiled tentatively at him as they drew near each other.

Cedric seemed to be at a loss for words. "How ... how are you?" he asked, lamely. He almost hit himself over the head for his lack of astuteness. Harry blinked at him, ducking his head and breathing out a puff of air. It dissipated into the cold air.

"Spectacular," Harry responded, looking curiously back. Cedric looked down at his shoes.

"Look, I--I realize I never really thanked you properly for tipping me off about those dragons ..." Cedric began, stepping forward to push his point across.

Harry's head shook minutely. "Forget about it. I'm sure you would've done the same for me." Cedric was once again reminded of how Harry shrugged off gratitude, just as easily as he shrugged off all manner of comments. Cedric always found that to be an entirely admirable trait, to be able to be impervious to other people's opinions, good or bad. And he's selfless, too, without thinking much about it, Cedric added in his head. Harry was like that, too.

"Exactly," Cedric hastily replied, just as Harry was, once again, turning to leave. Why didn't the boy ever feel the need to stay and chat? Cedric was beginning to think that Harry found him uninteresting. Or was Harry just busy, now that he had the good opinion of everyone at Hogwarts again? Whatever the case, Harry turned back again to hear him out.

As suspected, Harry had yet to figure out the clue within the golden egg. He looked quizzical when Cedric asked. Cedric almost smiled.

"You know the prefect's bathroom on the fifth floor ...?" he asked, the corners of his lips tugging, unable to hide his amusement anymore. "It's not a bad place for a bath. Just take your egg and ... mull things over in the hot water." They exchanged a meaningful stare, just so Harry had understood, and Cedric nodded once. He left before Harry did for once.

His smile as he walked back to the castle made him so warm he didn't even need his coat.
Mutual Understanding

Chapter Summary

The Second Task and Harry’s antics leave Cedric and Viktor distraught. Happens during the Second Task.

The only thing stopping Viktor from doing a good job with the Second Task was his inability to breathe underwater. Otherwise, he took to the Great Lake spectacularly, using complicated Transfiguration spells to give himself a shark’s upper body. He still retained his wits about him, but he had gills to breathe, and the nose to pinpoint where exactly it was he was supposed to go. Otherwise, he didn’t even need warming or impervious charms. He was so used to the cold depths that he could kick at a steady pace for long periods of time.

The shark Transfiguration was a risky move on his part. For months, he had been trying to figure out what the shrill wailing was that came from the golden egg when he opened it. Out of sheer pride and determination, he sought no help from anyone whatsoever, adamant in figuring things out on his own. Headmaster Karkaroff approved of this, and told every Durmstrang student not to interfere. The Headmaster had seemed intent that Viktor figured things out on his own, and even seemed to go out of his way to make things difficult for him by restricting his access to certain books and training. Two weeks before the Second Task, and he was drawing blanks, and no amount of poring over the ship’s extensive library or even Howgarts’ could save him. Were they supposed to know how to protect their ears from the wails? Did they have to figure out how to stop such a noise? He didn’t know, at least until a week before the Second Task.

He had been near the Lake as always, drowning his thoughts with a swim. The the dark waters had offered solace that nothing else he had ever experienced can, and it had calmed him somewhat, distracted him from thoughts of what was to come. Sure, it had not been a good idea to be taking his mind off of the tournament, but Viktor had needed reprieve--one more second of poring over books and trying to think of ways the Second Task could go and he was going to go insane.

He had not expected Cedric Diggory to be waiting for him by the bank, hands inside the pockets of his robes, looking out towards him with curious eyes. Viktor had coolly regarded him as he surfaced from the Lake, dripping wet with his usual gear of swimming trunks and an A-shirt. He had been surprised the blond’s eyes had flickered towards the lower regions of his body for a moment, towards his bulging thighs and wet shorts, a gesture that was quite telling. Viktor had raised his eyebrow at him, still composed. So the younger man eyed him with a hint of interest. He wasn't going to be perturbed or excited about it.

"Vot?" he said warily. "Vot is it you vont?"

Diggory’s lips quirked as he crossed his hands over his chest. "You getting ready for the Second Task, there?"

Viktor narrowed his eyes at him. "I don't know vot you're talking about."

Diggory’s eyes widened slightly. "I heard you liked to swim, so this task should be perfect for you."

Viktor shook his head. "I haffen't figured it out yet." It was only a few days until the Second Task,
and he was swamped in schoolwork and managing his family's affairs in Sofia, all the way from Scotland. Added to that were the other provisions in his national Quidditch team contract, the ones he needed to fulfill, like public appearances. He was being overworked, sure, but he wasn't bitter or angry about it. He was just exhausted, and wished that things came a little bit easier. He felt as if everything was making itself complicated just to screw with him, and it was driving him further into fatigue.

"You haven't?" Diggory asked, eyebrows furrowing. Viktor shook his head. Maybe it was alright if he got some help. Sure, he was nearly eighteen, and had to learn how to be completely independent as per Durmstrang policy, but he was swamped, and the Second Task was inching closer.

"Have you got your egg with you?" Diggory asked as he stepped closer, a movement that was meant to be casual, but came off as tentative. Viktor sighed. He supposed that his current expression didn't warrant anyone's friendship at the moment. He must look like a psychopath, ready to snap any moment.

"It's in my bag," Viktor responded in his usual monotone voice, pointing towards the small satchel propped against a large rock. Cedric glanced at it for a moment, before tuning back to him with a conflicted expression.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Diggory muttered, rubbing the back of his head and biting his lip. "But we're all in this together. One thing I've realized about the tournament is that it's lonely being a champion. Even though you've got your friends with you, they don't know the amount of pressure pushing on you from all sides. They don't know what it's like. We don't have anyone else to turn to about these things other than our fellow champions. Surely you get that feeling."

Viktor crossed his own hands over his broad chest and nodded briskly. "I understand. Ve are competitors during the tasks themselves. But before and after, ve are comrades."

"Right," Diggory responded in kind, with smiling eyes and a grin. Viktor didn't know what to make of the people in Hogwarts, who smiled so openly and were not careful at all with their emotions. In Durmstrang, everyone kept to themselves, and guarded their secrets with attention verging on paranoia. It was how it had always been in the school, and Viktor was only just getting used to the unusual warmth of Hogwarts.

"It's this little thing I've learned from Harry," Diggory confided, and Viktor's eyes intensified at the mention of Potter.

"Vot do you mean?" he asked as he went over to his satchel. Diggory trailed after him slowly, looking out at the Lake.

"He told me about the dragons. I mean, he chose to tell me, even though it was an advantage," Diggory said with a shrug. Viktor blinked at him. It was Karkaroff who tipped him off about the dragons, and he had to work out the rest. Still, the knowledge was greatly appreciated. If he hadn't known it was going to be the fire-breathing creatures, and only just found out during the First Task itself, Viktor wasn't sure if he could have survived through the trial. He understood, then, what Diggory was doing, bringing Potter into the topic of conversation. Potter didn't seem concerned about winning at all, and was more interested in his fellow champions' well-being, else he wouldn't have told Diggory anything at all.

"That boy ... he is quite something, isn't he?" Viktor had to say. Thoughts of Harry Potter and his green eyes had occupied his mind for the better part of his stay at Hogwarts. He couldn't quite get over how a fourteen year old had the striking eyes of a fearsome adult, or how his voice carried with it a multitude of emotions at once, not the least bit of them being despondency and bitterness. Potter
had the body language and the behavior of one who wanted no part of anything he was entrenched in, yet was resigned to his fate and was making the best of it. He hadn't been convinced before, not completely, of Potter's motivations for competing in the Triwizard tournament, but it slowly came Viktor, how Harry Potter could not have wanted his fate for himself.

"Something," Diggory repeated with a snort, as if the word didn't do Potter enough justice.

Viktor took out the golden egg from his satchel, the orb fitting his palm just so. He held it in front of him for Diggory to see, and then leveled the boy with a patient look. Diggory seemed to be offering his help, seeing the way he waited expectantly for Viktor. The Bulgarian scowled. Asking for assistance left a foul taste in his mouth, but he more in need of it now than ever. And Diggory was right: they, as people facing the same dangerous fate, needed to help each other. "Vot do I do vit this?"

Diggory nudged his head over to the Lake, lips quirking as he did. "Get in there with it. You'll figure it out."

Viktor's scowl couldn't get several shades darker, but it did, growing deeper as each extra second passed. Where is he? he thought in frustration. He heard a frightened squeak when his eyes inadvertently landed on a second-year by the nearest stands.

Potter had been ahead. Viktor saw the boy floating over the selection of hostages long before he got there with his poorly Transfigured shark head. He even caught a glimpse of a conversation pass between the boy and Diggory, who was using a Bubblehead Charm. But he had swum on, intent to finish first. He snapped his teeth at the ropes binding his friend Lestat to the stones below, and dragged him to the surface as soon as he can. Potter shouldn't have been this late to surface. Even Fleur, curse her, had backed out before time ran out.

His fists curled and uncurled at his sides, and he was glaring rather menacingly at the Lake. His body ran on adrenaline at the moment, perfectly unable to keep still. His baser instincts told him to just dive in, redo the spell and search for Harry Potter, but everyone seemed intent to fuss over him and keep him on the platform.

"We've got to do something," someone said to him, and his gaze snapped to his right, where Cedric, shivering under piles of towels, wore a pained expression. Diggory shared the same sentiment, and the two of them stood by Potter's principles of looking out for each other.

The kinship Viktor felt with Diggory was different with what he had with Potter. It was a similar, niggling need to keep the fourteen-year old safe from harm. Viktor didn't know when he had acquired any semblance of affection for the boy--maybe during the First Task, when he flew so sublimely that it almost brought tears to his eyes, almost, or maybe it had been during the Yule Ball when Potter's face had a pinched expression on it as he tried rather determinedly to make sure he was dancing properly.

Whatever the case, Viktor hadn't felt any sort of attachment form for someone in years, and it was slightly disconcerting. It was also the farthest thing from his mind at the moment, as he was too focused on the rippling Great Lake, eyes peeled for anything breaking the surface. A mess of hair or a glare from the sun overhead being reflected by round glasses.

He glanced back at Diggory, who was gripping the railings like a lifeline, fingers tapping impatiently. "He's out there, in trouble. He could be drowning, Viktor. We should tell the judges."

Viktor could tell that the younger man was overwhelmed by the Task they had just pushed through, and was running high on emotions, just like the Bulgarian was. He also didn't fail to notice the offhanded use of his first name, which meant that the other teen regarded him in a much more casual
manner than before.

Maybe Diggory had sensed it as well, the forming bond brought about by mutual concern for the Boy-Who-Lived. Maybe Viktor was in over his head, but he placed a hand on Diggory's shoulder nonetheless, and squeezed firmly. That seemed to calm the other male down, and he glanced at Viktor, eyes blown. Viktor's hand might have lingered for a few more moments than necessary, but that was only due to the fact that Diggory had rather ... taut shoulders.

"He's fine. He'll haff to be. Else ve're going to pummel him," he told the other young man. Diggory seemed to deflate into a more relaxed state, and his breathing seemed to come with less effort. He shot Viktor a grateful, if not slightly amused look.

"You've come around, haven't you? He's starting to grow on you?" Diggory asked him. Viktor's scowl deepened.

"I never not liked him. He's not a bad person," Viktor huffed. Diggory only smiled, but it was a short-lived smile, for nothing had changed, and Potter was still nowhere to be found.

Reprieve came at last, when two heads surfaced out of the water. But one was shocking red hair, and the other a pale sort of blonde. It was the friend of Potter, and Delacour's younger sister. Viktor's nostrils flared and his jaw tightened. Where was Potter? He drew his own conclusions—Potter, in a fit of selfless determination, thought he could bring back two hostages. How else could the two have been rescued? Potter was the only champion left in the water, and it was almost an hour past the time limit.

Just as Viktor was at wit's end trying to reassure himself, and Diggory was just about to scream at the judges, Potter launched out of the water like a human cannonball, landing ungracefully onto the platform with an echoing thud. The two other champions were near him in moments, eyes scanning the slight, shivering frame for any long lasting damage. Apart from scratches and minor scrapes, he seemed to be fine, albeit entirely pale and drenched. His webbed feet has disappeared, and so had his gills, leading Viktor to think that the gilly weed must have worn off before he even got to the surface. He thought of how clever the boy must have been, to cast a spell on himself to propel himself upwards. Even though it ended up with Potter landing squarely on his ass in front of everyone.

"He's fine," Diggory echoed Viktor, knocking shoulders with him. Diggory smiled reassuringly, and that helped calm him somewhat. Maybe he did look like someone who needed reassuring. For all he knew, he might have looked like a Skrewt ready to explode. They watched a Delacour showered Potter and his friend in thanks, and the corners of Viktor's lips twitched slightly, when Harry looked mildly alarmed and bewildered by what was happening.

They all listened as Albus Dumbledore and Ludo Bagman informed everyone of the judges' tally of points through Sonorus. It came as a surprise, then, when Viktor found himself to have assumed right about Potter. Merchieftainess Murcus had informed the judges of what happened at the bottom of the Lake.

Ludo Bagman finally got to Potter. "Harry Potter used gilly weed to great effect," he said. "He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, the Merchieftainess informs us that Mr. Potter was first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages to safety, not merely his own."

Viktor found that he shared the same nonplussed look with Diggory on that front. The both of them expected it, which showed just how much the two of them knew. Viktor felt disconcerted once again, about his growing attachment, not only to Potter, but to Diggory as well.
The point distribution ended up with the three of them being tied for first. Viktor channeled some of Potter's blase attitude and didn't care for it. He was just glad the all of them were safe, thanks in part to Potter's penchant for heroics. He supposed that the judges were right, that Potter did have outstanding moral fiber, which led him to wonder why it was exactly that Potter felt the need to rescue people at a moment's notice, without pause for thought. Viktor found it utterly idiotic, but couldn't fault Potter for it. He couldn't fault Potter for anything, not when he was being a very outstanding person to begin with.

He thought it was high time that he had a little conversation with the fourteen-year old, away from all the spectators and the high energy of the tournament. He couldn't approach Potter right out of nowhere, but he and Diggory seemed to be friends, so he might have to bring the blond along with him. Maybe have a drink at Hogsmeade. For sure, he wasn't going to be in a celebratory mood that night. All he would care to think about was Potter's green eyes, and Diggory's knowing smiles.
Chapter Summary

Viktor wonders how he ended up having drinks at the Three Broomsticks, against his better judgment. Happens during the start of spring.

Viktor trudged on with purpose, boots plodding along the muddy road, as if he was going to war instead of town. His natural resting face was brooding and somber, and at some point Diggory had pointed it out to him, which left him even more surly. They were supposed to meet Potter at Hogsmeade after the boy had had his time with his friends. Viktor didn't know why he even suggested the outing. He didn't like public places, and certainly didn't like raucous chatter from people he barely knew. That was what he expected to happen, and he was not looking forward to it.

"I told you to call me Cedric, didn't I?" Diggory said for the second time. Viktor shrugged at his smiling companion, curling further into his fur-lined coat.

"It takes some getting used to," Viktor replied with a purse of his lips. Diggory insisted they use first names to refer to each other. Viktor didn't mind, but he didn't see what difference it made. At Durmstrang, no one, save for the ones who had known each other since they were toddlers, ever called each other anything other than their family names. They served to remind everyone of each others' stature. Krum was a respectable enough name in Bulgaria--they owned mercantile branches in Sofia, had a good reputation as traders, and they were of Pureblood stock. But he guessed that it wasn't as important at Hogwarts, where Muggleborns were educated, and everyone was treated as equals, or so it said on the label.

"I reckon it's a bit too informal?" Cedric asked. "I mean ... I know a bit about Durmstrang. I have distant cousins there from my dad's side. They're ... a respectable lot," Cedric tried, smiling apologetically. "You all seem to have this air of ... surliness though. And you're all strictly formal with each other. Like it's a school thing."

"It's a school thing," Viktor agreed with a huff. Cedric beamed.

They said nothing else to each other. Cedric seemed quite content walking without the need for idle chat, and for that, at least, Viktor was grateful.

The minute they reached the first few establishments lining the outskirts of Hogsmeade, Viktor turned guarded. He was getting looks, and so was Cedric, and Viktor hunched further into himself, unaccustomed to the stares and gapes.

"I guess I'll have to get used to those," Cedric told him quietly, sidling closer. He was looking around surreptitiously, eyeing the onlookers.

"You're getting them, too," Viktor pointed out.

"Yeah ... but that's only because they're wondering. What's the Hogwarts champion doing fraternizing with the enemy?"

"I'm sure they are not wondering that," Viktor said, furrowing his eyebrows. Surely he wasn't the
enemy in that hypothetical train of thought?

"Ah, but they are. Might be. I don't really know, do I?" Cedric mused. Viktor wondered if Cedric often thought of other people's opinions.

"Are you always so concerned about what other people think?" Viktor asked. "I don't mean to be so frank ... but this was the purpose of this little ... outing." To get to know each other, he added in his head, but Cedric could figure it out without him saying out loud.

Cedric gave him one of his telling smiles again. Viktor could barely tell, but there were subtle differences to those smiles.

"Not always ..." Cedric trailed off mysteriously. Viktor waited for a definite answer, but got nothing. He saved it for another day.

When they reached the main road, they spotted at a distance a group of girls that Viktor was sure would cause trouble. He shot a panicked glance at Cedric. "Do you mind ...?"

Cedric caught on almost immediately. "Not at all. Let's take this back alley ... we'll round about and get to the Three Broomsticks from the other side."

Viktor nodded his thanks, and Cedric herded them towards a darker alcove, away from the gossiping gaggle of girls who intimidated everyone with their presence.

"They were Fleur's friends," Cedric told him. Viktor grimaced.

"I don't like Delacour, or her friends," he replied blankly. Cedric laughed.

"You don't like them because they're too ... whispery about everything. Understandable. They can get pretty scary."

"Scary," Viktor scoffed, as if the idea of girls with their shrill voices and overbearing perfumes could overwhelm him. Viktor paused in his ministrations. Maybe they are scary.

"Aren't you used to it all?" Cedric thought to ask, as they turned at an intersection. Viktor glanced at him inquisitively.

"The limelight, and stuff. Like ... haven't you arrived at a point where the stares don't bother you anymore?" Cedric expounded, and Viktor looked forwards, mulling over it.

"Not exactly ..." Viktor said after a moment. "It wasn't something that I signed up for."

He was referring to his Seeker position in the national team. If he was going to be honest, Viktor played for the money and the opportunities it allowed him. One of the conditions stated in his contract included a publicity clause--beside the rest of the investor advertisements, Viktor got to include his family's business. Because of that, the Krums had managed to expand into different marketing ventures.

"Still ... it has to be an amazing feeling, hearing people cheer for you at the Cup. I did. Cheer for you, I mean. Harry and I got to watch you together," Cedric said, ducking his head. Viktor noticed his ears going red. He wasn't sure what to make of that.

"You watched the Cup together?" Viktor asked, surprised. And here he thought the two boys barely knew each other. His companion gave an awkward sort of shrug.
"Yeah, well ... my dad had tickets, and so did Harry's friends, the Weasleys. My dad and Mr. Weasley got their tickets through Ministry connections ... of course, who would pass up an opportunity to see the great Seeker Viktor Krum live?" Cedric said, eyes teasing. Viktor looked away, feeling unexpectedly embarrassed.

"You flatter me," the Bulgarian deadpanned. Cedric shook his head, but didn't deny it.

"I won't pretend that wasn't my intention," the blond said quietly. "I'm a great admirer of your skill. Harry is, too. We're both Seekers, you know."

Viktor wasn't aware of that. "Potter vos very good on a broom." He was, of course, referring to Potter's undeniable skill during the First Task. Anyone who could fly under duress brought about by a dragon could very well easily fly for a national team.

"He beat me in all the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff games--except for that one time--but we have Dementors to blame for that," Cedric agreed, sounding a bit bitter, but accepting of it. "Can't fault him for it, though. You'd think someone with four-eyes would have difficulty spotting a Snitch. Guess again."

Viktor wasn't even going to ask about the Dementors. "Flying isn't so bad ... maybe ve could do a few laps, sometime."


Viktor was quickly getting tired of how his name rolled off of Cedric's tongue. He sighed in exasperation. "I wish you would stop doing that ... making me sound like some sort of celebrity."

Cedric shrugged. "You are a celebrity. But if it bothers you, I can always stop."

"If it's not too much trouble ..." Viktor said. It was difficult, trying to get to know people, but Cedric Diggory was amicable enough, and didn't seem intent on prattling on to keep a conversation going. Viktor was fine with the inquiries and the questions, so long as they didn't get too personal. He didn't think he was ready for that yet. It would come in its own time, he was sure. The Bulgarian rarely warmed up to people so quickly, but Cedric had a certain ... friendly air about him. Viktor couldn't deny that he was, at the very least, charmed by the boy.

Just as they reached the tail end of their conversation, they arrived in front of the Three Broomsticks. Viktor could already feel the warmth and the chatter seeping out from the wooden cracks of the establishment. The loud voices and the stuffy air exploded out for a moment whenever someone opened the entrance to come or go. He glanced at Cedric, conveying just how much he wasn't looking forward to going inside with one intent, steely gaze, and Cedric nodded, smiling in understanding.

"We'll get a seat somewhere neat the back, where no one can possibly bother us," Cedric promised, and Viktor nodded uncertainly.

They braved the Three Broomsticks. Viktor sucked in the breath as they temperature rose to more stifling levels, and he almost felt better, at least until some eyes landed on him and the illusion was shattered. Cedric pulled him out of sight before anyone could make a significant amount of fuss.

"Over here," Cedric told him, and Viktor found the other young man's hand to be pleasantly warm around his own. He furrowed his eyebrows.

"There're a few tables around this huge wooden pillar, people almost never see it because there's this
"I'm going to get Harry," Cedric told him, checking his pockets. "Can I get you anything?"

"Just some butterbeer, please. Warm," he told the blond. He would have asked for something a little less sweet and a little more alcoholic, but he was pretty sure Cedric was still a minor. He didn't know. He wasn't aware what the legal drinking age was in Scotland. But Cedric seemed tall and muscular for his age, whatever age that was. Certainly not burly like Viktor was, but imposing and mature enough to warrant a second look.

"Alright," Cedric said, hand grazing his shoulder for a moment before disappearing off to the bar. Viktor wondered why everything seemed to linger whenever they touched. It was intriguing and at the same time mind-boggling.

When Cedric returned, it was with a handful of butterbeers and one Harry Potter. Viktor blinked. He gave the boy a thorough once over, before nodding at him.

"Hullo again," Potter said, pulling out a chair. The bespectacled boy was flushed, and he was smiling uncertainly. Viktor hadn't seen him like that before. It made his insides twist. So Potter could actually look decently satisfied with his life. So Potter could actually look decently satisfied with his life. He almost smirked, wanting to make a jibe out of it, but considering against it. It wouldn't do to start things off with something so crass. Especially since Potter seemed to be in a good mood. He started with those exact same words, and Cedric snorted beside him.

"His Gryffindor friends wouldn't let him leave the table," the blond said with a glance towards the youngest male, sliding a bottle towards Viktor's direction. They settled in, looked at each other awkwardly, and drank. Viktor took note of a few things, like how Potter's shoulders weren't so slumped like they used to be, or how his brilliant green eyes were more vibrant than he had seen them.

"They said something about 'fraternizing with the enemy'," Potter started, ducking his head. Viktor and Cedric shared a meaningful glance. "What?" Harry asked, looking between the both of them with his eyes blown.

"Cedric said something about that a while ago," Viktor offered. Cedric smiled at him.

"I told you," he said. Viktor scrunched his nose. Cedric ignored it. "People think, just because we're in a tournament, that we shouldn't be speaking to each other at all."

"Sounds pretty understandable to me," Potter said, cringing afterwards. "Sorry, I didn't mean to sound like you're bad company."

Cedric gave him a hearty pat on the back. "Nonsense! You know, Harry, this was all Viktor's idea. He wanted to get to know you." The blond threw a sly wink at him, and he paled. It was the first time he wanted to deck the taller male. Potter's eyes transferred to him, widening in realization.

"Oh!, Er, sorry, I didn't mean to sound offensive--"

"It's fine, I didn't see it as that," Viktor hastened to quell Harry's doubts, and they went silent at the
same time, allotting too much focus and concentration on their respective butterbeers.

Viktor opened his mouth, closed it, then tried again. "How are you?" he inquired stiffly, casting his eyes on a very interesting bump on the wooden table.

"Good! I've been good. School work, and all that. Glad we'll have to wait 'til June until another debacle," Potter said, blinking owlishly. Viktor nodded carefully.

"I haven't told you how good you look flying," he said, the compliment rolling off his tongue awkwardly. Cedric was grinning at him in amusement. Harry went pink in the ears.

"Uh, thanks," Potter fidgeted. "Cedric's better--they won against us during Third year--"

Cedric interrupted him. "$Only$ because of the Dementors on campus," he clarified. There it was again, the Dementors. Viktor had to ask this time around.

"I thought that those Dementors guarded your English prison, Azkaban," he asked, eyebrows knitting. Cedric made to explain, but Harry beat him to it.

"There was ... Sirius Black last year," Potter said with a careful tone. Viktor immediately sensed there was something more to it, but he didn't press on unless Potter wanted to share it on his own. But it seemed Cedric had picked up on it as well, and was less focused on tact as he was.

"I wondered about that. Whatever happened to him?" Cedric asked, turning to face Potter. The boy seemed to be debating with himself on what words to say, until he shrugged in a resigned manner. But Viktor wanted to say something, right before Potter told them anything. Sirius Black had been the talk of many circles in Durmstrang, particularly because many of the students there were related, in some way or another to a sympathizer of You-Know-Who, or even worse, a Death Eater-in-training. Viktor knew enough relevant people to know that Sirius Black didn't have the Dark Mark on him, and that he wasn't at all a sympathizer of the Dark Lord. Viktor informed them of that, before Potter got a word in. The way Potter eyed him then--mouth agape, eyes shining with indescribable emotion--Viktor's stomach turned. He didn't know whether he said the right thing or not.

"He's ... my godfather," Potter admitted. Cedric nearly choked on his butterbeer.

"Your godfather, Harry? Meaning to say ... you're filial? Like, you're somewhat related?" Cedric looked like he couldn't quite believe it, and Viktor could understand his shock to an extent. Potter merely nodded, eyeing Viktor again, and then looking back at Cedric.

"He's supposed to be my guardian," the boy explained further. "But his name hasn't been cleared, yet. They say he betrayed by parents, but it wasn't him. It was a man called Peter Pettigrew, a friend of theirs." Viktor could observe Potter's hands curling slowly around his bottle. "I sold my parents to Voldemort to save his own skin. Framed Sirius for it. He killed all those Muggles, not Sirius. He was an Animagus, and he cut his finger off before transforming, to make it seem like he was killed. We caught on that he was alive last year. He was in the school. That's why Sirius was at Hogwarts: to exact revenge. But the bloody coward escaped."

"Wait--so, when we all heard that Sirius got away when he got captured that night ..." Cedric began, and Potter nodded, glancing between them. Viktor was too enraptured with the retelling of the events to contribute any words.

"We set him free, Hermione and I. We couldn't let him get Kissed by the Dementors. It was unfair," Potter said, eyes cast down. "He's in hiding right now. We write letters to each other."
"Well at the very least, you know," Cedric said after a moment. "I mean, he would have been incarcerated for how many years... that must have been the worst feeling, going to prison for something you didn't do... and more than that, knowing that your friend's son was out there, exposed to the world who had judged you so unfairly."

Viktor's eyes deepened at Cedric's wise words of sympathy. He was an imposing young man, but he was considerate and understanding of other people. Potter seemed to smile ruefully at what the blond had said.

"We've reconciled. I hope to live with him someday. You know... live with a proper relative, for once?" Potter said, and Viktor saw it, the tiny wince that meant he had said too much. Viktor pressed on, stamped on the small window of opportunity before it got away from them.

"Who are you living with now?" he asked, eyes trained on Potter. Cedric glanced between them, befuddled. Potter paled, and said quietly, "my aunt and uncle, and their son, my cousin."

The hesitation, the reluctance to explain further--Viktor sensed something there that needed more evaluating, but he didn't want to pry, at least, not yet.

"It will happen someday," Viktor assured him with a firm nod, and Harry looked grateful. Cedric seemed to understand, too. He didn't press the matter further.

"So... tell me about Durmstrang, er, Viktor," Potter told him to break the somber mood that they all seemed to have descended into. Viktor noted the use of his first name in that, too, and wondered if it was an indirect question about being casual with each other. Cedric seemed to like where they were going, and nodded in acquiescence with the topic.

"Yeah... I mean, I've heard little of it from my cousins, but you know... we never really did get along," he said with a grimace. Viktor blinked at the two Hogwarts champions, debating whether to tell them. He figured he could trust them enough--Potter, or rather Harry, seemed to trust them enough to tell more about himself, enough that the boy himself was caught off-guard by his own admission. Cedric, too, was open and trusting. Viktor didn't think anything bad would come from telling them a bit about the secretive school. Viktor huffed, leaning forward on his elbows. He kept his dark eyes trained on them as he spoke.

"Durmstrang is... a very strict place. Very dour. I seem to understand... Cedric is coming from ven he said surly vos a school thing. Ve are allowed recreation, just... scheduled ones," he scowled. "Although, the academics and the extra-curriculars are commendable. Ve don't haff houses. But ve haff clubs. Brotherhoods, they're informally called. Which compete vit each other in dueling and tests of intelligence. The school gives perks to those vit victorious streaks. It's very... rough."

Cedric and Harry seemed engrossed with his description, so he continued, albeit reluctantly. He shuffled in his seat and leaned ever closer. "It's common practice to learn about the Dark Arts from a very young age. I... ven I vos eleven, they taught me how to end the life of simple creatures, like roaches and rats, using spells."

The boys' expressions differed then. Cedric looked disturbed, while Harry looked... sympathetic? Viktor didn't expect it. He expected the two to have the expression of the other. Viktor shrugged, indicating that it was something he couldn't help. "I wish I could say it had redeeming factors, but it vos a cold place. I had to make due. Join a brotherhood before I got eaten alive. It is very rare for someone to go through school without being recruited."

"That's..." Cedric began, unable to find the words, but Harry supplied them. "Terrible," the bespectacled boy followed. Viktor's eyes widened a fraction when Harry reached forward and
clasped his hand.

He flinched away before the contact turned too intimate, casting his apologetic eyes almost immediately towards Harry.

"I'm sorry," Viktor said, his hands disappearing under the table. "I didn't mean to sound so ... tragic. It wasn't a bad experience. It was something everyone who came from a Durmstrang family had to go through. A legacy, if you will. I do not resent it. I've made friends and connections."

He seemed to say all of this to Harry, who looked frankly indignant about whatever treatment Viktor had gotten, or whatever it was he imagined Viktor had gotten. It wasn't that bad, Viktor mused, although there was that little part inside of him that said that it was, and he was just denying it out of pride.

Whatever it was, he stamped it down. He was much more concerned with the look he was getting from the two boys, in particular, Harry. Something in his green eyes had changed, and he didn't know if he liked it or not. He fidgeted under the attention.

"I'm sure Hogwarts is a more ... enjoyable story to tell," Viktor supplied, albeit a little desperately. He wanted to get out of his current predicament. He didn't tell them about the secrets of Durmstrang to ask pity from them. He was just doing it so he could learn to trust them. The two boys were interesting, unlike the rest of the school, and Viktor had gone out of his way to get to know them. Still, some part of him ached for the comfort of having someone from the outside know about his life, and was grateful that they reacted with sympathy and care. Like it mattered to them how Viktor was raised and brought up.

Harry looked careworn, almost empathetic—but it was ridiculous; Harry couldn't have known how it felt like—but Cedric caught on to what he was suggesting, just like he always did. Viktor appreciated how the other man could always seem to pick up his subtle, almost unreadable signals. It meant that Viktor didn't have to say so much. He almost never did, anyway. He was grateful for the male, when he started talking about Hogwarts.

Much later on, when the sun was beginning to set, and Cedric and Harry had been talking in length about their many mishaps at Hogwarts, Viktor sat and listened contentedly, a small smile on his lips. Cedric was the more animated conversationalist, and he always went off on tangents, jumping from one topic to the next. It was amusing to see Harry try to keep up, and look confused most of the time. Viktor had started to admire the way Cedric's lips curved, and the way his grey eyes glowed silver when a mischievous spark glinted in them. He didn't quite understand it, but the boy often threw him looks, furtive, lingering looks that Viktor had become hyper-aware of. It wasn't that he didn't like it. He just didn't expect the kind of attention from a man so different from him. It almost made everything a bit more hopeful.

They said their goodbyes when Harry's friends came to fetch him. Harry seemed reluctant to go, butducked out anyway, saying a quiet, 'talk to you later' to the both of them. Cedric gave the other Hogwarts champion a grip on the shoulder, one that Viktor realized mirrored perfectly the way he had done it to the blond during the Second Task, and he glanced at Viktor almost as if to tell him where he learned it from. Cedric parted with him at around the same time, when the blond informed him about school work he still hadn't done. Cedric didn't seem shy about touching him at all, taking his hand into his own and squeezing once, before leaving. Viktor curled and uncurled his fingers, looking at them in stunned silence.

Viktor thought nothing of it, didn't mull over it too much until he was back on the ship, in his private little cabin, thinking of the grey eyes once again. And the lips, the pleasant, curving lips of the affable boy he didn't pay much attention to, until he realized the boy paid attention back.
It was only during the time before he slept, that he realized something. Although he and Harry talked about some sliver of their lives, Cedric had yet to tell them anything about his own.
It was the day of the Final Task, yet Cedric was calmer than he had been when the other two tasks loomed before him all those months ago. As he pushed himself up into a sitting position on his four-poster bed, he blinked sleep away and stared at his sheets for a moment, contemplating what it meant, the serenity that had settled in him. Maybe it was because of the solid hours of sleep he managed to pull off, or the knowledge that it was the final task, and the term was ending, meaning no more worrying about dragons and grindylows and maintaining his NEWTs. Summer had arrived, and it was getting warm enough to ditch any excess clothing. Whatever it was, Cedric was feeling great. He was actually feeling excited!

The bounce in his step didn't go unnoticed by the dormitory. They seemed to siphon off of Cedric's positive mood and wished him good luck that day, with some promising to make banners and flags for the occasion. The air of confidence brought energy to the whole Hufflepuff common room, and they were sure then that their champion was going to come out victorious that day. Cedric smiled gratefully at them, and some of the girls gushed.

But then, plopping down onto the Hufflepuff table in the Great Hall for breakfast, Cedric had read the article that the mudslinging reporter Rita Skeeter put in the Daily Prophet, and felt his magic surge inside of him like a boiling cauldron. The nerve of that woman! Cedric was not naturally violent, but he entertained thoughts of using nasty hexes and curses on her, especially since he had been reading up like mad, preparing for the Third Task. He had heard Draco Malfoy's loud, obnoxious jibe from across the Great Hall, seen him reading the Prophet, and grabbed the nearest paper from one of his fellow Hufflepuffs, eliciting a sputter of outrage.

"I'll have it back in a jiffy," Cedric said offhandedly, scanning the contents of the article and becoming more and more irritated.

As if Harry didn't get enough of the torment from his schoolmates, he had to get it from the paper, too, and from the rest of the public. He cast aspersions through his cold glare, sent straight to Malfoy, the git, and then looked at Harry's direction. He couldn't quite see him—he was surrounded by a mess of brown bushy hair and a sea of orange heads.
He sat back, frustrated as he finished his pumpkin juice. Why wasn't Harry fighting back? Why wasn't he defending himself? In Cedric’s head, it didn't make any sense how passive Harry was being. But then, he couldn't possibly understand.

A thought struck him, and his head snapped to the far end of the Slytherin table, where the Durmstrang boys were. His eyes flit from face to face, searching for Viktor. When Cedric's eyes landed on the man, he was surprised to see that the Bulgarian was staring back, eyes blazing.

He understood. The paper was circulating in their area as well. Viktor crooked his head towards the exit, and Cedric was out of his seat in an instant, causing a mild disturbance around the circle of Hufflepuffs as he stormed out.

They met by the house point hourglasses. Viktor was slouched, but not at all lacking in the intimidation department, and he looked like a storm cloud personified. Cedric watched for a moment as the teen paced, until the shuffle of his feet caught the imposing young man's attention. They locked eyes. Cedric swam in their depths for a moment, before realizing Viktor had asked a question.

"Sorry--No. Yes. I don't know," he said, tripping over his words. "I don't know if they're true. Harry--we haven't talked much. We've all been busy. But he can talk to snakes. I think. It's not much of a secret. I learned it from a housemate. This boy Justin said that Harry talked a snake into threatening him, although that couldn't be right ... but people everywhere spoke about it for the rest of the year, so I'm not really sure. Do you figure we should ask?" Cedric said, his words coming out faster than intended.

Viktor reeled back, eyebrows raised. Cedric cleared his thoughts of the Bulgarian, and how attractive he made a scowl look. Not now, brain! He mentally slapped himself, cursing his inappropriate thoughts, shaking his head briefly before settling into a more serious expression. He didn't know Harry had been experiencing pain in his scar, enough for the boy to complain about it.

Viktor had been stalking in place, lost in thought, that when he cast a look at Cedric suddenly, the blond froze, deep dark brown eyes and sharp features arresting him for a moment. The hint of a stubble around the young man's square jaw and the down-turned, scowling lips looked entrancing to Cedric, that his gaze flickered there for a second, before coming back up to meet Viktor's eyes. The Bulgarian noticed the telltale gesture, pupils dilating and eyebrows coming together in an unreadable expression. He wasn't aware of how close they had gotten. He could practically feel the warmth surrounding the other man.

Cedric's heart fluttered in his chest. He was struck with the sudden urge to reach forward and kiss Viktor.

Instead, they jumped apart when they heard a coughing noise coming from the annex off the Great Hall. They found Professor McGonagall there, standing by the alcove, looking austere.

"Mr. Diggory, Mr. Krum," she said, eyeing them disapprovingly. "The champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast. Seeing as you two seem to be done nourishing yourselves for the day to come, I suggest you follow suit. Your families have been invited to watch the Final Task. This is a chance for you to greet them."

Cedric glanced timidly at Viktor, seeing the man's face turn less glowering. The Bulgarian's mum and dad were there in the next room, and so were his parents. Cedric hadn't seen them in a while, and while he got letters each week detailing how much they were proud of them, he still missed them.

They followed the Transfigurations professor without exchanging a word, leaving Cedric confused.
as to what transpired between them. *What is Viktor thinking? Do you think he felt the same thing you did? Don't be an idiot, of course not. Well, maybe ... but then, he does wear the same sort of expression a lot. Moody, brooding, sullen, dour.*

The thoughts distracted him even as he stood there, receiving hugs from his mum and dad, the latter boasting loudly of his flawless hero of a son. Cedric rolled his eyes, ignoring them and asking his old man, in as polite a manner as he could, to keep it down with the proud exclamations. His father brushed him off, saying that the students should be singing of Cedric's bravery and cleverness, and shouldn't have been pushed towards the sidelines just because the Goblet of Fire decided add Harry Potter as a fourth champion.

The mention of the boy made him glance about the room, and he noticed Harry shuffling in from the door, looking uncomfortable.

It hit him, then. Viktor's and Fleur's parents were there, had pulled them aside for a chat. But Harry, he was an *orphan*. His chest tightened. Why hadn't he thought of that? Of course the Boy-Who-Lived had parents who passed away. His mother his father wouldn't be there, touching him and rubbing his messy hair and giving him all their support. They were *dead*.

Cedric felt a huge amount of compassion for the lone Gryffindor. Surely the organizers would have thought of that? Professor McGonagall wouldn't just herd Harry into a room where no one waited for him, would she? That would be just cruel. Harry deserved so much better. He glanced towards the other side of the room. Viktor had his eyes narrowed at Harry. It seemed like he was glaring, but as someone who knew better, Cedric knew their thoughts were synchronized.

Just as Cedric was beginning to feel really unpleasant at the thought of Harry receiving no love from anyone, and had a plan forming in his mind to go to Harry and talk, the fireplace in the room roared to life, and two adult redheads stepped out. His eyes sought out the man immediately, standing out with his long, fiery hair, dragonhide boots, and rugged appearance. He looked similar to the Weasley twins, but even better-looking and somewhat cooler. Something in Cedric fluttered momentarily.

The woman next to him was plump and kindly, giving Harry a kiss on the cheek. He had no doubt then that it was the Weasley matron, the Twins' mother. The man next to her must be an older sibling of theirs. Cedric watched attentively as Harry's eyes lit up, greeting the two with a broad grin. The Weasley matron talked in a motherly way, and the older man pat Harry on the and shook his shoulder lightly as they talked.

Harry seemed happy, grateful almost. His face formed quite a picture, and something in Cedric stirred, too, that he was shocked to feel whatever it was forming in him, that resonated so well with what he felt for Viktor.

When Harry's group made to leave for somewhere, they passed by Cedric's parents, and his father spoke up before he could even warn him not to.

"There you are, are you?" his dad said, looking Harry up and down. Cedric internally groaned, and shot a panicked look at his mother.

"Bet you're not feeling quite as full of yourself now that Cedric's caught up to you in points, are you?"

"What?" Harry said, confused. Cedric shot his father a quelling look as the man went to talk to McGonagall, and then an apologetic one towards Harry.

"Ignore him," Cedric said, voice having gone low from feeling mortified. "He's been angry ever
since Rita Skeeter's article about the Triwizard Tournament—you know, when she made you out to be the only Hogwarts champion?"

"Didn't bother to correct her though, did he?" his dad said, loudly enough for Harry to hear as he made his way out with the Weasley sibling and matron, with the latter opening her mouth.

"Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos!" she said angrily. "I would have thought you'd know that, working at the Ministry!"

Cedric looked at his mother and crooked his head towards the two, and his mother finally stepped in, ushering her husband out of the room, dampening his ire. Cedric sighed. Harry had already been pulled out by his companions, and Cedric stood there, looking ashamed of his parents. Viktor sidled close later on, saying that his parents had to leave for a moment.

"They haff to register at the Ministry's International Magical Cooperation department," he told Cedric, looking nonplussed by their departure. He cast a look at the blond and the scowl returned. Cedric saw something hanging from Viktor's neck. "What's that?" he asked pointing at the amulet resting on Viktor's chest. The Bulgarian looked down on himself and shrugged. "Just a good luck charm. Sūzhalyavam. I heard vot happened. It vos rather ... unpleasant. But my father is the same. Imagine haffing a national team seeker for a son."

Cedric snorted as Viktor did something uncharacteristic and rolled his eyes, and Cedric felt the pull again, the warmth and affection that he was beginning to feel more and more often for the surly Bulgarian. What exactly did it mean? He supposed that he liked Viktor, but did it lean towards a more romantic tendency? Was he, perhaps, growing to like Viktor as more than a friend? He mulled over this as he went to class, saying goodbye to his parents. He was going to see them again, after the tournament.

He certainly liked Viktor in a physical way, that he couldn't deny. Viktor was attractive. Very attractive. Cedric found himself hot and bothered at nights thinking of the man in swimming trunks and an A-shirt, wet fabric sticking to his skin and accentuating the curves of every muscle. He let his imagination run wild behind closed curtains, touching himself at the thought of Viktor surfacing from the Lake, looking good enough to ravish.

Yes, he was a hormonal teenager, and he usually went with where his thoughts brought him. He had seen in his head the Bulgarian seeker shirtless, wearing only boots and exceptionally tight trousers, riding on a broom and looking sweaty and angry. He wondered how the young man performed. He wondered if he was well-endowed.

He shouldn't have been thinking about those kinds of thoughts during his Ancient Runes class. Sure, he could have gotten away with whacking off at the back of the room, while the rest of his schoolmates were taking the end-of-term exams, but Professor Babbling was exceptionally hawk-eyed.

He excused himself for a moment, to go to the bathroom and relieve his straining erection in one of the stalls. He was going to have to do something about his growing attraction to Viktor, he thought miserably, as his hand went down the front of his trousers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final Task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied in first place, with eighty five points, the Hogwarts champions Cedric Diggory and Harry Potter, and the Durmstrang champion, Viktor Krum!" Cedric swallowed as the cheers turned deafening—after all, three of the four champions were
mentioned, and almost everyone found the selection to be an attractive bunch. "In second place with eighty points, Fleur Delacour!"

The stands were brimming with people, multicolored flags and banners waving in the air, hands up and clapping, cheers erupting every which way, and there was even a brass section performing a happy, celebratory tune. It all contrasted with what Cedric was feeling inside of him. He didn't feel like celebrating. He felt like getting everything over and done with.

The edge of the maze towered over them thirty feet easy. He wondered how the staff had managed to pull it off, turn the Quidditch Pitch into a foggy, leafy deathtrap. He kept thinking of the worst creatures being inside the maze. He figured that something bad could happen to him in there. Break his neck, or choke on toxic air—he wasn't sure if he was prepared enough.

Cedric side-eyed his fellow champions--friends, he'd realized, now that they had established a firm foundation of mutual respect and concern for each other--and took a good, long look at them. Harry looked nervous, but wasn't unsmiling. He was waving to the Weasleys in the stands, and looked very much unperturbed by the rumor mill and the Daily Prophet spewing out the most unbelievable lies about him.

Viktor wore a pained expression, his hand gripping his wand tightly, like the idea of him standing in front of a crowd was so insufferable that it was giving him a migraine. Cedric smiled. That the two boys were acting no less than how Cedric expected of them to reassured him that things were going to be alright.

He ran spells in his head as Ludo Bagman explained the nature of the Third Task to the spectators, and then, the head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports turned to them, a manic sort of glint emanating from his eye. Cedric balked. This was it--they were going to enter the maze. His eyes sought out Viktor's unconsciously, and Viktor nodded at him, dark eyes conveying what needed conveying. Keep safe.

The whistle sounded, and the three males shot out from their positions and entered the maze. Cedric's view of them disappeared instantaneously as he ventured forward, eyes focused and alert for anything that might come his way. He had practiced day and night to be able to cast spells in a pinch, and he was pretty confident that he would be able to surmount whatever creature or trial waited for him.

At first, his steps were careful, thoroughly convinced that the first trial would jump out from the next hedge and surprise him immediately. Farther and farther into the leafy corridors he went, making sure that he was light on his feet and his muscles were ready to respond at a moment's notice. He hard from a distance, the sharp trill of another whistle, and he knew then that all four of them were now in the maze.

The sounds died down as the hedges seemed to move around him, and there was silence. Cedric was alone, and it was so quiet that he could hear his own heart beating in his ears. He thought ahead and didn't cast a Lúmios charm—a single point of light in a dark, seemingly endless corridor would attract attention. Instead, he cast a charm on his eyes that would allow him to see in the pitch black darkness. He blinked a few times as a shroud covered his eyes, and it made the view a lot clearer by far. He nodded to himself and went forward.

At around thirty or so steps, after ignoring a few turns, he came to a dead end. He cursed under his breath, turning back, only to see a flock of birds whizzing towards him at great speed. Cedric stepped back out of panic, and hit the far wall of leaves, racking his brain for anything, anything to stop them--
"Fianto Duri," he exclaimed, wand out in front of him, and the flying objects hit the translucent barrier and turned into powder. The mist of dust covered him. They weren't birds, but rather various sharp objects. Cedric sighed in relief as he brushed off the disintegrated knives and picks from his clothes and hair. The dead end must have had some sort of magical tripwire. He was going to have to be more careful next time. He only had a few defensive spells in his arsenal. Who knew what other spells were laced into the soil and the thick foliage?

He doubled back and made the next turn where the knives came from, and continued to walk at a brisk pace. He remembered the advice his mother gave him about mazes. *If you run your hand along one wall for your entire trip, you will eventually find yourself outside the maze or at the center of it.*

Cedric found the logic in that, but he figured that he wouldn't have time to go around the whole maze until he found the Cup. Besides that, he would be tripping a lot of hexes to activate whenever he got to a dead end. And anyway, he might find himself touching an island of wall, going around and around aimlessly. He sought to just use a *Point Me!* spell each time he lost track of his turns, and forged ahead without stepping on the breaks. *East,* he told himself. *Just continue heading east.*

The hedges seemed to close in on him the farther he went into the maze, and his feet were beginning to feel heavier. His shoulders itched, almost as if something was biting into them.

When he looked up, he screamed.

There was a giant black bird on his shoulders, looking down at him with hollow eyes. He tried to shake it off, but it just kept staring, and kept a-vice-like grip on his shoulders. Cedric went down on the ground and rolled. The bird jumped off and landed gracefully on the ground, looking at him with a dopey expression.

Cedric's breathing had become labored, and his heart threatened to burst out of his chest. The strange bird gave him such a fright; he didn't even notice it perched on him until he turned to look. He cursed. If the bird had been any more dangerous, he would have had his eyes pecked out or some equally gruesome fate. Instead, they engaged in a staring competition, with Cedric unsure of what the bird was or what it could do. It looked like a huge raven, only its eyes were twin black holes, and it had such a dark aura about it.

Cedric stood and stepped to the right. The bird did the same, blocking his path. He tried again, to the left this time, and the bird mimicked him. Cedric stepped back, and the bird hopped forward. He took a step forward, but the bird didn't move. Cedric furrowed his eyebrows. The bird was beginning to make him feel incredibly uncomfortable.

"Incarceous," he intoned, and the ropes wrapped around the bird, but didn't subdue it. It kept making the same moves Cedric did, and didn't budge when Cedric moved forward. Cedric was starting to feel frustrated. He didn't want to hurt the bird, but it seemed as if he had no other choice.

"Stupefy!" he cast, and the red spell shot. Cedric thought it would work this time, but the large bird opened its mouth wide, swallowing the spell, before spitting it right back, towards Cedric. He leaped to the side and narrowly avoided his own spell, gasping at the surprising rebound. He stood there breathing, regarding the bird with anger.

But then, from the shadows of the corridor in front of him, behind the bird, a shimmering thing started to form, and its light intensified so much that the spell on Cedric's eyes made it hard to look at it directly. It bounded on with a gallop, trotting between Cedric and the bird, and the fowl squawked, before flying above the hedges, out of sight. Cedric stared at the shiny beast in awe. It radiated with a wispy sort of light, that it could only be someone's Patronus.
"Are you alright?" a voice came from the maze, and Cedric squinted around the light beast to find Harry there, jogging towards him. Harry looked entirely disheveled, hair messy and leaves covering him, and his robes were torn, a part of his shirt hanging and revealing his slight torso. Cedric would have looked the other way, but he saw the Harry was bleeding. His eye narrowed immediately. Harry had been slashed by something. He was on his knees in a second, eyeing the wound closely, taking advantage of the light the creature beside them gave off.

"Vulnera Sanentur," he said without pause, running his wand tip over and around Harry's deep gash, his other hand curling around the teen's lithe hips to steady him. Harry was already protesting, but one quelling look from Cedric quieted him.

"What came at you? Blimey," Cedric asked, bewildered, watching in deep fascination as Harry's wound knit together. He saw the skin close, and the blood leave from Harry's stomach, revealing a smooth expanse of skin. Cedric blushed, and stood immediately. Harry seemed to be embarrassed as well.

"It was--I don't know what it was," Harry said, scratching his head. "I just ran as fast as I could. Didn't even notice I was bleeding, until--well," he said, picking at his torn clothing.

Cedric eyed him with concern, but then shook his head, telling himself to not worry too much. He stared at their wispy companion. "So this is your Patronus," said Cedric in awe, when the silver deer scratched at the ground with a hoof. It glowed bright and pure against the stifling darkness. Cedric was almost mesmerized by it. He put a hand in front of him, and the stag seemed to know what to do, ducking its head and pushing its nose against Cedric. "I've always had a hard time conjuring mine. I don't even know what my corporeal Patronus looks like. You're brilliant, though."

Harry flushed, shaking his head. "I don't know any healing spells like you," Harry admitted, eyes transferring to the stag. "I was so focused on spells used to maim and attack and stuff, I didn't even think about repairing any damage I would get."

Cedric let out a short laugh and then nodded in a reassuring manner. "We all have our strengths and weaknesses." Harry smiled, and Cedric almost flushed at the unguarded expression there. He bit his lip, eyes darting to the floor and back to Harry's face, a thought forming in his head.

"Listen--it's probably going to be much more dangerous up ahead," he said, shuffling on his feet and squinting his eyes at the great expanse of darkness up ahead. "I don't know--it's a competition, but..."

"You want to stick together," Harry supplied, looking up at him with comprehending eyes. Cedric nodded, grinning in a lopsided, awkward sort of manner.

"Yeah! Yeah, I never ... yes," Cedric said lamely. "I mean, even if either of us ends up grabbing the Cup, it would still be a win for Hogwarts, so--"

"--we should just win it together," Harry said quickly, and making Cedric's gaze snap back towards him, surprised. They shared a meaningful glance, and then Harry gave a firm nod, looking at him resolutely. Cedric understood that they had been thinking the same thing.

He had lost the feeling of jealousy and envy for the boy a long time ago, even before the First Task. Harry was selfless and thought of himself and his well-being very rarely. He didn't mind the stares or the insults or the whispers, though he wasn't blissfully ignorant of them either. He was a boy who was tough and had a good head on his shoulders, and Cedric deeply respected him for it.

He would be glad to share the win with Harry, even if it meant standing on the podium next to a
celebrity. Even if it meant sharing a glory Hufflepuff hadn't had in years. He owed the boy. Everyone did. It wouldn't bother Cedric, not anymore. Because Harry wasn't what the papers made him out to be. He deserved to win out of all of them, and his personal desires paled in comparison.

They forged ahead, sticking close together. The knowledge that Harry was there next to him brought such comfort that he grew more determined with each step. He didn't even warn Harry to turn his Lumos off. He didn't have time to teach the night vision spell, and Harry needed to be able to see.

The darkness stretched, and so did the hedges, with a dense fog making it difficult to discern where the thick walls of shrubs ended and the shadows began.

"How many obstacles have you encountered so far?" asked Cedric, rolling his shoulders as he was reminded of the large bird from a while ago. He hadn't been far into the maze, he thought, and so Harry should have around the same encounters as he did.

"Just the creature with the sharp tail, and a Dementor. That's why I had my Patronus up when I saw you," Harry answered, glancing at him as they walked. A chill ran down Cedric's spine at the thought of being alone in a corridor with an actual Dementor. He would have been a goner if he and Harry had taken each other's paths. Hell, Cedric wouldn't even be there with the bespectacled boy if he hadn't arrived with his silver stag.

He pondered how Harry could have possibly learned the Patronus charm when he was only fourteen. The spell was only covered in theory sixth year, and even then they had to coincide with a hands-on Defense professor. Moody was all for demonstrations, but compared to Professor Lupin the year before, they hardly had any actual practical application classes.

They turned left, and then left again, when they saw through the Point Me! spell that they were going west away from the Cup. They reached a fork, and they stopped for a moment to catch their breath, with Cedric throwing a cursory look Harry's way. He looked winded, but they seemed to be faring alright considering.

Without warning, a spell shot from the darkness and hit the far hedge, exploding on contact. Cedric had yelled for them to duck, and he and Harry went down on the ground as debris from the blast showered down.

"What was that?" Harry groaned, having rolled onto the ground in less than a second. Cedric looked across the dark corridor, squinting and finding no one there.

"Look out!" Harry cried, pushing off the ground and tackling Cedric-- who was brushing himself off as he stood-- against a hedge as two more spells soared past them in succession. Cedric made an 'oof' sound as the wind was knocked out of him. Spells were coming at them now, firing one by one, zooming and cutting the air like fireworks, and the only thing keeping them safe was Harry, who had practically pinned Cedric almost completely into the dense shrubbery.

"Harry--shield!" Cedric breathed, his wand having been knocked out of his hand. It lay on the ground, in the middle of the foray. if he could just jump for a moment--

"Oh, right! Protego!" Harry cast, pointing his wand towards their invisible assailant, and the blue barrier formed almost instantly. Cedric scrambled away from Harry, and just barely got his wand as four spells went after him, the last one being a Reductor curse and shattering Harry's Protego.

Cedric barreled towards the opposite wall, laying flat against the itchy leaves and tiny branches as
more spells soared past. His arms were covered in cuts from the shrubs, and he was bleeding. He had
to cover his eyes from the blasted earth as they showered them repeatedly, all while keeping an eye
on Harry. It was coming from a wizard, no doubt, casting various spells like Bombarda and stunning
jinxes, and they had to figure out how to stop them.

"Someone's attacking us!" Harry bellowed, as an orange spell soared so close it almost knocked off
Harry's glasses. Cedric tried to get a look see, but couldn't lean forward far enough to see anything,
as the spells kept coming. "What do we do?" Cedric asked, racking his brain for anything, a spell or
a hex or something.

But Harry had taken advantage of a pause in the spell bombardment and exclaimed, "Cover me!" as
he stumbled out of the hedge and started firing spells in the dark.

"Impedimenta! Everte Statum! Tarantallegra!" The spells went off one after another, a jet of red
followed by a bright yellow, and then a grey one, and they soared into the dark, illuminating the
corridor, shining light on a figure standing in the middle of it. Cedric caught just a glimpse of her
blocking the spells, but it was enough. It was Fleur, and she was attacking them. She did just that,
fire a series of complicated hexes that the blond was sure Harry wouldn't be able to avoid them.

"Protego!" Cedric intoned, frantically running after Harry, and one spell connected with the shield
just as it had formed, ricocheting to the side and blasting a hole through a hedge. Harry saw
Cedric's shield form and went behind the blue barrier, crouching down and firing two more spells
from under it.

Fleur was relentless, and Cedric saw her slashing at the air, weaving spells into combinations and
shattering the Protego barrier instantly. When Cedric got to Harry, he reached forward and grabbed
Harry's shirt from behind, pulling him aside and almost dragging him to one corner, pushing his
ankles down through the dirt. They were less than twenty feet from her.

"Are you alright?" Cedric breathed harshly against Harry's ear. He was clutching at the boy from
behind, arm over Harry's chest. "Yeah," Harry heaved, nodding. "It's Fleur. What do we do?" the
Gryffindor asked, turning his head to face Cedric.

"We have to bring her down. I don't know what's gotten into her thick, blonde head but she's going
to get disqualified for this."

"Follow her movements," Harry told him, and Cedric nodded after a bit. "I'll cast a few spells to her
right and you catch her to the left as she's avoiding them."

"Gotcha," Cedric agreed, and they stepped out at once, rolling onto their feet in moments. Cedric
erected a shield to block the incoming spells, and Harry threw a few Stunners her way. The blond
saw his chance, saw Fleur slamming against the other wall to avoid the spells, and Cedric pointed his
wand directly at her.

"Petrificus Totalus!" The spell grazed the hedge, but it soared and connected, and the Hufflepuff saw
the Beauxbatons champion go down and crash to the floor, completely Petrified.

Cedric let out a loud breath of exclamation as they got to their feet again, and he limped towards
Harry and pulled him up, the boy having attempted another roll to avoid the last spell. Cedric
laughed, completely delirious from the action, and gave Harry a one-armed hug as the boy swayed
into a standing position.

"Merlin, but you're light on your feet," Cedric told him, grinning, and dusted himself as they
approached Fleur, who was struggling under the Full-body Bind but not breaking through it.
"I've got Hermione to thank for that," said Harry, coming down from the rush and panting. He stared at her in disbelief, like he couldn't fathom someone like her to ambush them. "What do you reckon we do with Fleur?"

Cedric glanced down at her, stared at her face, and narrowed his eyes. Something was not right. She continued to struggle, but she didn't make a sound, and her eyes, they were--

"Cedric," Harry alerted him, pointing at her pupils just as the blond had noticed the hazy whiteness in them. "Did Professor Moody teach you--"

"The Unforgivables. No doubt. she's been Imperius'ed," Cedric nodded, feeling a chill settle. She had been Cursed.

"But who would ..." Harry trailed off, furrowing his eyebrows at her. He glanced questioningly at the Hufflepuff, who did a noncommittal gesture.

"In any case, we've got to get her out of here. The curse is still on her. We've got to alert a teacher."

Harry bit his lip, nodding, and then raised his wand up in the air, pointing to the sky. "Periculum!" he cast, and the flare spell shot up high in the air, leaving behind it a trail of smoke. Cedric scowled. Who would think to control a fellow champion and attack them? Did they have a specific goal in mind? Was it by chance that she ran into them? Cedric had a bad feeling about it all. Someone had cast an illegal curse, and they would be difficult to track unless they informed the teachers as quickly as possible.

"We have to move on," Harry told him, adjusting the perch of his glasses on his nose. Cedric glanced at the boy. His face was streaked in dirt, and his clothes were in shambles. Harry looked like he had been dragged through the mud and ground. Cedric supposed he didn't look too far off in appearance.

"Let's go, then," Cedric agreed, and he started to walk, but then flinched and went down with a cry. Harry was beside him in an instant, looking at him with big, worried eyes. "What happened?" he asked frantically. "Are you hurt?"

"Just ... my ankle," Cedric muttered, as he felt around and pressed against his foot. He winced when his fingers touched his heel. He seemed to have twisted it sometime during the fight, and had been too caught up with firing spells and subduing Fleur to notice it. "It's nothing."

"You haven't got a spell for it?" Harry inquired, glancing every so often at his foot with his eyebrows drawn together. Harry's face was a picture of distress, and with his face so close Cedric could feel its warmth. The blond shook his head. Maybe he wouldn't be able to reach the Cup after all.

But before he could even protest, Harry had disappeared behind him and stuck his head under his armpit, eliciting a yelp of surprise from the blond. To his astonishment, Harry heaved him up into a standing position with only one fluid push from his legs. Cedric didn't know Harry had such strength--he often thought of the younger male as petite and a bit too on the skinny side, so he was pleasantly surprised.

"You don't have to carry me all the way--"Cedric protested, but they were already walking, and Harry shrugged against Cedric's arm as he hobbled along.

They moved forward again, weaving through pathways this way and that. Cedric felt his muscles ache from the physical activity, but he didn't much care for it. He needed to keep his body warm and his muscles responsive, even though he was injured. Who knew what could have happened if they
were any less prepared for Fleur's assault? He was more of a burden than an asset now that he was an invalid, but he still had his wand. He could still be of some use.

Cedric found himself thanking Harry in his head once again. If they hadn't been there for each other, working together, they wouldn't have taken Fleur down easily. Harry had been nimble and on the offensive as soon as the threat came, and he thought on his feet. Yet, despite that, he was reckless and straightforward, moving instinctively before actually thinking about his actions.

In many ways, it was an effective strategy, but it had its flaws. More often than not, Cedric thought he might find himself pulling Harry back from a foray before he bit off more than he could chew. Cedric realized that they quite complemented each other in battle, with Cedric focusing on more thought-out strategies and defense, while Harry barreled on, relentlessly battering opponents.

He eyed the bespectacled boy once again, his insides flooding with concern and protectiveness. He wondered, briefly, if his affection for the boy meant anything other than a building friendship. After all, the day had been full of emotional twists and turns, and he hadn't experienced such a state of confusion and befuddlement since his short sexual crisis in fourth year.

He should really focus on what was up ahead, but the thoughts still plagued him. He was forming a bond with Harry, he could sense it, and he was anxious to think of what the Gryffindor thought of him. They had never been so close before, flush against one another, and Cedric heaved out a sigh. His thoughts had horrible timing, and really, he shouldn't be thinking of Harry that way, not when they were just new to their friendship.

Harry stopped in his tracks, hand going to Cedric's arm and gripping. Cedric froze. When they'd turned the next corner, they saw it. The Triwizard Cup. It glowed at the end of the dirt corridor, shining like a beacon for those who were lost in the maze. Cedric gaped at it for a second, mesmerized.

"C'mon," Harry said, the corners of his lips turning upwards. Cedric smiled briefly, nodding in acquiescence. They plod forward, hearts in their throats. If any spell or creature were to jump out at them from a pathway or the sky or whatever, Cedric would flip.

Instead, when they reached the center of the maze, they were in for another surprise. A figure was sitting near the corner of the pedestal where the Cup was, and Cedric had to squint to realize that it was Viktor. The Bulgarian started as they approached, and went on the defensive almost immediately, pointing his wand at them. When the oldest teen saw that it was only them, he sighed in relief, slouching again and furrowing his eyebrows.

"Vot happened to you two?" he asked, lowering his wand and closing the distance between them in three strides. Cedric thought his face was about to split from his grin. He was happy to see that the Bulgarian had managed to get to the end alone, without a scratch on him. He sighed in relief, slouching again and furrowing his eyebrows.

"Vot happened?" he asked shortly.
"She was under the Imperius Curse, is what happened," Cedric replied with more serious tone. Viktor eyed him, and then looked at the both of them, inspecting them to see if they had any more damage. He saw Harry tense under the gaze, but Cedric remained unflappable.

"We're fine, if you're going to fret," Cedric said cheekily, and Viktor gave him a steely glance. He didn't flinch under it at all, and smiled sweetly. "We worked together. And we've alerted the professors. My ankle's a bit twisted, but it's going to be fine."

"You worked together," Viktor repeated. The two other champions nodded, but Harry shuffled again. Cedric noticed how he tended to do that before he said anything.

"Why haven't you taken the Cup?" Harry asked, curious gaze lifting up to meet Viktor's dark eyes. Cedric's eyebrows raised. He didn't think of that question. Viktor had arrived first, yet he had been sitting there, motionless, staring up at the Cup with his ever present surly expression.

"Yeah, Viktor, why haven't you?" Cedric asked again, turning to Viktor, and the Bulgarian almost, almost colored, but they couldn't tell for sure, although his shoulders did stiffen up and he turned vaguely discomfited. Cedric smirked. He knew why Viktor didn't try to win. It was almost scary how easy it was to read the older teen.

"We'll take it together," Cedric decided, looking from one teen to the other. "Harry and I already agreed to win together if we got here first--but you so obviously deserve it, having arrived while we were battling it out with a mind-controlled half-Veela. So ..."

Beside him, Harry nodded his acquiescence. "I think that's how it should go. I mean, we were tied for first, we could easily tie again."

Viktor looked like he was about to protest, to hide his true intentions, but instead he huffed, and then jerked his head once. Cedric beamed.

Viktor took a deep breath. "Let's take it together," the Bulgarian intoned.

They found themselves shuffling around the Triwizard Cup, standing at each side of the pedestal. If they all reached for it at the same time, they would all be declared the winners. Cedric stood off to one side, facing Viktor, and Harry was beside them, in the middle, staring at the Cup with his effervescent green eyes. Viktor shared another glance with Cedric, and the blond found something else entirely arresting about Viktor. The man could smile, and he his lips were curled then, and he was looking at Cedric with thinly veiled affection.

"Together now," Cedric said, eyes deepening at Viktor's gaze, and the two other champions nodded, their eyes trained on him and their hands hovering over the glowing Cup.

"One--two--three!" and they grabbed the Triwizard Cup at once. As soon as they hands connected with the Cup's rim, they got pulled off their feet, and Cedric yelped, as the familiar tug took him from behind the navel, along with the two others. A Portkey, he thought in shock, swirling through a magical space, barreling through Merlin knows how many miles. They were soon deposited back onto the Earth, and although Viktor was quick and had landed on his feet, Cedric and Harry had been too jostled to right themselves before arriving. Cedric had landed flat on his bum, and Harry was lying on his stomach, groaning. The Cup flew off to some weeds as they landed.

"I hate Portkeys," Harry said, rolling on his back and pushing himself up. Viktor had gone to Cedric and offered his hand, and Cedric got to his feet with the Bulgarian's assistance. He in turn, pulled Harry up, and the boy dusted himself off.
"Where are we?" Cedric said, looking around. It didn't feel like they were anywhere near the Hogwarts grounds. There was no castle looming in the distance, nor was there the heavy magic that was a constant presence around them. The air was warmer, and the mountains surrounding the school were nowhere in sight.

"It looks to be a graveyard ..." Viktor said darkly, trudging forward into the foggy darkness. It was indeed a cemetery. The black outline of a church could be seen beyond a large tree to their left, while a hill rose above them to their right. If Cedric squinted, he could just make out houses at the very edge of the landscape.

He looked down at the Triwizard Cup, and then at Harry. "Did anyone tell you that the Cup was a Portkey?"

"Nope," said Harry. He seemed to be on high alert, looking around the graveyard. It was completely dark and silent, bringing chills to the three champions.

"Is this supposed to be part of the task?" Viktor asked, turning to them.

"I don't know. Wands out, do you reckon?" answered Cedric, glancing briefly at the Bulgarian. The oldest male eyed him with uncertainty. They had their wands in their hand shortly after.

Viktor tensed. "Somvone's coming."

Cedric tried to make out what it was, narrowing his eyes in the darkness. Beside him, Harry shuffled. They watched the figure draw nearer, and something about its approach made Cedric's hairs stand on end. He couldn't make out a face, but from the way it held its arms in front of it, he could tell it was carrying something. Whoever it was, it was short, decked in a heavy, hooded cloak, pulled up over his head to obscure his face. And--several paces nearer--Cedric thought the bundle in the person's arms looked like a child.

Beside him, Harry lowered his wand slightly. Cedric shot back a quizzical look. Viktor was as still as stone. The approaching figure stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six or so feet from them. For a second, the figure stood there, seeming to be looking at them.

And then, without warning, Harry cried out, clutching at his forehead. Cedric started, unable to do anything as Harry fell to his knees, screaming out in pain. "Viktor!" Cedric called out, stricken by panic, and he watched in terror as Harry's wand slipped from his fingers as he buried his face in his hands.

Cedric nearly buckled down with Harry, and he was trying to keep the boy up on one leg, throwing a furious glance at the figure in front of them.

He heard the voice, a piercing, cold voice that howled. "Kill the spare!" and he saw green light shoot towards him. Anchored by Harry, debilitated by his ankle, he could only watch as his silver eyes glowed green with the spelllight.
Viktor moved instinctively. For an instant, one of the cardinal teachings in his brotherhood's *Sveshteni Kodove* came to him. *The quickest course of countering a curse is quickness.*

He leaped.

Soaring above Harry's prone form, he collided hard with Cedric, right as the *Avada Kedavra* erupted from the figure's wand, and he had jumped with such great force that they flew out of the way, crashing to the ground. The curse hit a gravestone far behind them, petering out into nothingness. And then, a few things happened at once.

Briefly, Viktor saw the hooded figure raise his wand to cast a spell once again, and by the eerie green glow of his wandtip, he knew which curse it was. But everything around him and Cedric started to whiz around, like a tornado had sprung in the middle of the graveyard and picked them up. A tug behind his navel caught him unawares, pulling him up into an all-too-familiar flying sensation.

Portkey. They were being transported by Portkey. Viktor's thoughts were a blur, as he scrambled to hold onto the teen under him. Cedric clung to him for dear life, while Harry's cries died as the air was ripped asunder. They blinked out of existence, soaring through a long distance before being deposited back onto the ground. A grassy, less barren ground.

He had ended up pinning Cedric down onto the surface with his body, their chests heaving from being transported and crashing against one another so forcefully not a moment before. The both of them were completely disoriented.

Cheers erupted all around them, a blast of sound so wild and manic that Viktor's heart pumped in his ears. His head was swimming and he was bewildered by the cacophony. Pushing himself up on his arms and looking down at the teen before him, he saw that Cedric's grey eyes were widened, and he was breathing heavily through parted lips.

The trembling dread in those eyes was all that Viktor needed to understand. His eyes trailed down the length of Cedric's arm, and when he reached the blond's wrist, he stared, comprehension dawning alongside cold fear.

Cedric had the Triwizard Cup in his hand. The realization struck Viktor dumb.

Footsteps thundered and the ground shook, the cheers closing in on them, like walls of sound pushing through their consciousness. They were too stunned to move. Too shaken to acknowledge that they were back.

"Cedric's won! MY BOY'S WON!" he could hear the loud declaration through a piercing cry of girls screaming in delight, through the booming sound of howls that resounded as the mass of spectators heard of the news. Cedric was holding the Cup. But they didn't understand what it meant, what had happened.

Cedric gaped at him, and Viktor didn't know what to do, what to think. He blinked furiously. All manner of communication left the stunned Bulgarian. They were still in their own little bubble of growing fearfulness, unable to disassociate from the cold, dark scene only moments before. What were they doing back at the edge of the maze? How did they escape? They were there, in the
graveyard ...

But Viktor knew, it was all disturbingly clear: Cedric ... he had gone down, and his hand had fallen on the Cup's handle, the Portkey that brought them to the graveyard in the first place.

"Harry," Cedric choked, as if breaking the surface of a pool of water, and Viktor's eyes, which had been flitting about in confusion, snapped back to the blond's stricken face. Harry. He was still in the graveyard.

"No," Viktor breathed, and then he scrambled upright, swaying to his feet and looking around desperately. The judges closed in on them along with the rest of the excited crowd. Albus Dumbledore was ahead of them, swooping in like some great eagle, eyes and expression focused. He got to them before the others did, mere moments before they were swamped by spectators, and Viktor clutched at the old wizard's robes, looking at him pleadingly.

"Professor," he swallowed. "The Cup's a Portkey--Harry, he's--ve grabbed it together, he's still in that place, ve almost died," he said, unable to string two words together without being choked by the reality of it all.

The wizened old wizard's eyes trained on him with such intensity that it almost scared him. "What place? Where's Harry?" he asked in a quiet but commanding voice.

"In a graveyard. Somewhere, I don't know--but ve three, ve took the Cup together, and ve vere brought there by Portkey, and I--I pushed Cedric out of the way of a Killing Curse, he landed on the Cup--"he couldn't breathe, and everything was suddenly turning into a nightmare around him. The cheering crowd had already started circling Cedric's prone form, who was sitting there, completely catatonic and unable to move with his foot injured. "He got left behind! Professor, ve haff to save him!"

Dumbledore looked grim for a moment, and Viktor saw the age in those wizened old eyes as they darkened. In an instant, Viktor's mind was rewinding the events in startling clarity. Viktor staggered yet he was unable to keep his eyes away from the wizard. It all replayed in his head: their conversation near the Cup pedestal, their arrival at the graveyard, the hooded figure ...

And then Viktor zipped back into reality, as if his mind had been spat back into his cranium, and he stared, addled with what the wizard had done.

"Come with me," Dumbledore said gravely, and with a surprising amount of strength for a man so old and thin, he herded Viktor away from the crowd, past some of the more astonished spectators who looked at the Bulgarian like he had sprouted another head.

He didn't think of them, blocked everyone from his thoughts as Dumbledore pulled him along, out of sight, towards a tent behind the stands, and Viktor didn't know what was happening until they were inside, and heads swiveled in unison.

The first person he noticed was Madame Maxine, the Beauxbatons headmistress, towering over all the rest. Her face was a picture of distress and worry. Viktor's eyes continued to scan the rest of the faces--Professor McGonagall and her stern face, Professor Snape, who had accommodated them in the dungeons, looking displeased, Levi Georgov and Yana Stoyanova, Viktor's Martial Magic and Charms tutors respectively, and Fleur's parents. Soon enough he realized why they were there. Fleur was on a gurney, unconscious but breathing. Her once immaculate hair was in complete disarray.

"You've found her," said Viktor. "Harry and Cedric said she had been Imperius'ed."
"Süzhalyavam, Viktor," Professor Georgov said curtly, before quickly pointing his wand at the younger male's hand and disarming him. Viktor gaped at him, stunned, as his wand flew directly into his tutor's hand. His Charms tutor then moved with practiced grace, pointing her own wand at Viktor's. "Prior Incantato," she said, accent thick.

His spells began to echo back in their ears: Reductor curses from when he blasted those vines into smithereens, *Lacarnum Inflamarae* to repel some Wights, some repeated uses of *Lumos*, different charms and jinxes.

"It vos not him," Professor Stoyanova said decidedly. She turned to Viktor and threw him his wand back, which he caught deftly. "Süzhalyavam, deteto mi, but they vill not stand down until vev proven your innocence," she explained sheepishly. Viktor's jaw tightened, but he nodded all the same.

"Severus, Minerva, the Cup was a Portkey," Dumbledore interrupted, stepping past Viktor, who stood by the flap of the tent. The wizard continued despite the collective sound of dissent, his expression a gathering storm cloud. "Minerva, I need you to contact the Order. Severus, come with me. Only one person could have tampered with the Cup this close to the Final Task. I will need some answers."

Professor McGonagall blinked, distraught, while Professor Snape's face darkened, hooked nose becoming more pronounced as he tilted his head up. His hands slipped into his robes as he made to follow Dumbledore outside. The old wizard had almost gone out, but Viktor's hand darted and grabbed the Headmaster's arm instinctively, surprising even himself. The wizard turned to him, calm yet thrumming with magic.

"Vot about Harry?" Viktor nearly pleaded. Dumbledore's clear blue eyes had gone soft for a moment, before transferring to his tutors.

"Professor Georgov, if you could please take care of Viktor," said Dumbledore, before turning back to him. Viktor experienced waves of calming energy, which forced him into a more emotionally relaxed state. Dumbledore eyed him in a very grandfatherly way.

"We are following a lead, Viktor. Do not fret. We've still got time." Dumbledore said before ducking out of the tent. Professor Georgov approached him, while Professor Stoyanova threw diagnostic spells his way, making him itch and feel uncomfortable. He narrowed his eyes at the both of them.

"Harry could be dead by now," he said brusquely, seething where he was standing. He knew what Dumbledore meant when he asked Viktor's tutors to 'take care' of their student. He gripped his wand tighter in his curled fist, while the Bulgarian woman assessed him for damage. The older man, burly and large, completely dwarfing Viktor, bore into him a quelling, no-nonsense look.

The larger man's thick eyebrows and downturned mouth set in a neutral expression. "You vill tell me vot happened."

Viktor huffed in annoyance. They shouldn't be standing there doing *nothing*. They should be out there, using tracking spells, divining objects, *anything*.

Instead, Levi stood sentinel, blocking his path and stopping him. Viktor stood his ground, but hesitated. Levi always angered him, because the man, like a solid boulder, never budged an inch, whatever Viktor did. "Ve got the Cup together, all three of us, but ... it vos a Portkey, and it brought us to a graveyard. Ve met a figure, and it cast the Killing Curse. I had to push Cedric avay--but ve landed on the Cup and ve got transported back."
"And those people in your 've'," Levi said, raising his eyebrow. "They're your friends?" Over Viktor's shoulder, Yana narrowed her eyes, and she stepped to the side and regarded the both of them.

His tutors weren't much older then Viktor, only by five years or so, but they were mature for their age, and very talented magical practitioners. Viktor didn't think he could distract them long enough to make a quick getaway. He was truly trapped, and he felt worthless, while Harry was in a cemetery with hooded figures who threw around Unforgivables without a thought.

"Da," Viktor replied resolutely. Yes, they are.

"Then we should go," Levi answered simply, stepping aside.. Yana threw him a disbelieving look, while respect and gratitude swelled in Viktor as he smiled.

Levi Borisov Georgov was an alum of the Vulchanovi, one of the brotherhoods in Durmstrang. Viktor also belonged to that brotherhood, and they shared a common Sveshteni Kodove or rather Hellige Koder, in the more appropriate Norwegian setting. Fraternal bonds are sacred. One's brother is a brother to all Vulchanovi.

Levi pushed the flap of the tent's entrance open, and Viktor nodded in thanks, before dashing out into the cool late afternoon air. He could hear Levi hot on his trail behind him, with Yana close by, mouthing off disapprovingly.

"You are disobeying the old vizard's orders, Levi! He is supposed to stay in vone place!" she said, huffing as she jogged alongside them.

"Ah, but Yana. You wouldn't know what it is like, to be compelled by code," Levi said, brushing her off. Viktor threw him a glance, to which the bigger man responded with a sly wink.

He didn't have a plan, not yet, but he only needed to realize what his goal was, and work from there. He went around the Pitch, avoiding the crowd which was still celebrating, blissfully ignorant of the crisis under their nose/

Harry needed to be rescued. Who knew what was happening to the boy right at that moment? For that very reason, they had to be quick. The boy was in a graveyard, somewhere in Europe because Portkeys didn't work across vast distances, and there was no immediate way of getting to him. Viktor became agitated, closing off any unnecessary information. He walked briskly, breathing hard, and strained to come up with something, anything.

He tried to relive the events in his head, how they came to the graveyard, any landmarks that could have been distinct enough. He could remember a yew tree, a church and houses in the distance, but nothing that could be considered a landmark, only sprawling hills and thick fog. The ground had been barren, and he could recall how they arrived, how his two companions landed ungracefully, and how he had to help them up.

He could remember the figure that drew near, the impending sort of dread it brought with it, and he remembered Harry's piercing cry, clutching at his forehead as he dropped to his knees in agony--

His forehead. Viktor stopped in his tracks. Harry got headaches from his scar, his lightningbolt scar that was so iconic, yet so trivial now that Viktor's gotten to know him. It suddenly made all the difference. Why did his scar give him pain at that exact moment? His scar hurting meant something--the papers didn't quite get it right but there was something there.

Cedric said he didn't know that Harry experienced that kind of suffering, but someone had to know.
Someone like one of his friends. He stopped by the edge of a crowd of students, with Levi and Yana skidding to a stop behind him.

"Vot is it? Have you thought of something?" Levi asked, and Yana shot him another irritated look.

"Ve should go back to the tent, Viktor. Dumbledore said he vould handle it," she implored him to reconsider, but Viktor ignored her, and scanned the crowd. He could recall how Harry oftentimes sat with a bushy-haired girl. He had overheard one of their conversations about House Elves, and heard how intelligent she sounded.

"Look for a girl with very bushy hair," he instructed them as he dodged and weaved around students, walking fast into the crowd as his eyes darted. She would probably be around people of the same house as Harry's, the red and gold of Gryffindor, and he ignored all other washes and hues of color in his vision, eyes training, as they would when they were in the Pitch, seeking the Snitch.

The students were very raucous and loud after the events, and they seemed pretty jubilant, or at least, the students from Hogwarts seemed just so, and Viktor was put off by the celebratory air, not because he was bitter, but because it was very distracting. They didn't know that Harry was in danger, and they didn't even need to, because it would only cause panic. No doubt some would even think that it would kill the mood. But he knew who would care, and he had to find her, if only everyone in his direct vicinity would stop moving and get out of the way--

It had only been in his periphery, but he caught it, the mass of wavy, messy brown hair that could only belong to one person in the entirety of the Hogwarts student body. Viktor squeezed his way to the crowd, jostling people without a hint of apology (Levi and Yana apologized for him), and as he approached, he realized that she was in conversation with a redheaded boy. He only caught the tail end of her statement.

"--out of the maze yet?" she said worriedly. The boy noticed him, gaping openly, and then crooked his head to tell the girl. She turned to look at him, and Viktor froze. Her eyes blazed, and she approached almost immediately, stalking intently.

"What happened in there? Where's Harry?" she demanded, stepping into Viktor's personal space. He almost stepped back, stunned.

"He's vith Dumbledore," he lied, and he could tell by the warm presence by his shoulder that Levi had heard it. "But his scar vos hurting. I need to ask why."

Her eyes widened for a second at what he had said. She then regarded him coolly, eyes entirely too knowing, and Viktor almost fidgeted in impatience. Beside her, the redhead was still dumbstruck.

"Why do you need to know?" she asked warily.

"Because Dumbledore von't tell me. And ... he's my friend." She glanced at her friend, and Viktor could see the way she debated giving him an answer as her eyes flit about in thought.

"His scar hurts whenever ... whenever Voldemort--" she said it in a hushed whisper, "was affecting him. It kind of works as a signal for when things are about to go bad."

Viktor paled. Suddenly, the image of the hooded figure in his head formed, and he could not anymore disassociate it with You-Know-Who. The cold hiss in the air, the command to kill Cedric, it all made a startling amount of sense.
The Cup had been tampered with, presumably by his followers, and Harry was supposed to win, he was supposed to be sent to the graveyard. And the Imperius Curse--it all seemed connected, if he thought about it--Fleur was supposed to dispose of him and Cedric, so that Harry had no other competition for the Cup ...

He turned swiftly to Levi and conveyed everything with his grim expression. Levi nodded. With Durmstrang Institute teeming with supporters of the Dark, the Dark Lord had to relegate someone to do his bidding, and they knew who it was. It was common knowledge, whispered in the shadows, talked over in the common rooms at night. And he hadn't been in Fleur's tent. If he really was a Death Eater, he was sure to know what was going on.

"How are we going to find him?" Viktor asked urgently, glancing between him and Yana. Levi fished out his wand.

"What's going on?" the bushy-haired girl piped behind them, but Viktor didn't listen, watching his Martial Magic tutor as he performed a complicated spell.

Viktor furrowed his eyebrows, turning to Yana. "It's a tracking spell that uses ones memories," she said.

Levi's eyes flew open, his gaze landing on the Durmstrang champion. "He's in the dungeons. Loading a boat. I think he's trying to escape."

"Escape? Why?" Yana asked in astonishment, but once again, Viktor had gone ahead of them without listening and full-on sprinted. They had no time to waste. Igor Karkaroff, Headmaster of Durmstrang Institute, was fleeing. It was known by everyone who had ever picked up a newspaper that he was a Death Eater. He would know what was happening, but if he escaped, Viktor would never get that chance he needed.

He clung to the amulet around his neck for luck, wishing fervently that Harry was still alive. He weaved around the crowd and soared out of the Pitch at top speed, leaving his tutors behind and barreling through the grounds.

Once at the front of the castle, he burst through the Entrance Hall, looking around for a moment before continuing on. He passed the house point hourglasses and the Great Hall, going around the side of the grand staircase and into the hall that led to the dungeons, where he knew a pathway led to the underground docks of the Great Lake.

He saw the back of a retreating figure, clad in a dark cloak and heading for the docks. Viktor whipped his wand out in a slashing motion and cast an *Incarceous* non-verbally. The heavy ropes shot out. It whipped around the person's feet, and the man made a sound of alarm as they fell to the ground. Viktor saw the glimmer of Karkaroff's embellished aspen wand and knew right away that he found the Headmaster. He smirked triumphantly.

"*Expelliarmus!*" The spell fired, and Karkaroff's wand snapped out of his wrist, flying towards Viktor. He caught it gingerly within his fingers. Now the man was defenseless.

"What is the meaning of this? Krum!" the grisly old man said in indignation, and Viktor descended upon him. He had no allegiance with the Headmaster, who promoted Dark Arts in the school and fanned the flames of animosity between brotherhoods. He had no qualms being rough, especially since he knew the man to be tied to the Dark Lord.

He jammed his wand over the skin Karkaroff's throat, glaring fiercely. Viktor rarely wore such vehement expressions, but he employed them now, to intimidate.
"Headmaster," he muttered, a low, terrifying sound in his throat. "Going somewhere, are we? Are ve, perhaps, escaping the authorities?"

"Wh-what are you saying!? Unbind me this instant!" he said reproachfully. There was fear in his eyes, and he flinched away from Viktor's hawk-like gaze.

"You're going to bring me to the Dark Lord, else you vill die, slowly, agonizingly," Viktor told him so quietly that it sounded ominous. He knew how to browbeat. He knew how to scare someone with the consequences they would face if they didn't do as they were told. Karkaroff fidgeted in his binds and looked like a caged rat.

"You know nothing, you ingrate. I have been nothing but generous to you. Do not seek to understand what is above and beyond your place," Karkaroff spat. "Now, release me!"

"Pneuma Talonis," Viktor uttered, running his wand down Karkaroff's chest. Viktor's eyes hardened. The older wizard began to sputter and cough.

"What--kof--did you do!?" the man demanded, coughing violently. He was wracked with pain, and began coughing blood onto his shirt. Viktor's steely gaze didn't falter.

"Bring me to the Dark Lord, and I vill end the curse. If you value your life, Headmaster, you vill comply. This spell is untraceable," he warned with a disturbing calmness. Karkaroff coughed again, and he seemed to be choking, suffocating on his own blood. When the suffering became too much, he nodded fearfully, and Viktor muttered the countercurse. It didn't heal the internal damage, but it ended the scratching in his windpipe.

The wizard, shivering and gasping, gathered his bearings for a moment, before sending a vehement glare Viktor's way. He ripped open his sleeve, revealing what Viktor knew to be the Dark Mark. He was shocked to see that it was writhing under Karkaroff's skin.

"Grab hold of me," Karkaroff spat through bloodstained teeth. Before he did, Viktor cast another spell on himself.

"Sanctuera Potens," he cast, tapping the top of his head. The improved Disillusionment Charm wrapped around his form like a thin veil, settling onto his skin with a light thrum. Karkaroff started when Viktor gripped his other wrist firmly, and before he knew it, they blinked out of existence, Apparating.

They appeared in a clearing, with Viktor stumbling a few ways from Karkaroff's form. He fired stunning spells almost immediately at the man and subdued him, before shoving him behind a large tree.

He was standing at the edge of the graveyard. He remembered the scenery, the stale, cold air, the curling hand of death and decay, but it felt worse. The area was thrumming with Dark magic. Viktor's many years in Durmstrang made him particularly sensitive to high concentrations of it, and it made him heady and dazed for a moment, bracing against a cold boulder as he rode out the thick magic and got used to the cloying atmosphere.

He had to find Harry fast. He didn't like the Darkness that spiraled the area. It felt unnatural and tainted, unlike the wild Dark that surrounded Durmstrang or his ancestral home in Sofia. He needed to get out of there before it consumed him.

He set off. He trudged through a rough path, making doubly sure to keep silent in case anyone was
in the area. The wispy, translucent coating against his arms indicated that the Disillusionment Charm was still in place, but it could only hold for so long before it left him exhausted magically.

He carefully avoided the litter that was scattered along the vast expanse of the graveyard, eyes flitting, but not really staying long enough to look at the headstones that were in disarray. The place was creepy and desolate, with fog that looked like tattered pieces of thin cloth floating in the air, and dark, spindly branches of what used to be living trees. The anticipation of what was in the middle of the graveyard chilled Viktor, and he grew more terrified with each step.

Voices. He heard them from a distance after going over a hill, murmurings in the night that were out of place in an abandoned cemetery but made it all the more disquieting. Viktor followed the sounds with painful trepidation, looking at his feet to make sure that his movements didn't reveal his position.

He crept over to a near headstone, a few meters away from another clearing, and crouched down, wiping at his sweaty brow with his sleeve and peeking around the side of the stone.

His eyes widened when he saw Harry. He was standing in the middle of a circle of statues, looking headstrong and defiant. He had his wand in his hand, Viktor noticed, and he looked as ragged and worn as when he had when they inadvertently left him.

And then Viktor saw another figure step into his line of sight, out from behind one of the statues around Harry, and he felt another chill, much more electrifying, run down his spine. It was almost like seeing a story come to life, except it felt like the stuff of his deepest, darkest nightmares. The man—if one could even call it that, wore black, billowing robes, and his skin was ghastly pale and clammy-looking. He looked like Death personified.

This figure could only be the Dark Lord Voldemort, and Harry just stood there, facing him, without a shred of fear in his eyes. Viktor was stunned silent.

"We bow to each other, Harry," the Dark Lord's voice carried all the way to Viktor, like it seemed he was magically enhancing his voice. Viktor saw him bow low, sneering at Harry viciously. "Come, the niceties must be observed ... Dumbledore would like you to show manners ... Bow to death, Harry ..."

Viktor heard a cacophony of dark laughs, and some of the statues moved. His blood pumped harder in his veins. Those weren't statues. They were wizards. Death Eaters, he thought despairingly. How was he supposed to subdue a dozen Death Eaters, hoodwink the Dark Lord, and grab Harry for an escape? The odds of pulling something spectacular like that off without a hitch became slimmer and slimmer as the cold settled further into Viktor. His muscles spasmed as he tried hard not to make any more unnecessary movements.

"I said—bow," the Dark Lord hissed, raising his wand and angling it downwards forcefully. Viktor saw Harry cry out as his body was forced to bend forward, shaking with tension. Viktor gripped his wand harder.

"Very good," Voldemort continued quietly, letting Harry go. Viktor saw the boy wobble on his feet, staggering, before pulling himself up and standing again, glaring. Harry had so much fight in him, and he was looking so determined in spite of the most powerful Dark Lord to have come into existence standing in front of him with the intent to kill him.

Viktor felt a surge of protectiveness go through him then, hardening his resolve. Harry was a fighter. He was a survivor. He did not deserve to die by the vile, wretched wizard's hand.

"And now you face me, like a man ... straight-backed and proud, the way your father died ... and
now—we duel."

Quicker then the eye could see, Voldemort had flicked his wand forwards, and Viktor gaped, heart beating wildly in his chest as Harry doubled over and crashed to the floor, thrashing on the ground like he was being electrocuted.

He was being tortured, by the Cruciatus Curse, no doubt. Viktor's mouth went terribly dry, yet he couldn't look away. The Institute used the particular Unforgivable to prevent major offenses from being committed in school, and only to those who were repeat offenders. He had not once been at the end of a wand that cast it.

Harry's frightening scream filled the air, and the Death Eaters laughed and laughed. Viktor ached with every fiber of his being to jump from out of the headstone and run to Harry, but he couldn't. He was frozen in place, feet nailed to the ground by his fear and terror. He could be facing death that very night. He could fail, and end up being tortured until he no longer had any sense of pain and sanity.

But Harry held on. He screamed, and screamed, until Viktor was sure the boy's throat was hoarse, and then the spell lifted, and Voldemort chortled. Harry coughed violently onto the ground beneath him. Viktor held his breath. "A little break,' the Dark Lord said in a disturbingly teasing manner. "A little pause. That hurt, didn't it, Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?"

No response came. For one, fleeting moment, Viktor thought he had failed Harry, and the slight boy's body had given up, but a little jerk, a convulsion, confirmed Harry's state. Harry was fighting. He was fighting. The thought of the fourteen year old struggling against all odds to survive gave Viktor strength. He shuffled, moving his legs to make sure blood flowed in them, before creeping close, to a nearer headstone.

"I asked you whether you want me to do that again," the Dark Lord said. "Answer me! Imperio!!" he bellowed.

Harry's body twisted, and Viktor felt an urgent need to approach even faster. He was jumping from stone to stone now, making doubly sure not to make a sound as he tiptoed to the next gravestone, and to the next, eyes never leaving Harry's prone form, which had gone still.

"Just say no, Harry ...." the Dark Lord said smoothly. "Just say no." Viktor nearly clambered into a rusty old chamberpot in his haste to go down the hill, but thankfully he had avoided it just in time, and dodged into another headstone.

He nearly jumped when Harry screamed. "I WON'T!" and collapsed to the ground again, heaving, leaving Viktor flummoxed once again. That was an Imperius Curse from the Dark Lord that Harry had just broken through. How powerful was he, exactly?

"You won't? You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die. Perhaps another little dose of pain?" Voldemort raised his wand, and Viktor slid ever closer, almost near the circle of Death Eaters now, past the ring of the last headstones and into the clearing. He had gone unnoticed by the dark wizards, due largely in part to the show unfolding in front of them.

Harry had leaped, despite his prone and exhausted form, behind the largest headstone of them all, the place where Cedric's Killing Curse hit as it missed him by an inch of his life. Viktor scrambled to circle around, to reach that place where Harry was, side-stepping, his thighs straining as he walked on all fours.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort with a colder voice than before, and
Viktor knew that he wasn't toying with Harry this time, that death was imminent, that he had to do something before it all ended in Harry's demise.

"You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry ... come out and play, then ... it will be quick ... it might be even painless ... I would not know ... I have never died ..."

Viktor finally saw Harry crouched behind the headstone a few feet from where he was invisible. Harry looked so weak and feeble, and Viktor struggled to draw closer, inching forward without alerting the Death Eaters that have him in their line of sight, still ...

But Harry ... Viktor saw his face turn into the face of grim determination, and before he could get to him, just mere feet from the boy, Harry had ducked out, and cast *Expelliarmus*, just as Voldemort shouted the Killing Curse with absolute vehemence. He screamed soundlessly.

A surge exploded, the shockwave spanning out and hitting everyone who wasn't Harry or Voldemort as the two spells collided. Their magic erupted continuously from their wands, like unending jets of electricity and light, and Viktor squinted at the harsh vibrating air between the two wizards, shaking in their stance and battling for supremacy.

Viktor couldn't believe it; Harry was holding his own against Voldemort, was actually fending off the Killing Curse with his own spell! He saw a bright, gold band shoot from both wands and connect, like a ray of light from the sun. Viktor was astonished. He gazed on, frozen on the ground as the spells ignited the once desolate night.

Viktor was further stupefied when Harry and the Dark Lord rose from the ground, their wands still connected by the shimmering pillar of light. The Death Eaters began to shout as they floated off, and Viktor saw his chance. If he was going to have any chance at saving Harry, he was going to have to subjugate all of those Death Eaters.

He ran forward, shoulder colliding painfully against the marble headstone where not so long ago Harry was, and racked his brain for a perfect spell. He remembered the one Fleur used on her dragon during the First Task, a spell he had not encountered before, but had studied laboriously during their down time before the Final Task. It came with a more powerful, spreading spell, and he had to get the wrist work just right ...

He jumped out, facing the stunned Death Eaters, and said, loudly, *Hypnos Maxima!*, and with a complicated brandish, he gathered enough magic in his wand to throw towards the center of the area where the dark wizards were.

One by one they fell to the ground, asleep, and Viktor disarmed them, one after the other, going around and breaking wands left and right, giving some of them a right kick or two, all while the two wizards battled in midair. He could hear Voldemort's piercingly agonizing cry, feel it right down to his bones as he made sure each Death Eater was completely helpless, and he looked up in amazement.

The golden band of light between the two wands had become even more intense, that it almost like staring at the surface of the sun. Wisps of smoke where erupting from Voldemort's wand, shadows in the form of bodies, bursting limb by limb out of the Dark Lord's wand until the whole mass had escaped and flown outwards.

He saw that Harry was holding on for dear life. Viktor didn't know what to do to get him down from there without seriously injuring him or breaking the connection that seemed to be keeping Voldemort from delivering death.
More figures erupted from the wand, ghosts, it seemed, of people that had once lived, and Viktor watched in fascination as they drew close to Harry speaking to him. Viktor couldn't hear them over the torrent of magic and the bursting, flaring sounds that came forth from their wands, but they seemed to be on Harry's side, supporting him, keeping him strong ...

At the very climax of the connection, their magic coalesced into a stream of colors, and Harry gave in, the connection snapping like a taut wire. Before he realized it, Harry was plummeting to the ground, and Viktor ran after him, desperate to know if he was still alive. He saw the ghosts turn into clouds of dust and crash into Voldemort, engulfing him in smoke, but didn't look for any longer than he allowed himself, dropping down near Harry and skidding to a halt.

"STUN HIM," Voldemort screeched from behind the thick veil of ghosts, but Viktor had already subdued the Death Eaters, and he was cradling Harry's barely conscious form. He was still invisible, but about to be revealed, once he did what he had to do. He reached over to his chest and grabbed his amulet, hugging Harry close with his other hand. He kissed the surface of the gemstone, and muttered, "Antiochol," with a shaky breath.

They heard Voldemort's scream of fury at the same time as Viktor felt the tug from behind his navel that meant the Portkey had worked--it was speeding them away past sceneries and mountains and rivers ... away from the accursed graveyard where Voldemort had risen. They were gone from the place. He had saved Harry.

Chapter End Notes

In this fanfic, we will follow the films' idea of Durmstrang being an 'all boys' school. I'm not sure if I should even mention Beauxbatons, but it will come when it comes.

The Brotherhood of the Vulchanovi is based on Durmstrang's founder, Nerida Vulchanova.

The unfamiliar spells are made-up. Just let me be creative lmao.

свещени кодове means 'sacred codes'. So does hellige koder, in Norwegian this time.
Relief and Solace

Chapter Summary

Viktor takes Harry back to Hogwarts, but is faced with a much bigger dilemma. Cedric feels frustrated about everything that's happened. Happens after the Third Task.

Chapter Notes

Again, this is not beta-read. I'm sorry in advance for any spelling and grammar mistakes. I'll come back to them later. But anyway, I wanted to thank you guys. This has more than a thousand hits, and nine comments, which is more than I could ask for. Please stay tuned and leave comments. Funnily enough some comments guess accurately my next moves. I'm going to have to be more creative soon lol.

The Portkey dropped them onto hardwood floors with a large thump, with Viktor landing unceremoniously on his ass, hard enough to snap him back into reality. They had made it. The relief that flooded into the Bulgarian made him feel light-headed. The echoes of Dark Lord's screams died in his ears and as silence took over, Viktor sat still for a moment, chest heaving and blood pumping in his veins so fast he thought his limbs might fall off. In his arms, Harry stirred, trembling. Viktor held onto him tightly as a protective gesture, arms wrapped around the teen's shoulders.

"Harry ... Harry ..." Viktor murmured, squeezing, and he had never heard his own voice go so soft or low. He found himself doing things he wouldn't normally do, like pull Harry close to his chest, and card trailing his fingers through Harry's scalp. He just did them instinctively. He knew how much the teen had suffered. "Ve'er good. Ve'er safe. I got you out. It's going to be fine. I'm sorry ... I'm sorry ..."

He was apologizing for leaving Harry to fend for himself, even though he didn't mean for things to happen the way they did. Viktor regretted everything, especially since Harry looked so downtrodden and broken.

Harry's fists clutched at the back of Viktor's shirt tightly as he began to sob in relief--short, quiet hiccoughs that were warm against Viktor's collar. Whether it was because of the pain he had endured or the enormous weight that seemed to lift from his shoulders, Viktor didn't know, but Harry wouldn't show his face.

The sobs wracked through the teen, and Viktor sighed, thinking of what the Harry must have gone through. He thought of how traumatizing it must have been, to stand toe to toe against the most powerful Dark wizard in existence and stand his ground for so long. How lucky they had been, to have escaped such a fate as death in the hands of a madman.

Viktor blinked around, recognizing the place once he had taken in the furniture and the decorations. It was their house in London, one of the many homes belonging to the Krums. It didn't seem uninhabited, as there were pieces of parchment on one table by one of the stuffed cushions, presumably left there for further investigation. This must be where his parents were staying.
"What's this?" he asked in Bulgarian, eyebrows drawing together curiously at the amulet as his mother put it around his neck. His mother gave him a patient, fond look as she ran her tiny delicate fingers along the necklace strand.

"We've been in London since March," she informed him, side-eyeing Viktor's father. She pressed the amulet with the pad of her thumb. "This is for later, if things go wrong." The older man, Viktor's father, regarded him quietly, as if he was expecting Viktor to do something. Viktor didn't move an inch. He knew that his father saw any excessive movement as a sign of weakness or trepidation. He merely regarded the man back, equally impassive.

"We're proud of you," his father said, and there was a hint of warmth and conviction in his eyes that Viktor's throat went dry when he heard the words. Valko Krum had never been candid about showing affection towards his son, but Viktor always knew how his father cared for him. Their likeness in behavior stemmed from Viktor's devotion to the man who raised him.

So the Portkey brought them to Antiochol, just as he had expected when he uttered the keyword. They should be somewhere in London, then. Viktor could almost laugh in relief, but the way things had gone didn't make him feel like celebrating. His eyes flit back to Harry, soft and concerned.

"Spazi," he muttered in the darkness, and out of nowhere, a house elf popped into existence, wearing a child's old bib. Its ears flopped in front of its big eyes as it bowed low, though it twitched constantly, ruining the gesture. The Krums had learned to deal with the house elf despite the nervous tic.

"How may Spazi serve young master?" it said in a squawking yet respectful voice. Harry's breathing had evened out, though his body still trembled every now and then. His fingers had gone slack around the cloth of Viktor's shirt, and he pushed gently away from the Bulgarian. Viktor stared at Harry's face. He looked like he had been dragged to hell and back.

"Fetch us a Pepperup and some essence of Dittany from the potions stores, and hot tea. And we need warmth in the room, so fire in the fireplace, too, please. I need to Floo someone," he instructed, eyes never leaving Harry as he shuffled slightly away. His warm hands remained on the teen's shoulders. Spazi spazzed for a short second before disappearing.

"You're going to be okay," Viktor said firmly, eyes piercing through Harry's clouded green eyes. He saw Harry swallow thickly, and then nod shakily. Viktor's eyes furrowed. He stood, leg muscles feeling like he had run a marathon, and then nearly lifted Harry up to his feet, guiding him towards one of the soft armchairs in his house's parlor. Spazi winked into existence again, setting a tray with steaming hot tea down on a table next to where Harry had settled, and then waddled over to the fireplace, snapping his fingers and igniting the wood in the hearth.

"How did--how did you return to the graveyard?" Harry croaked, looking like he was valiantly trying to calm his frayed nerves by forcing his body to freeze, and Viktor crooked his head sharply at the tea when he heard Harry's voice. The screaming from suffering under the Cruciatus Curse must have done a number on Harry's vocal chords. Harry eyed tea tray hollowly, but made no move to drink just yet. Viktor sauntered over, grabbed and uncorked a vial of Pepperup Potion from the tray, and shoved it against Harry's lips.

"Drink," he ordered, his glaring expression and looming figure saying that he wouldn't hesitate to spell it into Harry's nostrils if that's what it took. Harry stared back, undaunted, but took the vial anyway, flushing its contents down his throat with a wince and a cough. There was still some fight in Harry, some strength. Viktor looked satisfied for a moment, before going to the tray again and taking a teacup of his own.
"I made a Death Eater Apparate us to your location," Viktor replied after tasting the Darjeeling. He was also exhausted, but adrenaline still pumped within him, racing around his bloodstream like tiny spiders. He felt like he could move mountains with his pinky. His gaze flitted across Harry's features, soft, tired, looking so much like a young boy. But those eyes ... they had always look somewhat haunted, older than the rest of him. Viktor found those eyes entirely enrapturing.

"How did you know to look for one? I mean ... I didn't find out it was him until ..." Harry trailed off, gaze falling down to his arm. There was a gash there, not too deep, and it was beginning to scab. Viktor glared at it.

"Your scar hurt," Viktor said simply. "I learned of it from your friend--the smart one, with the wild hair--that you get headaches whenever he's doing something. I connected the dots."

"Hermione. That's her name ..." Harry said absently, looking like he was winding down from a very draining ten mile run. Viktor didn't quite catch her name. He was too busy willing Harry not to hurt anymore.

"It was Karkaroff, wasn't it?" Harry said after a while, voice still thick from overuse and the thickness of the potion he had drank. He was trying to make a grab for his tea, but his hand wouldn't cooperate, shaking in the air. He let it drop to his lap with a huff He was going to need much more than Pepperup to recover. Viktor should call the school already.

His eyes trained on Harry instead. "How did you know?"

"I saw him in a memory ... he was tried by the Wizengamot, but was released when he sold out his fellow Death Eaters," Harry muttered, the fire in the hearth reflecting in his round glasses as he looked reminiscing. Viktor regarded him for a moment, and then turned back to the fireplace, crouching down and throwing the Floo powder in his fist into the fire. The flames raged, turning bright green. "Why did he agree? I thought ... I thought he wanted nothing to do with the Dark Lord."

"You're right. He was trying to escape when I got to him. I ... roughed him up a bit." It wasn't an outright lie, but Viktor did omit leaving Karkaroff for dead, Stunned in the middle of nowhere with internal bleeding.

"Serves him right," Harry said, wincing as he tried to move. Viktor was stunned to hear his words. So Harry wasn't so innocent ... but it had been too fleeting, not enough to base anything on. His attention was grabbed once again when Harry shuffled in his seat.

"Why?" Harry rasped, looking nonplussed.

"Why vot?"

"Why did you rescue me?"

Harry's eyes were fixed on him, green, uncomprehending. Viktor was speechless. He didn't know what to answer. Why? They were friends, weren't they? Hadn't they made that clear months ago? Then again ... Viktor had been almost painfully awkward during their short time together, and he had always been weak when it came to making a connection with people. Were they supposed to declare those sort of things? Define a relationship? Or was Harry just dense? Wasn't it supposed to be a smooth transition and all that? Harry certainly had no misgivings, using Viktor's first name right away ...  

Viktor's head nearly burst with overthinking. His face heated up.
"I--I vos the only one who could haff done something," Viktor muttered, ducking his head. "And ... ve're friends. I don't ... I couldn't let you die, not after I made the connection about You-Know-Who. Your friend told me. The bushy-haired girl? She told me that your scar hurt whenever the Dark Lord vos doing something bad ... that's when I knew that Karkaroff could bring me to you."

Harry went silent, uneasy. He didn't know how much effort it took to say what Viktor had said. So Viktor just shrugged his shoulders, and then faced the flames. He realized, just as the Floo connected, that he didn't know what happened to Harry the second after he and Cedric fell on the Cup.

It was a whirlwind of events that followed after Viktor managed to reach the school. He and Harry Floo'ed back, entering through the fireplace in the Headmaster's Office, and was immediately swarmed by many people. Viktor informed Dumbledore of Harry's state, and a short version of what happened, including Harry's fight with the Cruciatuus, and was subsequently introduced to the Order of the Phoenix, who were in the office discussing their next course of action. The reaction to Viktor's story differed from face to face. Soon after, Harry was rushed to the Infirmary, but not before the teen said his mumbled 'thank you' to Viktor.

"You didn't tell me vot happened when Cedric and I disappeared ... vill you tell me later?" Viktor asked, squeezing Harry's shoulder tightly, and the teen bit his lip and nodded.

His exhaustion ran to the bone, but he couldn't rest just yet. The Order sat him down and asked for the full details of Voldemort's return, and Viktor tried to tell them everything, conveniently leaving out how he convinced Karkaroff to bring him to the graveyard through Side-Along Apparition.

They were impressed by his nerve and bravery, particularly Dumbledore, who sat in his chair with eyes twinkling knowingly. Viktor was starting to become irritated by that look, but he sat there, maintained his composure and heard everything that had transpired when he left.

The judges had declared Cedric Diggory the winner of the Triwizard Tournament, as it had been unquestionable that he had brought back the Cup. The Order had decided not to alert the Ministry authorities about the Triwizard Cup being a Portkey. The Minister's lackeys would only seek to tarnish their reputation and ruin their credibility, if they started mouthing off about You-Know-Who's return.

That being said, they couldn't say that the three male champions tied for it, or that Fleur had been attacked. It was all very unfair, but Viktor realized that he pretty much didn't care at that point, just as long as Cedric and Harry were safe.

Snape and Dumbledore had managed to sniff out Alastor Moody, whom they knew to have had enchanted the Cup since it was he who placed it within the maze. They had uncovered that he was in fact Barty Crouch Jr., an escapee of Azkaban and a Death Eater. He had used Polyjuice Potion to impersonate the grisly Auror, and had planned it so that Harry would take the Cup in the end. He had cast the Imperius Curse on Fleur Delacour just before entering the maze to hinder the two other champions.

They found the real Moody in his office, stuffed inside a magical trunk.

Afterwards, a shabby but gentle-looking man--later introduced as Remus Lupin--told all of them that Viktor had had a long day, and should be just about ready to drop at any second. Next to the man, a large black dog yipped, which sounded suspiciously like a word of agreement. The Bulgarian shot him--and the dog, seeing as it seemed to wag its tail and pant at him--a grateful look, and they were
soon dismissed, with Dumbledore informing him that they will continue with their talk the following
day.

As he was leaving, a plump red-haired woman by the name of Molly Weasley approached him and
expressed her gratitude almost tearfully. He remembered her to be the surrogate mother that came for
Harry when it was time to meet their parents earlier that day.

Beside her, the same redhead man from that morning, with big shoulders and long hair, eyed him
critically, but offered his hand in thanks in the end. Viktor took it, feeling an odd sort of electricity
flow from the man's calloused hand. He introduced himself as Bill Weasley, and after that Viktor had
become instantly wary of him. After talking for a bit, Viktor made the connection—the ginger boy
who stood gaping next to the bushy-haired girl from the Pitch was Molly's son, and he and Harry
were best friends.

Once again, the man with sand-colored hair, Remus, intervened with a light reprimand, saying that
they shouldn't bother Viktor at that moment, after all that he had been through. His dog kept shoving
its nose against Viktor's palm, and Viktor, aggravated yet charmed by the mutt, scratched its neck
briefly. The sneering Professor Snape then took Bill Weasley away from the conversation to say a
few curt words to him.

Remus also expressed how grateful he was, and told him that he and his dog Padfoot cared for Harry
very much, and that he would like to have a chat with the Bulgarian sometime. Too tired to argue,
Viktor complied with a shrug and finally, finally made his exit, along with Remus and the dog, who
told Dumbledore that they were going to catch up to Harry.

Levi and Yana met him at the bottom of the gargoyle staircase which led to Dumbledore's office.
Levi looked pretty much ready to kill him, his expression lined with fury, and Yana was there,
probably the only one stopping Levi from cursing Viktor to oblivion. But when he reached the
landing and slumped, swaying on his feet like the world was playing tricks and tilting under him,
Levi's expression shifted, and he caught Viktor's shoulder right before he dropped.

"His core is nearly exhausted," Yana pointed out worriedly in Bulgarian, locking eyes with Levi, her
wand up and firing diagnostic spells the second she saw the teen. Levi nodded, squishing Viktor into
his side fiercely, as he guided him down the corridor. Viktor didn't even protest, feet barely rising
from the floor as they trudged on. He didn't know that he had been putting on a facade. He was so
used to it, a trait ingrained into him by his father, that it came second nature to him to never show
weakness.

Levi's palm went down on his buzz-cut head and gripped it tightly like a Quaffle, as a form of
reprimand. Viktor made a halfhearted aggravated noise deep in his chest.

"You are an idiot. Stupid, brash, thoughtless—you could haff gotten killed," Levi scolded, and Viktor
knew that if he had been in a better state Levi would kick him down relentlessly until he apologized,
that being said, he truly was shamefaced. Their worried looks were too intimate for him to bear. "I
taught you better than that. Why didn't you bring us along?"

Viktor sighed tiredly. "I needed to act quickly. You fell behind." It wasn't his fault if they lost track
of him somewhere along the way. They knew where he was going. They knew what was at stake.
That didn't make it any less okay, and Levi made that clear when he gripped the top of Viktor's head
again, hard enough for it to hurt.

"Do that again and I vill kill you. Brotherhood and friends be damned," Levi nearly snarled into his
ear, and Viktor didn't even want to act defiant.
"That being said, your father and I need to talk to you. We're going back to your home." Levi ushered him through the corridors, with Viktor barely registering where they were going since he was so knackered. So he just let his brain do all the work, and zone out completely.

oOooOooOooOooOooOooOooOooOooOoo

Cedric could very well replace a tea kettle on a stove top for all the seething he had been doing for the past hour. He didn't win, he wasn't a victor. He had been trying to tell everyone that for the past hour, but nobody would listen. It was driving him nuts.

But more importantly, he hadn't heard anything about Harry or Viktor. It had taken every fiber of his control not to lash out at the tearful, celebratory Hufflepuffs who carried him off from the edge of the maze before he could so much as protest, to yell at them angrily and say that there were much bigger things to worry about. He wouldn't have gotten away from them, if Madam Pomfrey hadn't insisted that he be taken to the Hospital Wing for his ankle.

As it turned out, his foot had been hit by a curse from Fleur. But he was left addle-brained as to why Madam Pomfrey told his parents and the judges that it was swollen from an Acromantula attack. He didn't understand why Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore and the rest of the people who knew were keeping it a secret that Fleur had been Imperius'ed.

He tried to tell the judges, but they responded in turn, saying that he was probably too excited to think straight, that Fleur had been knocked out by one of the man-eating plants placed in the maze as obstacles. Dumbledore and Professor Sprout said so themselves. He didn't know why his Head of House lied, and no one would bloody explain things to him.

What made it all worse was that his dad didn't believe him, or rather chose, stubbornly, not to listen to him. He had been the worst, if Cedric was going to be honest. He had gone ballistic the second he found out that Cedric was holding the Cup in the end. He boasted so loudly and so constantly, that Cedric felt his ears could melt right off with how hot they felt. He had to plead to his mother, that she take his father away from his bedside at the Hospital Wing before Cedric could say something irreversibly scathing.

He was terrified, stone-cold with fear at the thought of what must have happened to Harry. When he had realized that his fingers had fallen on the Cup, that he had Portkey-traveled with Viktor back to Hogwarts, he had been so choked with horror that he couldn't utter a word to Viktor.

He knew that the man had felt the same, that dread had cloyed so tightly in Viktor's throat at the thought of what had inadvertently happened. That he had told Dumbledore as soon as the Headmaster had approached, and that they had gone and done something about it. But the thought of not knowing what happened after that ate at Cedric so relentlessly that he thought he was going to go nutters on his hospital bed.

He wished that he didn't have the bloody injury in his ankle, that he could run about and search for the answers himself, but Madam Pomfrey had threatened him with castration should he leave his place, which shouldn't have daunted him as much as it did. But she also shooed away any student who wanted to congratulate him on his win, which made him feel less frustrated with her.

The Mediwitch managed to fend off most well-wishers, but then had to leave when who of all people but Severus Snape dropped by and took her with him as he left. Cedric was visited by two students he didn't ever expect to find him afterwards, when there was no overbearing, protective Mediwitch in the room to guard the doors. It was Granger and Weasley, and the two Gryffindors couldn't have hidden their distress even if they wore masks and the light was off.
It was Weasley who spoke up first. The redhead glanced uncertainly at Granger before jerking forward. "Er, congratulations, mate."

Cedric eyed them with reservation, unsure of how to talk to them exactly. "Thanks?" he said, shifting in his seat on the bed.

Granger looked torn, as if she wanted to say something but didn't think she should. Her eyebrows were drawn in a harsh, non-congratulatory line, and she was sucking on her lip as if there was a lemon wedge between her mouth. Cedric was half-tempted to ask her just to spit out whatever she wanted to say, because they were quite obviously not there to share any sentiments of victory and triumph with him. Cedric waited, eyebrow raised.

"We wanted to ask what happened to Harry," Granger blurted, closing her eyes in despair. Cedric narrowed his eyes. Beside her, Weasley looked gravely ill. Granger pressed on. "We know something's gone wrong. Viktor Krum told us that Harry was with Dumbledore, but we haven't seen either of them anywhere. And he said that Harry's scar hurt, which is ..." she looked conflicted, eyes darting between Weasley and him, "it's not something that should be taken lightly."

Viktor had lied, and they didn't know. And it was up to Cedric to tell them. He swallowed thickly. He was getting more and more frustrated with the Bulgarian. "Harry's ..." he shook his head. "When we got to the Cup, the three of us, Viktor, Harry and I, we decided to tie for it. Just share in the glory, you know? But things went horribly, horribly wrong, I ..." he debated whether he should tell them, seeing as nobody took him seriously, but seeing as they were Harry's friends, and they looked frightfully anxious to find answers, Cedric told them.

"The Triwizard Cup had been spelled into a Portkey. It took us to a graveyard," Cedric said carefully, quiet and resentful. He sighed. "And then a figure came. That's when Harry's scar began to hurt. We tried to help him, but the person, it ... it cast the Killing Curse at me. Viktor pushed me out of the way ..." he huffed, looking down at his hands on his lap. He was angry with the man, but he owed him his life. He wouldn't be on that hospital bed then if Viktor hadn't reacted so quickly.

He continued. "... but we landed on the Cup. My hand did. That's why I had been holding it when we accidentally Portkeyed back. I've been trying to tell everyone, but they won't listen. I didn't win. We were supposed to tie for it. And now I don't know if Harry's okay ..."

Weasley's eyes were blown wide, and Granger was covering her mouth with her fingers, and he could feel the dread settle over them, just like it did when he and Viktor realized what had happened.

"This isn't good," Weasley nervously. "Bloody hell, this is bad. Really bad." The two Gryffindors shared a glance, and Cedric looked at them suspiciously. They were hiding something, he could tell.

"What? What is it? What's going on?" Cedric snapped. He was so exhausted and short-tempered that he had forgotten his good manners altogether. "Look--I've had enough of people keeping me in the dark about these things! You're not leaving until you tell me what the fuck is going on here."

Granger seemed shocked that he was capable of such language, but Cedric honestly didn't give a Skrewt's ass if he was rude or not. They must be seeing this side of me for the first time, Cedric thought sneeringly. Granger bit her lip. "We thought Harry would have told you ... he said the two of you were friends."

"Yeah, well, nobody ever tells me anything," Cedric said bitterly. "So out with it."

Weasley puffed his chest out. "His scar's a connection to You-Know-Who. When it's hurting Harry, it means You-Know-Who's up to something."
Cedric gawked at them, and then paled, picking up his jaw from the floor. "You must be mad. You-Know-Who is--"

"He's not dead," Granger interrupted. "He never was. Harry encountered him in our first year at Hogwarts, and then again in our second year. He was found to be possessing Professor Quirrell's body. He was also behind the fiasco with the Chamber of Secrets. It's not public information. In fact, I have a theory about that ... The Ministry, I think, is trying to keep it all hushed up and kept under lock. They don't want mass panic in their hands, so they're trying to distract everyone using the Prophet ..."

"Whoa, whoa. Merlin, hold on," Cedric held his hands up to stop her from talking. Too much information had been dumped on him that he needed a second to fit it all in his head. "You-Know-Who's alive? He's alive? Are you telling me that when you were eleven and twelve years old, you had been fighting the Dark Lord alongside Harry?"

His incredulous tone seemed to have struck a nerve with Weasley, for the boy's face had turned pinched and he looked nettled. "Oi, we were useful enough back then! Fat lot more use than Dumbledore or anyone ever was. And what did you expect? I mean, this is Harry we're talking about. if there's anyone out there who can face You-Know-Who, it's him."

Cedric had to admit that he was impressed with the loyalty and confidence Weasley had for Harry.

"Look--believe us or don't, it doesn't matter." Granger crossed her arms. "Harry's in trouble, and you've got to tell us how we can rescue him!"

"I don't bloody know how to rescue him!" Cedric said crossly. "Don't you think I would have done that already if I did?"

Their exchange was cut short when Madam Pomfrey returned with Snape and a haggard-looking, almost corpse-like Mad-Eye Moody. The three students looked positively alarmed.

Madam Pomfrey's stressed out expression honed in on them. The two Gryffindors paled. "What in heaven's name are you two doing in here? Out with you!" she clucked at them in outrage, but she was too busy casting spell after spell at Moody to usher them out, practically shoving the Defense professor onto an empty hospital bed and focusing her attention on him entirely. Snape went to the Hospital Wing's potions cupboard and began extracting vial after vial of tinctures and tonics.

Weasley was eyeing Moody in perturbation, but Granger looked back at him, frowning. "We have to go. We need to figure out what to do and alert Dumbledore."

"What? No!" Cedric hissed. "You still have to tell me a lot of things concerning Harry! D'you reckon it was You-Know-Who who cast the Killing Curse at me? And you're not saying that the Ministry actually supports the shite the Prophet comes up with?"

Granger shrugged helplessly, pulling Weasley along as she side-stepped away from Cedric's bed. "I'm sure that we'll have time for that later, but we have to go, Cedric. Harry's out there somewhere, probably with Voldemort as we speak. And you can't exactly come with, seeing as you're injured. We need to do something. We'll talk later," she muttered, and they ran off, leaving Cedric severely put out and frustrated with his injury and the people around him and Viktor and You-Know-Who, in that order.

He ran a hand over his face in exhaustion and then let his head fall back onto the pillows behind him, his head lolling to the side as he watched Madam Pomfrey attend to Moody.
"What happened to him?" Cedric asked, figuring that he should at least find something to preoccupy himself with now that the world's decided to leave him out of things indefinitely. It seemed weird, seeing as Moody was the very picture of crazed, neurotic health just hours ago. The Moody on the hospital bed was frail and gaunt by contrast, and his hair was so badly cut up the Cedric felt sorry for him.

Madam Pomfrey glanced at him briefly, before continuing on with her spells. Snape came between them and started shoving potion after potion down the man's throat, using his wand to practically spell the liquids into Moody's stomach.

"It's none of your concern, Mr. Diggory. I suggest that you rest for now, focus on recuperating. Your foot's been badly cursed, and we've put it on Stasis. You're going to need a curse breaker before you can walk on it again," Madam Pomfrey answered primly. Of course it was none of his bloody concern. Everything seemed to be none of his concern but his stupid Triwizard Tournament win and his stupid Hufflepuff entourage.

"Really? I thought it was Acromantula poisoning," Cedric said sarcastically. He couldn't help himself.

"The eldest Weasley spawn is in the Headmaster's office, Poppy," Snape said snidely. "Might be he could help the young victorious champion. Lord knows he'd sulk a little less if he can walk on his feet." Cedric was reminded of how much he hated the Potions professor, then, and he didn't hesitate to let him know just how much, by glaring defiantly.

"Oh, Bill Weasley? That's perfect. Tell him to stop by. We need to lift the curse on poor Mr. Diggory's foot. He should be out there celebrating," Madam Pomfrey answered, and Snape left with his usual aerated robes flicking out from behind him. Cedric didn't feel at all like celebrating. His supposed 'win' was a fluke, Viktor and Harry where nowhere to be found, and You-Know-Who was alive.

They used Viktor's Portkey to return to London, and found themselves back in Antiochol, the Krum house. Viktor was half-dragged, half-carried towards his bedroom by Yana this time, while Levi separated from them to alert his parents of their arrival. He wished he had stayed at Hogwarts for a bit longer, but it seemed as if his parents wanted him there. For what reason, he didn't know, but he had a feeling that he was about to find out.

Yana gingerly deposited him onto his bed, firing cleaning spells in advance so he at least didn't leave his bed stained with all kinds of grime. She then summoned Spazi, telling the house elf to fetch them some tea, potions and nourishment. She started a fire in Viktor's fireplace, and then set to work on restarting Viktor's magical core.

Viktor told her of the spells he used: the Lung-Scratching Curse, the improved Disillusionment charm, the improved sleeping spell, among other spells he'd used outside of the tournament. He also told her that he might have left Karkaroff beside an unknown graveyard, dying of his wounds. He didn't think he had anything to hide from her, seeing as she was one of the last people on Earth who would judge him for his actions. She just nodded at him briskly, fussing over his prone form.

She hated Igor Karkaroff, not only because he was a Death Eater. Although she went to Scholomance in Romania instead of Durmstrang, she knew of Karkaroff's treacherous nature. She loathed how corrupt he was in Viktor and Levi's school, and how he was biased against their brotherhood, the Vulchanovi. So she had no qualms about what Viktor had done.
"You have a lot to make up for, Viktor," Yana began in Bulgarian as she sighed tiredly, her wand hovering over the surly teen, who was lying still on his bed and had his eyes closed. "I hardly had the wits about me to stop Levi--I was frustrated myself. He was so close to cursing the next student who so much as looked at him oddly. It pained him to see you rush into danger like that."

"I know that," Viktor said sourly. It still felt very uncomfortable, when his two tutors showed him any amount of open concern past shooting him healing spells after sparring or making sure he watched what he ate. Levi was a particularly unsettling man when he revealed his worry for Viktor. He was broad and rough and firm-handed, and he never hesitated to knock Viktor out or jynx him when he went out of line during training or slacked off. But his display that night had left Viktor downright floored. He didn't think he could look at the man again, without feeling some sort of disturbing affection for him.

When Levi returned, it was him trailing after Valco Krum, who looked grim-faced, and Viktor's mother, who was white as a sheet. Viktor immediately sensed that something was wrong. His father was wearing battle robes.

"What is it?" he said, jaw tightening and expression turning harsh. His mother sat down on one of the armchairs near the fireplace, and Yana went to her, tension etched in her face. Viktor sat up, spine going rigid as he stared unflinchingly at his father. Valco, unblinking, inhaled.

"We've been sent a letter," Valco began. "It contained powdered Angel's Trumpet, and we had to act quickly before I died of poison."

Viktor scowled further. "Where did it come from?"

"From the High Order of the Munteri. As First Wand of the Vulchanovi brotherhood, they have informed me that the binding truce between the two brotherhoods has been severed. A Vulchanovi brother has intentionally broken a Munteri brother's wand."

Viktor paled. It couldn't be. He hadn't known ... He had broken the truce that had gone on between the two reigning sectors in Durmstrang since You-Know-Who's purported demise fourteen years ago. It meant only one thing: chaos. He had to own up to his mistake. Viktor stared hard at the floor beneath his father's feet, shamefaced.

"At the graveyard ... I broke all of the Death Eaters' wands. I didn't know there would be a Munteri brother there, I didn't ... I should have thought it was possible, after all, all of the Dark Lord's followers in Durmstrang come from them ..." he said, head swimming with the gravity of what he had done. He had unwittingly endangered every Vulchanovi brother across Europe.

"What does it mean?" Yana interjected, her hand placed around Viktor's mother's shoulder. Levi turned to her, steely eyes boring into her.

"It means that the Munterian Law of Duel shall apply once again. It shouldn't be a problem, except we've been in a truce with the Munteri for years. Many wizards have harbored deep resentment over time, on both sides, grudges that only death and suffering could satisfy."

Viktor swallowed again. The aforementioned law meant that any Durmstrang alum belonging to a brotherhood was fair game, and wouldn't be allowed to reject a duel engagement, so long as the brotherhoods that they belonged to didn't have a magically-binding truce between them, and as long as the reason for challenging someone was justifiable. Durmstrang had always been a school primarily focused on the Dark Arts and Martial Magic, and the International Magical Law System respected the laws of the school, for it was their identity and tradition. Any form of murder or atrocious crime performed under the Munterian Law of Duel was overlooked by the magical
authorities.

"Father, forgive me--" he stammered, but Valco raised his hand to quell his words. He looked fierce and commanding. Viktor felt fear cradle him where he sat. But then, as Valco's eyes pierced through him, the man shook his head faintly.

"It is not your fault." The man walked over to the fireplace, stared at the flames distantly. "I will send word to the council and the rest of the brotherhood as soon as possible. They will know that you are responsible, but I will also make them understand the necessity of your actions. They will understand. The Vulchanovi have always been against the Dark Lord's ideals. And you have upheld our beliefs by protecting and rescuing the Boy-Who-Lived, the only infallible threat to the Dark Lord's regime."

Viktor felt an enormous weight lift from his shoulders, that he almost slumped and fell back on the bed altogether. However, his father's presence kept him attentive.

His father looked between him and his mother. "We will have to stay away from Sofia for now, until the brotherhood has regrouped. I imagine challenges between the two brotherhoods would be issued all across Europe as soon as word gets out, and I have no doubt that the Munteri would be eager to exact revenge. We shall use Antiochol as a base of operations, but you, my son, will have to finish your education. I seem to recall that in this country, one is required to pass exams called NEWTs, to be able to secure jobs and apprenticeships. Your mother and Miss Stoyanova shall handle that, make arrangements."

"You mean to say Hogwarts, father?"

"Just for your examinations. I take it you haven't been neglecting your studies, Viktor?" His father eyed him critically. Viktor shook his head.

"Good. I implore you to rest and recuperate. Miss Stoyanova and Mister Georgov will leave you to your devices. I have a feeling you'll be wanting to return to Hogwarts soon, to congratulate the winner of the Tournament, and see to the Boy-Who-Lived's condition." He exchanged a knowing glance with Levi, and Levi shrugged apologetically at Viktor. It seemed as if Levi had let out that he had been growing close with Harry and Cedric. Viktor didn't know what to think of that.

His parents exited without further word, his mother lingering for a moment and touching his cheek, followed by Yana and Levi, with the latter telling him that he would escort Viktor back to the school early morning. Viktor acquiesced, and then settled into his sheets, kicking his boots and taking everything off except his boxers. He fell into a deep sleep soon after, his dreams fretful and disconcerting.

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Having been left alone for nearly half an hour without anyone to talk to or anyone to inform him of the events taking place around the castle, Cedric nearly died of surprise when Harry was quickly ushered into the Hospital Wing by Remus Lupin and a big black dog, followed by a redhead that Cedric quickly assumed was Bill.

"Bloody hell, Harry! You made it back!" he breathed in astonishment. A huge smile split his features as Harry was brought to the bed next to him, but it quickly faltered into a frown as he saw how Harry barely managed to lift his feet onto the hospital bed and Madam Pomfrey started with her round of spells. Harry still managed a weak nod, but his breathing quickly evened and his eyelids fell shut as soon as his head connected with his pillow. Cedric nearly bowled onto the floor as he jerked out of the bed, almost stepping on his cursed foot, but then remembered it at the last minute. "What
happened? Is he alright?"

Bill talked to Madam Pomfrey for a moment, while the black dog ambled over towards the area between his and Harry's bed, ears drooping. Remus' gaze flit towards him, giving him a reassuring but rueful smile. "He's sustained quite a lot of damage, Mr. Diggory. He'll be fine, but he will need a lot of rest. Can I trust you to keep an eye on him while he recuperates?"

Cedric nodded, biting his lip. He didn't know why Remus Lupin was back in the castle all of a sudden, but the mere presence of his past Defense professor already pulled a huge amount of stress and worry off his shoulders.

He stared at the unconscious Gryffindor, watching as Madam Pomfrey started listing what needed to be done to help Harry heal. The teen's skin was littered with wounds all over, and he looked at least ten times worse than when Cedric saw him last. "I thought ..." he mumbled, eyes casting down to the floor. "I thought he was a goner. How did he manage to come back?"

"Krum rescued him," Bill offered, sauntering over to the foot of his bed. "I'm Bill Weasley. Congratulations on winning the Tournament," he said, but he was talking Cedric's ankle, his wand out and drawing complicated lines in the air. "I'll make short work of your foot, don't worry. You'll be walking soon enough." Cedric jerked his head down towards the redhead's direction when his gaze flitted towards him for a moment.

So Viktor had succeeded in bringing Harry back. Relief flooded in him so fully that he felt buoyed. He ached to know how the Bulgarian pulled it off, but more than anything, Cedric was very, very frustrated with him. Some part of his brain understood that Viktor did what he had to do under dire circumstances, and he knew that he owed the man his life, but he couldn't for the life of him understand how Viktor could easily throw himself towards him and push him out of a Killing Curse, yet have so little self-preservation when it came to making important decisions. He could easily see the older teen being Sorted into Gryffindor if things had turned out differently, despite his perpetually present scowl and aloof attitude. He wanted to talk to the older teen badly.

"Wait--but where is he?" Cedric inquired, a unique scowl of his own setting on his face. If he had found some way to get back to the graveyard, he couldn't have left with Harry unscathed, not when You-Know-Who had been there. He did manage to come back with Harry, didn't he? "Where's Viktor?" he nearly demanded, sitting back up and narrowing his eyes at them.

Remus held his hands up in front of Cedric and approached, calm brown eyes looking at him patiently. "He's fine, Mr. Diggory. Professor McGonagall told me that Krum went home for the moment to rest up. He wasn't injured, just exhausted. He and Harry faced something that no regular teenager should be able to handle, but the both of them fought bravely, and managed to escape. You'll hear from him soon, I'm sure."

Cedric nodded coolly, settling back onto the bed, but inside him burned that niggling concern for the surly Bulgarian. He was put out by the circumstances surrounding the Final Task, but it was something that he couldn't help. Sure, Viktor could have chosen to stay in Hogwarts' hospital wing, but he figured that he must have had a good enough reason not to. Cedric was still incredibly pissed off at him, and was more upset that he couldn't justify his anger. He wanted, more than anything, to hex Viktor's balls off, beat him to a pulp, yell at him for being a rash, reckless, downright prat.

Remus sidled over to his bed again and looked down at him with another encouraging smile. "You've had a long day, Mr. Diggory. You should stop fighting your body and sleep. Don't fret. There will be time to talk tomorrow."

Cedric sighed, nodding weakly before sinking back into the sheets. When he finally fell asleep, he
dreamed of Harry back on his broom, healthy and happy and smiling, and Viktor next to him, a smile forming at the corners of his mouth. Cedric wanted to punch him in the face, among other things Cedric wanted to do to the older teen.
Cedric stared out into the Great Lake, his coppery blond hair flopping onto his forehead and brushing against his eyebrows as the breeze licked up. It was summer, and the grounds that sprawled around the massive lake looked vibrant and alive, a stark contrast to its more somber mood in the past, when Cedric had been in the middle of the lake with hundreds of spectators watching him. He certainly felt just as nervous then.

He couldn't believe it, but his sixth year had drawn to a close, a boring end to an otherwise spectacularly exciting year. He wondered if he should be grateful at all, that he had won the Triwizard Tournament and survived, when it was riddled with such a large amount of controversy. Although he had earned the respect of the Wizarding World--or at least, that part of it that followed the events that took place in the school--their attention to him felt empty, because he thought that everything had been unfairly handed to him.

He had been a scapegoat, in the end. He couldn't help but feel like a pawn to the games that the bigger players played, and he hated it, hated the idea of being stuck in one place, helpless, while other people decided his fate. He wanted to be able to take control of what happened to his life, but he didn't know how to break away from it all. Was he supposed to just sit idly by while everything that happened to him was decided by other people? Was he just supposed to go with the flow? He was stuck in a bubble of his own uncertainty.

He could have died that year, if Viktor hadn't pushed him away from a Killing Curse, if Harry hadn't told him about the Swedish Short-Snout. All along, they had decided Cedric's destiny, and it didn't even occur to them that Cedric felt that he owed them. They just went by with their lives, unselfish and undemanding. Cedric hated being indebted to them, if only because he thought it made him useless and too dependent on other people.

He couldn't hate Harry personally, not when trouble seemed to be an occupational hazard for the
Boy-Who-Lived. Cedric was beginning to learn to live with that, and it didn't deter him from continuing on being Harry's friend. He couldn't fault the teen, not when Harry lived and took everything in stride, strove for the best and made do with whatever was thrown at him. On the contrary, it made the thought of being around Harry all the more attractive in his eyes.

It was day after Harry had arrived at the Hospital Wing, and he had yet to wake up from his fitful slumber. Madam Pomfrey had been like a prison warden, making sure that he and Moody and Harry were not disturbed by any anxious visitors. But Cedric couldn't bear being in the goddamn place for more than a day with nothing but the ceiling to preoccupy himself with, that he snuck out that morning the minute he was left alone.

Bill had lifted the curse on his foot sometime during the night after some grueling spell deconstruction, and he could walk on it perfectly already, but Madam Pomfrey insisted that he stay the full twenty four hours, and leave when it was time for the End-of-Term feast. Because of his recent hatred towards conforming to any kind of authority, Cedric exercised his wild streak and left early that morning.

Not entirely sure of how to go about his day until the Feast later that night, he went back to his dormitory to pack his things for their impending departure, being extremely careful not to be seen by anyone. He had the luxury of being protected by a dysfunctional, paranoid Mediwitch during his stay in the Hospital Wing, but after that there was no one to serve as buffer to any onslaught of Hufflepuffs still high from their beloved champion's triumph.

Any thought of the Tournament and what had transpired sickened him, and the reverent faces of his admirers would only serve to dampen his mood. He still hated to disappoint in the end, and facing the crowd would only reveal his true colors. Yet he was actually half-tempted to show them what he thought, just so that he could see their joyous faces dissolve into shock as their beloved, flawless, well-mannered Hufflepuff representative lashed out viciously at them.

His thoughts that morning as he shoved his clothes into his trunk had flitted inevitably to Viktor. There was still that pang in his chest, a longing to see the teen. He wanted to tell Viktor exactly how he viewed the man, even though he didn't know what those feelings were exactly. He was undoubtedly frustrated, but of what, he didn't know. He couldn't be angry with Viktor, not when the man had been nothing short of what Cedric expected him to be, but he was still inexplicably annoyed by him.

It was the slow, steady reversal of his opinion of Viktor over the course of the year that left him so desperate to understand what it was churning inside of him. Viktor had been the heavy-eyebrowed face that scowled at everyone, the unapproachable Quidditch celebrity that seemed completely untouchable to the likes of Cedric.

But the Triwizard Tournament had brought them together, and thrown Viktor into an altogether different light. He was thoughtful and selfless and pleasant to talk to. He was surly, sure, but considerate of other people's opinions of him, especially of his and Harry's. Though he and Harry were so identically dense that one had to be very clear and straightforward with them, Cedric didn't mind.

Viktor went out of his way to be a little less awkward with them, took initiative to get to know them better. All the rough edges and the lack of social skills and foolhardiness were overshadowed by the man's quiet eagerness to please, and the determination to do better. It was all so terribly appealing to Cedric that he couldn't help feel more and more warmth and affection for the Bulgarian with each passing day that it made him sick to the stomach.

He had owled the older teen shortly after that, telling him to come by the side of the Great Lake
where they had their first conversation. It had been by sheer impulse that he penned the dreaded note and sent his owl off with it. He regretted it now, as he paced himself into the ground.

Standing under the huge, lush tree canopied the side of the Lake, his heart hammered relentlessly in his chest and his palms sweat, thinking of Viktor. He briefly entertained thoughts of his feelings for the man. He was certainly attracted to him, and all the running around and being unintentionally brave and heroic during the Final Task just made him like Viktor all the more. Maybe he liked him more than as a friend. Maybe he even lo--he shook his head furiously, face heating up. He couldn't even think about it without being reduced to a liquid version of a schoolboy with a crush.

A tap on his shoulder sent him jerking away and almost made him trip over one of the tree's big roots. He jerked around to see that it was Viktor, looking absolutely breathtaking. His words caught in his throat. He stepped back for a moment just so he could bloody breathe, his fingers trailing around the width of the tree.

"How are you?" Viktor smiled. "You look--"

"Don't scare me like that," Cedric interrupted with a huff. "I didn't see you come around. How did you get here so suddenly?" He felt like he might collapse, and he struggled to keep his composure. He leaned against the trunk next to him and turned away, looking out towards the Lake, and he fought the fierce blush that threatened to overtake his face, silently grateful that there was a breeze to cool him down.

"I followed the path," Viktor said with a hint of amusement. "You were too busy to notice me."

Cedric breathed quickly out of his nose, unable to keep eye contact. He was trying to steady his breathing, dispelling any and all of his previous intimate thoughts about the Bulgarian. He shouldn't be behaving so nervously--it was Viktor, for Merlin's sake. His blood shouldn't be causing heavy traffic in his veins.

"I see that you're walking again," Viktor pointed out. "I stopped by the Hospital Wing and you weren't there."

Cedric was too focused on gathering his bearings to say anything back. Viktor stood by, stepping on a root that bulged out of the ground and bending down to pick up a pebble. He tossed it back and forth between his hands. Cedric quickly remembered that it was considered impolite to be silent.

"I hate hospitals," he confessed, gaze flickering briefly towards Viktor's face before dropping down to Viktor's hands. "I couldn't stand being there for another second."

Viktor nodded slowly. "It can get boring just lying there. I understand. And the school Medivitch seems like a scary woman." He gazed out into the Great Lake, where the Durmstrang ship bobbed like a small toy. The wind picked up, a cool summer breeze that wrapped around the both of them. Cedric used this time to stare at him for the first time.

He had spent so many hours just worrying about the other teen that a new wave of relief bloomed inside of him just seeing him standing there. He's here, he saved Harry, he made it back alive.

"How's Harry?" Viktor inquired lightly, side-eyeing Cedric. The blond blinked rapidly and looked away again. He answered this time without missing a beat.

"Good! Good. He's recovering. Madam Pomfrey said he should be able to go down for dinner later, if he wakes up in the afternoon."

"I'm glad," Viktor whispered, looking down at the pebble in his fingers. There was a pregnant pause,
and Cedric spent it trying to figure out what Viktor was thinking. "You should haff seen him, Cedric," Viktor said after a while. "He fought him. The Dark Lord. Even after a Cruciatus. I'm glad he's safe."

There was no question that Viktor was awed by Harry. Cedric bit his lip, something of a pang flaring in his chest. Was he jealous? "Me too," he said quietly. "I'm glad both of you are. I was so worried about you."

"You vere vorried about me?" Viktor asked, looking up. Cedric locked eyes with him. Viktor's dark brown eyes were open and expressive, and Cedric could feel his breath coming short just staring into them. He could get lost in those eyes if he stared for too long.

"I am allowed to, aren't I? I mean, you just went up and left. I thought you were just going to discuss things with Dumbledore. I didn't know where you were, much less if you were in danger," Cedric said bitterly. "I didn't want to hear from Bill Weasley that you went off and played Tug-of-Harry with You-Know-Who."

"You're upset." The Bulgarian stepped closer.

"I'm--" Cedric shut his eyes and breathed for a second. He was forgetting to breathe again. "I'm fine. Not upset. Just worried sick, you prat." His dreams the previous night had been filled with dark figures, running after them within the maze, and then a spell was coming towards him, and Viktor crashed into him and took the hit in his place ...

"I'm sorry," Viktor said in a low, soothing voice, his eyebrows furrowing. He jerked forward, hand going up, as if just stopping himself from reaching out. His hand dropped back to his side. "I did not first came to me. I had no time to think."

Cedric shook his head. "I know. I don't ... you just scared me, alright? You came back to that place even though it was dangerous." He remembered the sickening green light from the Killing Curse. "I should be thankful that you do things like that so recklessly. I wouldn't ..." his voice dialed down to a murmur. "I wouldn't be here if you didn't push me out of the way. Neither would Harry. You saved both of us. But I can't, for the life of me, just accept it. You've got to be more thoughtful next time ..."

Viktor said nothing, just stood by with an inscrutable expression. Cedric could hear every beat of his heart in his chest, could feel the way the hairs on his arms pricked at the feeling growing inside of him. Had he stepped out of bounds? Was he asking too much? He and Viktor have only known each other for less than a year, but it felt like it had been much longer than that.

"Why did you ask me to come out here?" inquired the Bulgarian.

Cedric swallowed nervously. He noticed that Viktor had a hint of a stubble on his chin, and that there was a faint scar running from the bridge of his nose down to his cheek. Cedric's mouth went dry. He wanted, badly, give Viktor a kiss ... but he was too caught up with trying to say the right words that he failed to say them altogether.

"I wanted to thank you." He shoved a hand into his pocket and ran the other one through his hair. "I wanted to thank you." His heart had never pounded so fast in his life. "So thanks."

"Is that all?" Viktor asked, eyes hooding. He shuffled closer. Viktor's close proximity took all of Cedric's focus. Electricity and awareness shot through his body.

"Yeah." Cedric lied, looking up and getting caught up in those eyes once again.
The longing became unbearable, and Cedric pried his eyes away before he did something that he might regret. He turned on his heel, ready to bolt out of there, but just as quickly, Viktor grabbed his wrist and pulled him back, capturing Cedric's lips with his own.

The warmth of Viktor's mouth sent currents through the him, his eyelids fluttering shut. The Bulgarian's hands snaked around his waist as he leaned into the kiss, and Cedric lost himself in Viktor's minty breath and soft lips.

Cedric found his arms winding around the Viktor's neck, coming undone now that Viktor's made a move. It felt incredible. He couldn't get enough. Viktor sucked on his bottom lip slowly, and Cedric kissed back, tilting his head to the side to fit their mouths perfectly. He pressed closer, wanting more than anything to feel more of Viktor's heat. Gods, how he'd wanted this. It was everything he had ever imagined and more.

The warmth pooled quickly around his groin area the second Viktor's tongue entered his mouth, prying his lips open and probing lightly. Cedric gasped, their breaths intermingling. The slick muscle felt so hot against his own tongue that the front of his trousers strained instantly. He didn't know Viktor had such a talented mouth. So many nights thinking of how it must feel built up into incredibly blistering exchange. Viktor wanted him. The gentle firmness of the Bulgarian's body moving against him and the man's insistent lips tasting him over and over drove Cedric wild.

He moaned. Viktor wasn't stopping, sucking and biting and nipping, and Cedric was going lightheaded. He needed air badly, and the exchange was turning desperately intense as they struggled to stay connected.

"Viktor ..." he said against the male's lips. "Let me ..." He couldn't get a word in edge-wise, not when the searing mouth stopped him. Cedric descended further into pleasure, letting Viktor give and giving back as good as he got. Merlin, if he only knew what Viktor was thinking, what he wanted to do with Cedric ... but they didn't need words, not when friction and contact supplied all the communication.

Viktor started palming the front of his trousers with the heel of his hand, fingers sliding down between Cedric's legs and cupping upwards. Cedric thrust his hips up to meet him, hands running down the man's shoulders, smoothing down thick, hairy arms and moving towards the Bulgarian's chest. Cedric's dick was hard, so fucking hard that it hurt, and Viktor wasn't making it easy with all the pressure.

The blond moved his lips to the man's chin, lips grazing lightly over the roughness of Viktor's stubble before surging upwards, kissing the crook between Viktor's jaw and neck. The resulting groan against him sent tremors down Cedric's spine.

"Take these off ..." Viktor nearly growled against his ear, thumbing into the waistband of his trousers. The hot breath across his neck made Cedric salivate with need. Merlin, out here? In the Great Lake? Oh, but his hardness wasn't going anywhere, and it really was painful ...

Cedric complied, unbuttoning his trousers and zipping down his fly. Soon after, his boxers tented out, the freedom feeling absolutely relieving. His cock was throbbing immensely inside the thin fabric, and he felt tiny drops of himself leaking out from the tip. Viktor kissed him once, and then breathed against his cheek as he looked down at Cedric's erection.

"Shit," Viktor murmured, and the unexpected curse felt so hot against his mouth that his cock twitched in response. The Bulgarian kissed him, hard, and Cedric swam in a daze. This really was happening, wasn't it? That's his hand ... Oh God, those are his fingers pressing my prick, aren't they?
Cedric arched back, his shoulders hitting the tree trunk behind him. Viktor's mouth kissed under his chin, lapping and sucking, showing him just how fantastic it made him feel when Cedric did it, and Cedric's skin felt like liquid fire beneath the assault. Viktor thread his fingers around the fly of his boxers and tugged his cock free. The unique sensation of his prick sitting flush on top of Viktor's hand made him force his eyes shut.

His hands sought out Viktor's own warm bulge, eager to reciprocate, while at the same time rolling his hips in time with Viktor's fist. The man's dick strained tightly against his jeans like a rock, and Cedric fumbled with his fly, practically shoving his hand down to unzip it.

The Bulgarian tilted his chin up, kissing him. "Look at me," he commanded. Cedric's lids flew open and Viktor locked eyes with him, daring him to break contact. Cedric was confined to touching and feeling, arrested by those beautiful orbs.

He reached down blindly, his tongue doing a once-over his too dry lips, and then he thrust his hand into the opening of Viktor's trousers. The contact between the pads of his fingers and the skin of Viktor's hardness sent a current through both of them. Cedric felt the male tense around him, huffing quietly. His large arms came around and braced himself against the tree. With struggle, Cedric wrapped his fingers delicately around the thickening shaft and pulled the man's cock out.

The thick flesh was strong and full around his hand, but Viktor didn't allow him a peek. He was once again pillaging Cedric's lips, surging forward and kissing him wantonly. Let me look, please let me look ... Cedric pleaded quietly, his moans turning desperate. Viktor thrust his hips forward into his hand, their bodies crashing together and pinning Cedric's wrist and cock.

How can this be happening? Viktor's lost all control ... Merlin, the man's amazing ... He finally got a chance to glance down, see the man's girth, and he nearly came right there, seeing Viktor's wonderfully chiseled stomach, hairs trailing down from his navel down into a thatch of coarse black hair. Viktor was well-endowed, painfully so, and was fully hard against him. Cedric's knees went weak with need. Merlin, he's perfect ...

Viktor kissed like the world was going to end, that they were going to die, and the only way to save them was by attacking his mouth. It felt so exciting that the Bulgarian could be so horny after all this time, when Cedric had been the one doing all kinds of dirty things at night with the Bulgarian in mind.

"Wanted this ..." Cedric groaned quietly, as Viktor rested his forehead against the tree and began rutting against Cedric like a man possessed. Anyone could run into them, see their pants down, their cocks out ... The thought drove him absolutely mad with arousal, that Viktor was thrusting against him in the middle of the grounds with no regard for who might see.

The friction turned into fireworks between his legs. He could feel his balls tightening into him. They panted in unison, rolling their hips against each other. Viktor wasn't stopping, he wasn't stopping, and Cedric was so close to the edge that all he needed was breeze to topple off ... that when Viktor's lips blindly sought his and crashed them together, Cedric came with a wordless cry.

His spunk burned a path out of him, muscles spasms wracking him from the waist down. He was coating Viktor's shirt and stomach and everything. Merlin it was a mess. But the feeling of elation was nothing compared to seeing the Bulgarian cry out his name in ecstasy, as his own prick pulsed and ejected thick wads of come all over them.

"Cedric!" Viktor growled, and he came fast and hard. Cedric watched, awed by the image of the Bulgarian depositing all over him. Their chests heaved great lungfuls together, the furnace of heat between them making them sweat all over. Gods, but Viktor looked so happy, so satisfied. And his
cock wasn't letting up, completely proud as it stood at attention. Cedric felt incredibly light and buoyed. They stared at each other, both boys taken aback by how much they had let themselves go. And then, Viktor did something incredibly rare.

"Ve're doing that more often," Viktor grinned, giving him a fluttery kiss before pulling back again. Warmth and contentment settled, and Cedric fondly gazed back. Viktor suddenly looked all too adorable to take, and Cedric flushed as he panted quietly. He smiled back, grinning in disbelief. He was still gobsmacked about it. He didn't know that Viktor wanted him, too.

"Do you mean ..." Cedric trailed off. They shared a long, languid kiss after that, just tasting and getting used to each other's mouths. Viktor nodded against his lips. "You want to date me?" Cedric asked quietly, and the Bulgarian kissed him again. He hummed in acquiescence and Cedric beamed.

Cedric became suddenly aware of his surroundings, and the stained state of their fronts. He coughed, and pulled his wand out, tucking himself back into his boxers. "Let's just, er ..." he Scourgified their fronts to clean up, and then watched as Viktor made himself presentable again. Cedric felt awkward. Happy, yes, but still tentative with the other male. He shoved his hands back into his pockets, smiling hesitantly.

"I haff wanted to do that for some time now," Viktor told him with a duck of his head, looking up with mirthful eyes. Cedric smirked.

"I would have kissed you yesterday, you know," Cedric admitted, giving Viktor a peck on the lips as he sidled close. "But damn McGonagall got in the way ... I guess now, I couldn't hold back because yesterday made things feel all the more real, you know? Like, what if things had gone differently? I wouldn't be able to do that to you."

Viktor hummed silently in agreement, hands settling comfortably on Cedric's narrow waist. "Ve're dating now, okay? You can kiss me anytime you want."

"Even at the Feast later, when everyone would be looking?" Cedric teased. The Bulgarian scowled, but flushed all the same, and Cedric chuckled lightly.

"You are a show-off, you are," Viktor said back, and Cedric snorted. Viktor didn't look like he minded it if Cedric was.

"So what do we do?" Cedric took his time staring at the Bulgarian's face, memorizing every plane and line. He was going back to Ottery St. Catchpole for the summer, and he wouldn't be seeing Viktor for quite a long time, especially since he was going back to Durmstrang. Viktor looked guarded for a second, a frown settling in place, and Cedric furrowed his eyebrows inquisitively. Viktor tried to smile back to reassure him.

"I'm not going back to Bulgaria."

"Why?" Cedric's heart leaped. Viktor wasn't going back to Durmstrang? Didn't they have a finishing year there or something?

Viktor shrugged. "Father's decision. I ... my year's done, basically. I only haff to sit through your NEWT exams. Ve're moving to our house in London. Something's come up. But it's nothing to worry about. Just some tension back at the capital. After that, who knows?"

"So you're staying nearby?" Cedric couldn't fight the grin trying to split his face open. Viktor locked eyes with him and jerked his head a few times.

"I wouldn't do this vith you if I wouldn't be able to see you often ... of course I'll be close by," Viktor
assured him, his hands circling around his waist and pulling him close. Cedric kissed him again, sweet and full of tenderness, and this time it was much more intimate, more open. Viktor wanted something long term, and of course Cedric couldn't deny him, not after everything that's happened.

"I still have my seventh year after summer. That's going to be tough," Cedric murmured. Why was he being insecure? Did he think Viktor would leave him just because he was still a student and Viktor was graduating? Maybe he did. Maybe it was too early. But Viktor shook his head, kissing him briefly.

"Ve'll think of something. It vill be easy. You going back to school isn't the vorst thing." Viktor was calm and confident that they could make things work, and really, that was all Cedric was asking. So summer was coming along. They could make unforgettable memories during those months. Viktor could visit his place, and Cedric will introduce him to his parents and cousins. Everything should be smooth sailing.

Cedric didn't expect any of it. He didn't expect the whirlwind sort of confession, the hot, blistering sex against a tree. He almost laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. He was in a relationship with Viktor Krum! He wanted to shout it out to the heavens, let everyone know that he had bagged someone so wonderful and kind and hot. But of course, he was going to have to restrain himself. Everything with them was new. They were in an experimental stage of romance, and he was sure that both of them didn't want to screw it up. He kissed Viktor again, feeling absurdly happy for the first time in months.
Dear Harry,

I know it's only been two weeks since we'd gone back to our own homes and such, but it has gotten pretty boring around here. I've cooped myself up in my room since my dad finds it necessary to accompany me everywhere, so much that I'm beginning to feel like a show dog being paraded around. It's very weird, but ever since they declared me the winner of the Triwizard Tournament, a lot more people know me now, or rather know about me. I've had girls running towards me asking for my autograph and other appallingly sexual requests. I think I'm going to go mad! I mean, who the hell gets marriage proposals through the mail? Sure, I'm pureblood and such, and it has been a long-standing tradition for marriages like this to be arranged between ancient families, but this is absolutely ridiculous! No, I don't want to marry some lovestruck pureblooded witch from Belgium. She doesn't know me at all, and frankly, she seems like a bigot, if she believes the shit that's been printed out in the papers.

I don't want to be presumptuous about this newly-found fame, when I didn't really win the Tournament in the first place, but it gets kind of really annoying. I don't know how you or Viktor handle it. What's worse was that I got into such a loud screaming competition about it with my dad at Florean Fortescue's after I mouthed off rather rudely about my being a complete sham. He told me off for being ungrateful! Can you believe it? Yapped at me like a fucking howler right there in the middle of an ice cream shop, because I won't conform to his standards! The Ministry's gotten to him, I'm telling you. Bigots begat bigots. We won it together, you, Viktor and I, yet no matter how much I make a statement about it, my dad always shoots me down and gives me a right nattering.

I read the articles on the Daily Prophet. I'm really, really sorry about them. I don't know why the Ministry endorses the living bollocks out of my bogus Triwizard triumph, much less why they keep dragging your name through mud and dirt. That shriveled cow Rita Skeeter's been so relentless, it almost seems like she has a personal grudge against you and Granger. It's borderline disconcerting. I know for a fact that you and Granger are just friends. I mean, you are just friends, right? Or did I miss that little spark between you? And that bit about you yelling at Dumbledore in the courtyard before the Leaving Feast--I heard about it before it came out in the article, but I wasn't sure of what to think, not when the rumor mill and the paper couldn't be trusted. I've been so caught up in this stupid whirlwind of a conspiracy that I can't even rely on any piece of information anymore, so I thought writing to you should clear things up. Why is the Ministry so adamant to call you and Dumbledore liars? I wish we had gotten a chance to talk, but we all got caught up in our own little worlds before the Feast, and we all had to leave so quickly.

Tell me about your day-to-day woes. I don't get out of the house anymore because I've been labeled the Ministry's poster boy, and I certainly don't want to reaffirm anyone's beliefs, not when any
random picture could be spun around in favor of the Ministry. It's just that the loneliness is taking its
toll and I'm craving to talk to someone.

I sent over some licorice whips and ice mice. I don't know what sort of sweets you like, actually, so
try these out first. I hope my owl Sylmeria didn't eat them on the way.

Your friend,
Cedric.

P.S. Viktor tells me he'll send you post by the end of the week. Says he's really busy nowadays. But
he's in London, if you didn't hear, for an indeterminate amount of time. He still won't tell me why, or
what's been going on. Can you try asking him for me?

Dear Cedric,

It's good to hear from you! Sorry if my penmanship's a bit rusty--I don't get to use the quill much
back here in my aunt and uncle's place. And I don't get posts too often, too. Come to think of it, this
is the first one I got over the summer. You know how you part with friends at the end of the year and
tell each other to write, but don't get to do it because of reasons? I've sent off some posts, but no
replies have returned so far. I reckon it's because everyone's been busy or something. I would have
sent you and Viktor a few letters, but I didn't want to burden Hedwig with the task of finding you
two. I mean, how do post owls even do it? Do they have magic in them that just activates whenever
they have to find a person?

I hate to sound bitter, but it feels like I'm being ignored, you know? Just like at the start of last year
when everyone thought I put my name in the Goblet of Fire. I get pretty used to it, so it isn't all so
bad. I'm just terrified I'll turn into a bookworm like Hermione! I've gone through all my coursework
the past year in just two weeks. It's insane how much I missed just by being in that bloody
Tournament. Hate to not comfort you at all but I'm glad I'm not the one going through what you're
going through. This whole Boy-Who-Lived business has been a monkey on my back for the past
four years that home's actually turned out to be a solace, if you can believe it. You're doing right, as
far as I know, staying cooped up in your house, but I agree that it does tend to get lonely. Have you
tried doing work around the house? Tending to a garden? Look for a hobby or something. Anything
to get your mind off of things.

I don't know if I should be pissed off or relieved that I don't get the Daily Prophet through post. I
don't know how to get a subscription, and to be frank, I don't really care about those articles
anymore. If you're asking why Rita Skeeter's been publishing those articles about us, well ... it's
because Hermione found out how she had been getting access to private information. She's an
unregistered Animagus. Hermione caught her in a jar the day of the Leaving Feast. It turns out she
changes into this tiny, inconspicuous beetle and flits about getting the dirt on everyone. Hermione
wanted to crush the life out of her in that form but I couldn't let her. We had to force her hand,
threaten her with a lawsuit, but I guess no Wizarding court would try her fairly, now that she's sided
with the Ministry. Hermione and I are just friends, Cedric!

As for that bit with Dumbledore ... that part's true. I could have handled it a lot better, but I just
exploded in anger when he told me that we had to keep Voldemort's resurrection a secret. I just don't
bloody get it, is why. He told me that it would be no use, and would only invite trouble. That the
Minister was already paranoid as it is, with the whispers going around that Dumbledore and I were
telling people Voldemort has returned. I don't understand why the public can't be informed ... at least
not until I talked with Sirius. He told me that public opinion was easily swayed, and that we didn't
have the proper medium to spread the word, not when the most popular newsprint is publishing
stories contrary to our claims. I sort of understood it, then, but it didn't make things any less frustrating, or day to day life any more safe. These people need to be informed that he's out there, biding his time, gathering forces.

I'd tell you about my life back here but I'm afraid Hedwig'll be carrying your weight in parchment after I'm through. But thanks for the sweets. Merlin, I've never had ice mice before. They taste amazingly minty!

Harry

P.S. Tell Viktor that I'll write back. I didn't know he was in London!

To Harry:

This is Viktor, writing from my new home in London. How are you? How is your health? I certainly hope this letter finds you well--I sent it with my own eagle owl Barbarossa, who followed Sylmeria, Cedric's owl. I exchange letters with Cedric on a daily basis, if only because he sends me them without fail. I have a feeling his silver owl can go back and forth between here and Ottery St. Catchpole while wearing a blindfold. He's really chatty--not meaning to offend him or anything. If you can take him off my hands for a few moments, maybe I can have some rest.

We didn't get to talk after the Feast. I had to prepare for NEWTs exams since I'm going to be in the British Isles for quite a while. I think I did alright--I'm still waiting for my results. It had been a very odd week of preparation. There are subjects that one school covers and the other does not, so I merely took exams for those I had complete confidence in, namely Charms, Transfigurations, Potions, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I think six is the bare minimum for me to be able to secure a job, although that in itself will be a challenge, since I would be, for all intents and purposes, an immigrant from a Dark school. Nevertheless, I am fighting. I really want my move here to be successful. I have my tutors Levi and Yana helping me. Yana's waiting to read this letter now, to fix some of my English.

My inquiry towards your health wasn't a mere formality. I really want to know how you are these days. Sometimes, my thoughts go back to that night in the graveyard, and I remember how horrible it had been for you. I don't know if it affected you at all, but still, I worry. If there's anything I can help with, I'm here to listen and talk. I asked you, right before we parted, if you would tell me what happened within the graveyard when Cedric and I disappeared. I'm still waiting for your version of the story, since I don't have anyone else to tell me what happened.

My father wanted me to tell you about the brotherhood I belong to in Durmstrang. Brotherhoods are not unlike Hogwarts houses, except that there are more than four brotherhoods in Durmstrang. My father Valco, Levi and I belong to one of the most prominent, the Vulchanovi, a brotherhood dedicated to justice, service, and equality. I have gotten such praise from my brothers for what I did during the Tournament, if only because they admire what the name Harry Potter stood for. I know that it will make you uncomfortable to know this, but you are very much influential, and the Vulchanovi are on your side. We are not practitioners of what is considered 'Light' Magic, but that doesn't mean that we use Dark Magic for nefarious purposes. By contrast, our opposing brotherhood, the Munteri, are evil by nature. Igor Karkaroff was Munterian, and so was Gellert Grindenwald. Most, if not all of the Dark Lord's recruits from Durmstrang come from their brotherhood.

So why do I inform you of all of this? Until quite recently, the two brotherhoods were bound by a magical truce, put in place fourteen years ago when the Dark Lord was vanquished. There were very particular restraints with regards to the truce, but a few weeks ago, during the final task of the
Triwizard Tournament, I broke the truce by accident. Well, it wasn't really me. Let me explain. One binding condition of the truce was that duels between brotherhoods weren't to occur when one or both parties are hidden in disguise. The truce prevents treachery by anonymity, and thus this clause was put in place. Hence due to the nature of the encounter in the graveyard, the conditions were met. Someone Munterian was within the ranks of Death Eaters that night, and was therefore garbed in a cloak and mask. My mere presence activated the other condition, and the pure chance of it all activated the third, which dictated that the previous two conditions cannot be staged for the purpose of breaking the truce. These occurrences allowed me to invoke a rite of truce severing, wherein the truce would be officially dissolved through an act of hostility. I broke everyone's wands that night, and unknowingly dispelled the magic.

This is a major incident. For years, the two brotherhoods had kept to themselves their anger towards each other, passing on grudges to their children and perpetuating hatred. Now that the truce ceases to exist, duels have started all over Europe. My brothers did not blame me for my actions, but it doesn't make me any less responsible. This is the reason why I'm telling you this. Although you are not Vulchanov, you are still very much connected to us. This presents a danger to your well-being. I have informed your godfather Sirius Black through his friend Remus Lupin about what is happening, hoping that we can figure something out soon.

I want to apologize to you personally for putting you in this position, but this letter will have to do for now. I hope you can find time to see me soon, so we can talk in person. Keep safe, and please stay put for the time being.

My regards,
Viktor.

P.S. This is a very big secret I've been keeping from Cedric. Please don't inform him of anything. Everything that was said in this letter is strictly in confidence.

Dear Viktor,

I'm doing well, thank you, considering my circumstances. I don't think I'll get the chance to go out any time soon, since I'm under strict orders by Dumbledore not to go anywhere, whether it be unsupervised or not. I still have to do errands and stuff for my aunt, but no incidents so far. I appreciate your warning--any information I could get to make surviving each day easier is most welcome. In the end, I don't see any of this as your fault, so you shouldn't be apologizing at all. It was something that was outside any of our control, although it doesn't make me feel any less frustrated about it. It gets pretty tiring, having to watch your neck for any sort of threat, so much so that each year it's becoming mundane. Isn't that sad? That I go through danger on almost a weekly basis that I'm starting to become used to it?

One time, while I was tending to my aunt's hydrangeas, I saw a figure out in the trees, which darted into hiding the second I noticed it. At first, I thought my head was playing tricks on me, but then it happened during all times of the day, after being extra watchful. They didn't seem to be doing anything, the wizards surrounding my house, and they didn't seem to radiate any dark intent, so I guess someone must have put them there as a form of protection. I could always plead self-preservation if I captured one of them, so on one hot summer day I decided to leave a jug of lemonade out in the backyard, then pretended to go inside, only to come back out under my Invisibility Cloak. It worked! I managed to lure out into the open a wizard and a witch, both of which I cornered and questioned.

It turned out that they were placed there by Dumbledore, as sentinels in case You-Know-Who...
decided to attack. One of them was Nymphadora Tonks, who identified herself as Sirius' cousin, and
some other guy named Dedalus Diggle. I couldn't trust any of them yet, not when they were Aurors--
rather conspicuous ones at that--but I told them that they could have refreshments and rough it a little
less if they didn't tell Dumbledore I was aware of them. At least I know now that the old coot is
looking out for me, but I still hate it how he isn't telling me about anything he's doing, or telling the
Wizarding public that Voldemort's at large. Doesn't he have influence? It baffles me how he has all
these titles but can't stretch any of them out to ask for favors from anyone. It's not a noble thing to do,
but it certainly is necessary, if people's lives are at stake.

To be honest, I've never forgotten how it went down in the graveyard. I still have dreams about it.
Nightmares, if you will. I don't suppose the memory would have stuck itself in my head, only to be
replayed over and over, if it hadn't affected me at all. I owe my life to you and Cedric, in the maze
and in the graveyard, and I guess you both deserve to know what happened in there when you two
went back.

The hooded figure that approached us and tried to kill Cedric was Peter Pettigrew. He goes by the
name Wormtail, a name that he lost the right to use since it was my dad that gave it to him. He had
been cradling something in his hand--do you remember? It turned out to be a shell of what
Voldemort was, a lump that was barely managing to survive. They ... used a complicated ritual. I
didn't understand what was happening back then, but they drew blood from me, and used a bone
from Voldemort's father, and Wormtail's severed hand. And then just like that, he's returned, and he
removed my restraints to finish me off in a duel. I guess that didn't work out so well for him, not
when Priori Incantatem happened and you arrived. He and I, Dumbledore tells me, have twin wands
which don't work against each other. That's why the reverse spell phenomenon worked.

But that's not all I dream about. I see him, Viktor, in my dreams, and it's so clear and vivid it's almost
as if everything's happening somewhere out there for real. He's on the move, he talks with people--
the words are obscure but I'm certain he's planning something. Something bad. It just makes me want
to jump out and go out there, find him and end him for good. I've been wary of the news since, the
Muggle news, for anything relating to death and destruction. I don't understand why I still have to do
things the regular way when someone somewhere is out to get me. I hate to admit it, but the thought
of being captured and tortured to death scares me. I don't want to end up like the people in my
dreams. I don't want to die. To be honest, these letters from you and Cedric are a most welcome
reprieve. I don't know what's happening outside, what everyone is planning. I don't like the idea of
everyone doing something while I'm stuck in this place trying to play normal. I hope this letter hasn't
been too long. I believe I've gushed too much about how simultaneously boring and hopeless and
terrifying my life is.

Harry

P.S. I won't tell him, not because I'm honoring your secret, but because you should tell him yourself.
Why should I be entitled to confidence when he's not? No one will be more loyal and supportive
than Cedric.

Chapter End Notes

This was edited to fix a mistake that a gracious commenter Menacingk pointed out.
Harry couldn't use magic, indeed, so I changed that part about him Stunning Dedalus
and Tonks.
Recruited

Chapter Summary

Viktor meets Remus in London to hear about a prospective job offer. Happens a few weeks before the Dudley Dementor attack.

Chapter Notes

One hundred kudos! Thank you to all the readers and subscribers. I'm terribly sorry for the discontinuities that occur because of my silly brain. I do write these things after midnight, so my brain tends to be scrambled. So thanks again!

The rain fell down, not as a pouring torrent but as tiny smatterings that nearly evaporated before they hit the ground. The humid air smelled of sun-baked asphalt and Muggle automobile exhaust. Viktor peeked out from under his umbrella, grimacing. The sun should be coming down from its peak, but the uncharacteristic early afternoon shower made it slightly overcast. He sighed, trudging onward.

He should curse his luck--he had been the one to arrange the meeting through letter, yet had been unsure what day to schedule it. He had so much free time that it hardly mattered, but it did pave a way for him to elude his tutors. He knew that Yana had part-time work in Sofia, and that Levi often attended Vulchanovi alum meetings. All it took was a little persuasion, and easily enough his father had scheduled a brotherhood gathering on the same day as one of Yana's work days.

Viktor took this opportunity to suit up into his best Muggle clothes and sneak out unassumingly through London. No Munterian wizard could possibly be lurking at the next turn, waiting to entrap him into a duel. Of course, Viktor still remained careful. He kept himself concealed and buried himself in his Muggle coat and hat. He could very well pass for a random passerby. He almost smirked to himself, but stopped, knowing that he would look like some sort of nefarious criminal. Instead, he walked with purpose, dodging and weaving through countless Muggles going about their day-to-day lives.

He was going to get beaten up later for it, bloodied and bruised until his pleas to stop would be taken as an apology. Levi would see to it. Viktor didn't look forward to it.

Over the course of the week, he had found himself unable to secure a job around the Wizarding sector of London. Viktor had lost count with how many interviews he had blundered through. He had been applying for any job related to magic, whether it be clerical, hard labor, retail--he had even tried applying for a job as a model in one of those Quidditch magazines. But no matter how 'desirable' his body was, as put by the casting agent, they said that he didn't exude the right 'it' factor. Viktor didn't understand, impaired he was on the communication side. He knew English well enough, but not the conversational slang every Englishman seemed to fall into naturally.

Of course, going around under a slightly altered face and the name Torvik Murk certainly didn't help matters. Without his fame to back up his interviews, he might as well be just another foreign wizard trying to make something out of himself in a new country.
He couldn't exactly remember how he came about mentioning it to Remus Lupin in one of his letters to the man. The two wizards had struck an odd sort of friendship during their correspondence regarding Harry Potter and his godfather.

Remus seemed to trust him enough and had no qualms revealing to him his being a Dark creature, and Viktor, for the life of him, couldn't figure out why. But the man turned out to be an unexpected source of comfort during the trying times, and Viktor found their conversations veering more towards him trying to seek advice than updating them on movements by the Munteri brotherhood. Remus knew how hard it was to look for a job when one had ties to the Dark, even though they were ties one didn't want, and Viktor felt somewhat reassured by his words.

The last letter from Remus contained a proposition. There was work that Remus thought Viktor fit perfectly, but they had to meet in person for Remus to assess him. It would be a job interview of sorts, and Viktor didn't know how he would conduct himself in front of the man.

The last the Bulgarian had seen him, the bedraggled, graying wizard had been looming over Harry like a hawk in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts when Viktor came to visit the two Hogwarts champions. He looked the type of person who paid absolutely no attention to his appearance, though Viktor could remember seeing the strength in his broad shoulders and the clarity in his eyes.

It would be the first time in a month that they would meet. Viktor certainly didn't feel nervous, although he was a bit apprehensive. Remus had mentioned the last time they had seen each other that they should set aside time to chat. Viktor didn't know what he and the man could possibly talk about, though he had to admit that he was intrigued.

He wondered, falling into a daydream, if Cedric would be put off that he chose to meet Remus instead of going to Ottery St. Catchpole to share some quality time together. He really missed the handsome teen, even though they had been in correspondence every single day. He was consumed with jealousy when Cedric had mentioned that he was being flocked by women all around the Wizarding district, not because he yearned for the same kind of fame, but because he wanted, badly, to be the one flocking towards the blond and showering him with affection.

It was a rather cheesy thought, he surmised, one that he didn't expect to occur to him, but he allowed himself the silly thoughts, so that when they finally reunited, his passion would still flare with the same intensity as it did at the Great lake.

He banished any insistent, dirty thoughts about the tall Hufflepuff’s body, opting instead to focus on the task at hand. He was supposed to meet Remus at some shop in Islington, located just at the outer rim of the borough. It was a mix between a bookstore and a café called Same Old Grimmauld, at Grimmauld Place. Viktor supposed it was a secure enough place to conduct whatever business they had with each other--Islington was a relatively Muggle district, perfectly unassuming and out of the way.

He reached the shop without any incident, blinking curiously at the café's facade. It had a well-worn exterior, as if the shop had stood there for years and eroded while the rest of the street got developed. He wondered briefly, if Remus was already there, and decided that the only way to find out was to enter the establishment.

The tiny bell by the door chimed in welcome, and he ducked inside, staring awkwardly by the doorstep for a moment. The interior was larger than it appeared to be outside. It was just as ancient-looking, though the warmth and the woody smell of old parchment was certainly welcoming. There were the scent of candles and caffeine in the air as well, which all in all added to the homey ambiance.
There were a few patrons inside enjoying the small library of tomes and books and syllabaries, drinking tea with some companions, some loud in conversation and some quiet while reading. He saw one old woman levitate a few sugar cubes into her teacup, and immediately understood. It was a Wizarding place. His head craned around as he heard his name being called, and turned to see Remus Lupin sitting at the far end of the café, waving him over with a smile.

Viktor strode over, uncertain as to how he should address the man. His permanent scowling expression turned into somewhat of a smile, and Remus looked almost fatherly in his amusement, like he knew the teen's temperament.

"Mister Lupin." The Bulgarian jerked forward to offer his hand, but before Remus could take it, a familiar black dog bounded from the shadows and gave Viktor's fingers a sloppy lick. Viktor's smile faded and turned into a disgusted grimace, and the older man chuckled.

"Merlin's balls, I'm sorry. The pup rarely has any time outside and is enjoying his little freedom," Remus said, shaking his head as the dog trotted back to its master and rested its head on Remus' lap. Viktor narrowed his eyes at it with distaste.

"Have a seat, Viktor, and don't mind Padfoot." Viktor did as he was told and gingerly sat down after shrugging his coat and draping it over the chair's backrest. He watched for a moment as Remus prepared some tea for him, shrugging as he was asked if he preferred sugar, lemon or milk in his tea.

"I hope you didn't have trouble finding the place." Remus started, his hands deftly moving about as he poured some hot tea into a teacup. Viktor shook his head in answer.

"London is complicated. I had to use some magic to be able to make it on time."

"Right. And how fares life in London? I understand that it's pretty different from Sofia?"

Viktor gave another noncommittal shrug, pulling the sleeves of his shirt back and leaning forwards. "You get used to it. The people are not so different. Speaking is very ... difficult, when your partner in conversation uses slang often."

Remus nodded. "I'll try not to use them, then. I've gotten used to fouler words since a certain wizard came back into our lives."

The dog beside them gave a sort of annoyed yip. Viktor glanced sharply at it, before inquiring, with a suspicious eye trained on the pup, "How is Mister Black? I understand that he's faring rather well considering. Harry talked about him often. We exchange letters on a daily basis."

Remus gave an inquisitive eyebrow. "Do you, now? Well, you can assure Harry that Sirius is fine. In fact, he's here right now, sitting among us."

Viktor's eyes widened, and then looked around the place. The same collection of faces surrounded them. "I'm sorry? Is he in disguise?"

"Oh, yes. He's the dog."

Viktor's face turned incredulously at the mutt beside him, which seemed to be donning a very human-like, teethy grin. It gave a low bark in answer, and Viktor eyed it with a little more apprehension.

"He's ... Mister Black." He said it with a tone of disbelief. "I suppose he's an Animagus, then?"

Remus' hand descended onto the dog's dark head, smoothing the hairs there back down. "Yes he is,
though it is a well-kept secret. Not even the Ministry knows, which makes it illegal."

"Very illegal." Viktor agreed. Back in Sofia, Unregistered Animagi were sentenced heavily. "Though I suppose since he's on the run, it doesn't quite matter."

The older man beamed at him, and Viktor was taken aback by the openness of it. He was making an unguarded statement, though it seemed to have pleased the other wizard greatly.

"Padfoot is very happy to hear that. I should tell you that it was his decision that I tell you, because I got a very enthusiastic nattering about Viktor Krum being very much trustworthy." He sighed, looking at the dog with affection. A low growl came from somewhere within its ebony muzzle, and Remus looked unflappable as he gave its ear a tug.

"He told me he had a 'gut' feeling, and that everyone should always trust his gut feelings. Though in my opinion, I think he likes the idea of his godson being friends with a very famous international Seeker." Remus eyed him with glee. "You are just friends, aren't you? I seem to recall a very worried Bulgarian visiting the Hospital Wing at the end of the school year, looking careworn at the sight of one bedridden fourteen year-old boy."

Viktor's face colored and he fidgeted in his seat. He wasn't used to being grilled. Was he honestly being interrogated right now about his intentions with Harry? Did he come off as interested in the boy? "I don't ... no, that wasn't my intention. I haff ... someone."

Remus looked apologetic. "I seemed to have misjudged you. I'm sorry. It's not everyday that I see someone so interested in Harry in a way that isn't ... fanatic. Surely you understand. Although we're not related, Harry's becoming more and more of a son to me. Imagine my sentiments and increase them tenfold, for this mutt over here beside me."

They both ignored the indignant yaps from the dog. Viktor nodded. Harry needed some parental figures. One question struck him as something that begged to be asked, however, and it left his mouth before he could even stop himself.

"Then why isn't Harry living with you two?"

Remus' smile faltered, and he looked thoughtful for a moment, almost rueful, that Viktor wanted to take back what he had said.

"I'm sure you understand that we're in very trying times right now. Harry needs protection more than anything. He Who Must Not be Named is back, and could very well strike without notice. We are following orders from Dumbledore. He says that Harry's blood ties with the Dursleys keeps him safe from harm, because of very old magics that his mother had triggered upon her death. Besides, winning a custody battle against a convict and a werewolf is almost too easy."

Viktor stared at his cup. "I see," he replied, and drank from it, using the scalding liquid as punishment for his tactless tongue.

"Speaking of Dumbledore ..." Remus said slowly, in a not so smooth attempt to jump away from the topic, "it's one of the reasons why you're here."

Viktor bit his lips. "Pardon?" Viktor couldn't imagine how the old wizard factored into their meeting. He was sure that he was here, looking for a job and he couldn't be related into the conversation unless--

"Dumbledore wants to hire you," Remus clarified, shuffling in his seat to signal the change in discourse. "You seemed to have earned his trust after the demonstration of your loyalties during the
Viktor stayed silent, gaze begging for an explanation. Remus continued, turning the handle of his teacup.

"Hogwarts is in need of a gamekeeper for the school year. Dumbledore has sent Hagrid on a very important task for the coming months, and Hogwarts would be understaffed in that area. Added to that, Madam Hooch is with child, and I'm pretty certain she wouldn't be able to ride a broom when fall arrives. Hogwarts would need a Flying instructor to teach and coach House Cup Quidditch games."

It dawned on Viktor what it all meant. He was to be hired as a Hogwarts staff. He sat back and contemplated this for a bit, crossing his arms over his chest and looking pensive. There was no job to be had anywhere in London for the time being, and opportunities like this were hard to come by. What's more, the thought of being back in the old castle seemed comforting, since he had familiarized himself with the place already. It sounded to him like an inviting prospect, except he wasn't certain if he was up for the task.

"Why me? I don't think my ... credentials could make me a suitable candidate for the position," Viktor admitted. He was thinking more about his Dark roots, coming from a family and school that openly practiced the Dark Arts, though he didn't voice the concern.

Remus smiled. "Your modesty might just be your best asset, Mister Krum. On the contrary, your credentials fit the bill perfectly. You have six NEWTs, certainly enough to make you eligible. You're a Triwizard champion, so we have no doubt as to your abilities with caring for the grounds, and your line of work should make you a shoe-in for the Flying Instructor position, seeing as you play in an international Quidditch team. rather brilliantly, if I may add."

"Are there any other candidates for the position?" Viktor inquired with a hint of trepidation.

"Hmm, no, I don't seem to recall Dumbledore mentioning anyone else but you." Remus leaned forward and looked at him intently. "Though, if you were to ask me the real reason, I won't hesitate to tell you. Go ahead. Ask."

Viktor asked without pause. "Why else?"

Remus regarded him for a moment, and then spoke again, more seriously this time. "He wants an extra set of eyes in the school that he could trust. He expects many changes to happen within the school after the whole situation last year, and he would be terribly busy these coming months as well. Professor McGonagall would have a lot on her plate as deputy headmistress, and he isn't certain if she would be able to assure that Harry's life would be pleasant, considering the dark times."

Viktor frowned. "I appreciate the honesty, but surely you could do with someone better. I'm no capable guard to Harry, if that's what this job entails ..."

Remus shook his head. "It would be an undertaking behind the scenes ... but really, the school does need those empty positions filled." The man pulled a letter from the pocket of his coat and slipped it towards Viktor, whose eyes flickered briefly towards it before leveling the man with a questioning gaze. He opened it gingerly with his fingers, and read the words written on it.

"I've already been appointed?" Viktor said in shock, eyes looking up towards the other wizard. He then read the rest of the letter, and then felt even more surprised. It read, at the end, 'Your exemplary demonstration of dedication and loyalty to Harry Potter has also earned you a place in the Order of the Phoenix.' Viktor glanced up to Remus in question, wondering just what the Order of the Phoenix
was and what the statement meant. The wizard looked vaguely uncomfortable for a second, looking around suspiciously, before leaning ever closer and speaking in a low whisper.

"The Dark Lord is at large again," Remus murmured. "The Order of the Phoenix is a society that Dumbledore created during the dawn of the First Wizarding War to combat the burgeoning threat to the Wizarding World. You would be a huge asset to the Order, and a capable delegate to this brotherhood of yours, the Vulchanovi. Dumbledore has sent a letter to your father, and they are discussing the matter right now in a private meeting with your brotherhood's council."

"I ... didn't know that," Viktor deadpanned as he sat back, stumped. So it all had been planned, or so he was left to conclude. Here he thought he was deceiving his father and his tutors, when in truth, it was he that fell into their schemes. It was brilliant, but it was also rather frustrating to have things dictated for him. He didn't know what to think, except that everything seemed to be quite overwhelming all of a sudden.

Remus, in the meantime, enjoyed his tea. Viktor's reverie dissipated when the huge black dog reared its head from under the table to shoot him a set of large puppy dog eyes. Viktor didn't know what to say. It was as if Sirius was begging him to take the job with his pitiful dog whine.

"So it's all set then?" Viktor asked resignedly. "I don't get a say in this?"

Remus frowned in understanding. "Surely you don't mean to reject the offer? I get how shady it all seems, but measures need to be done. It's not so bad, if you think about it. It should be a win-win situation for everyone.

"I reckon Dumbledore sent me because I was in the same situation two years ago. He seemed all too knowing, with that damned twinkle in his eyes, that Sirius would return, and I would be needed at Hogwarts. I don't believe in divination, but Dumbledore does seem to have a knack for these things. It made me frustrated as a drowned Kneazle as well, when I found out that I was to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts in Harry's third year. It all seemed to turn out well in the end, although there is much to be desired about my tenure. I could have done without all the meddling the old wizard does, it's bloody well bothersome."

Viktor quirked his lips and nodded. It all seemed terribly convenient, as if everything had been planned since his arrival at Hogwarts, but it was also rather relieving. He wouldn't have to look for a job now that he had secured one in Hogwarts, and he would be doing something that his father would at least approve of. He didn't think his father would appreciate it if he posed semi-nude on the cover of a rather questionable Quidditch magazine, so it all seemed well and good.

Plus, if he was going to return to Hogwarts, that meant that he would be there for Cedric's final year. He smiled further, and coughed in his hand to hide it. Remus waited, looking expectantly at him.

"I accept the job," Viktor answered, and coughed in his hand to hide it. Remus waited, looking expectantly at him.

"I accept the job," Viktor answered, and the other wizard beamed, before offering his hand. Viktor shook it resolutely, feeling the tension ebb away with the firm handshake ... but he felt the odd friction of something in their touch, and he realized that Remus left something in the palm of his hand. It was a piece of paper, and Viktor unfurled it without question.

The words read, 'The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.'

"It's nearby," Viktor blinked at the piece of parchment for a few moments, before it floated upwards and turned into cinders. Viktor stared at the old wizard, who nodded in his direction. "I thought ve met here just because it vos out of the vay from Diagon Alley and the Wizarding district."
Remus downed the rest of his tea, looking just about ready to end their meeting and leave. "It was a matter of convenience, yes, but only so that Sirius didn't have to go so far from his home. Would you care for a visit? I'm sure you'll see some familiar faces inside."
Cedric hears about Harry's impending hearing. Happens before and on the day of Harry's trial.

Life in Ottery St. Catchpole was slow and uneventful, trickling like sand in an hourglass. But Cedric didn't give in to the temptation to Floo to the Leaky Cauldron or to explore some uncharted part of London's Wizarding district. There were days when he spent the whole time locked in his room, deep in thought. He was an advocate of introspection, but the self-imposed exile was beginning to turn into something undesirable.

His absence was immediately noticed by the public, and articles had turned into tabloids explaining the many possible reasons why Cedric was in recluse. Cedric particularly disliked one column asserting that he was in some country in Asia, trying to spread his influence by doing public appearances and working as an enchanter. And of course, having a time of it enjoying the local delicacies (of the female persuasion).

Tales wove themselves in and out of the public's heads so intricately that even his fanmail had started to sound worried ... Not that Cedric read them--most of the mail hated being ignored and turned into talking pieces of parchment when he swept them into a pile by his windowsill.

The only posts he ever really read at length were Harry's letters detailing his different levels of stagnation, which Cedric completely sympathized with, and Viktor's not-so-innocent letters regarding the various activities he would do with Cedric the minute they seized some time alone. He never thought it possible, but he found that wanking to his fantasies and Viktor's uncharacteristic words of desire were turning into a favorite pastime.

Whenever one of Viktor's letters came, Cedric would snatch it from the Bulgarian's beast of an owl, shoo the bird away and then throw locking and silencing spells at his door. He would then plop down onto his soft sheets and start reading, fingers trailing almost affectionately over the parchment, eyes dancing expectantly over carefully written words of lust.

It was nearly an addiction to Cedric. How can such a regal and dignified-looking man write such vulgar, inappropriate words? Cedric's cock had never been so hard as he read about how Viktor often had a stiffy in the shower, how wet his body was as his rough hands glided over the soft skin, how achingly full his bollocks were at the thought of Cedric naked. Before long, Cedric would find his hand down his trousers, gripping at his erection and tugging furiously. His face would be flushed with embarrassment and arousal, his muscles taut with need for release.

Each day spent without Viktor was slowly turning into torture. They were going to have to arrange some sort of rendezvous during the next few weeks or Cedric would go insane. But he was constantly pressured by the continuous flow of articles expecting him to make remarks about every sordid little detail in the Ministry's inner machinations.
How had he suddenly turned into someone whose opinion was worth heeding? He hardly gave a 
Skrewt's ass what the Ministry was up to these days--there were more pressing matters that they 
should be focusing on, like the return of You-Know-Who.

There was a window of opportunity for Cedric to ask his father one time during dinner, but the old 
man had gone ballistic at the mention of the Dark wizard. Ever the Hufflepuff, he was loyal to a 
fault, and didn't besmirch the Minister's stand on You-Know-Who's return, which was to say, 
absolute denial.

He hardly spoke with his father, not when their conversations quickly turned to the topic of his 
newly found celebrity status, and Cedric's voice went a few decibels above conventional volume. He 
could tell by the little vein that popped often in his dad's forehead that he was livid, but didn't want to 
aggravate his one and only celebrity son. Instead, they steered clear of each other, at least until it was 
plastered all over the news that Harry Potter was to stand trial.

"What's all this, then?" Cedric demanded as he stormed into their kitchen, clad in a henley and 
Muggle jeans. Amos was enjoying a cuppa and savoring his breakfast, leaning back from the dining 
table, legs crossed. He was reading the paper with a critical eye, his nose upturned, making his 
glasses reflect the light from the sun outside. When he turned to Cedric, it was with an imperious 
stare, triggered partly by the boy's choice of clothes, but mostly by his disrespectful tone. "Dementor 
attack, father? Surely you know the details to this madness?"

Amos Diggory hummed in thought, turning back to the paper in his hands. "Oh, yes. That Potter boy 
is at it again, seeking more attention now that the spotlight's moved onto newer, less demented young 
wizard icons." The glint in his eye only frustrated Cedric further, and his annoyance had turned so 
severe that he went past raging and turned very cold.

"Tell me what you know," Cedric muttered low in his throat, strands of hair falling over his eyes. 
The paper had long been crumpled in his curled fists. Amos eyed his seething son with disdain.

"The poor boy's gone off his rocker you see--our Department headed out to the site of the incident, 
but there had been no sightings whatsoever. Dementors, honestly," Amos scoffed. "Before you 
know it, he'll be going off about hill giants and vampires."

Cedric narrowed his eyes. Dementors? Was Harry attacked by one? "You do realize, father, that 
You-Know-Who employed the use of Dementors during his first reign of terror all those years ago?" 
He wasn't blind or ignorant to the Wizarding war all those years ago when he was an infant, not 
when he was supposed to be in his final year at Hogwarts the coming fall.

Amos rolled his eyes dismissively. "So the boy's been paying attention in school--anyone with 
Hogwarts: A History could fabricate such a story. Clever boy, that Potter--at least his lies add up."

"They are not lies," Cedric said through his teeth, but he knew that there was no reasoning with his 
father, not when he was fully entrenched in the Ministry's dark pool of corruption. He stood rigidly 
by the doorway, eyes frigid with something harder than fury.

Amos turned away from him and resumed eating his breakfast of eggs, toast and porridge. "There's 
not much we can do about it now--the Boy-Who-Lived is done for. Not a single wizard believes the 
drivell he spouts, even if his words are compounded by Dumbledore's. You know that old coot's been 
sounding very suspicious lately--what little he had to say about the matter was entirely fishy in my 
opinion. Seems like he's being dodgy about the things Potter says, as if he doesn't believe them 
himself. Couldn't blame him of course. The stories that boy comes up with is turning more and more 
fantastical by the day!"
"When is it? I want to be there when the trial takes place," Cedric insisted, voice turning assertive. Amos suddenly looked bewildered, forgetting his breakfast and glaring through his thick lenses.

"You're to absolutely stay in this house until this whole trial business blows over!" The old wizard looked positively nettled, mustache quivering. "Goodness me, that boy's got you wrapped around his finger, hasn't he? You're blinded by his--his fame and his penchant for rebellious antics. And here I thought a friendship between you two would bring about something worth recalling in the future. Why, he's been nothing but a thorn in your success, my boy!"

"Don't make me do something you'll regret," Cedric warned, his eyebrows coming together into a harsh expression. The look turned out to be more menacing than planned. Gone was the boy who looked like an angel, to be replaced a rougher, more mature Cedric. "I'm the one with all the fame now, father, not you. Imagine what the Ministry will do the second I declare You-Know-Who's on the rise--I'll say it out loud in public, in the middle of a crowd of reporters. You'll be ruined, you will. The very administration you're fighting protect will turn against you."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Don't think for a second that I'm unaware of what's going on at the Ministry. I have my sources." He didn't, really. He was bluffing, and making it sound convincing by insinuating that he had been in contact with a lot of people. His father knew that owls had been flying back and forth on a daily basis, and that Cedric had spent more time writing posts than he had in years. It felt underhanded, trying to manipulate his father like such, but Cedric was beginning to tire of his father's impudence.

Amos looked appalled with his son, sputtering indignantly. "And I'm supposed to allow you to openly support the Boy-Who-Lived during this god forsaken trial? Your spotless reputation would be tarnished! We've worked so hard to put you where you are now, in the good opinion of the Wizarding world! I would sooner cry wolf myself, start bellowing like a lunatic in the middle of the Ministry Atrium saying 'You-Know-Who's alive!'"

Cedric sucked in a calming breath, ignoring the little voice in his head that urged him to brandish his wand and sock his father with a pot lid. "If it worries you so greatly, I won't be making an appearance in this trial--I'll only be there before and after. I'll be loitering in the Ministry, in disguise, and none would be the wiser. Allow me that, and I won't go off to the nearest Wizarding establishment playing soothsayer."

Amos looked like a turnip about to explode. "Why you--you ungrateful child! Away with you! I have no more words to spare you and your insolence. Why, the nerve of you--your mother shall hear about this, I'll have you know--let's see what she'll think of you now ..."

Cedric left the kitchen, the sounds of his father's infuriated diatribe dissipating as he went further down the hall. His father had yielded for now, though Cedric idly wondered how likely it was that he would be able to get away with such impertinence in the future. Yet all he could think about then was Harry and this so-called trial.

The story was egregious, if he was going to be honest--hardly deserving of the word 'trial', where one can infer that there would be fair trying and deliberating. More likely it would be some form of sentencing, though Cedric would still be aghast if it came down to that. How low can the Minister get, pushing Harry around like that? It made him so angry that his magic came out in spurts from his fingers, like tiny sparks of electricity.

Things started clicking into place the second he got back to his room. For days now, Cedric had been receiving curious posts from Harry detailing a different sort of summer. He wasn't confined anymore to the four walls of his room at his aunt and uncle's house, seeing as the letters were mentioning Sirius Black, his best friends Weasley and Granger, and even some snippets of the twins, Fred and
George, with whom Cedric had a capricious relationship.

Somehow, the young Gryffindor had gotten out of the house, and he knew it was due to the predicament that was spelled so negatively in the papers. Was Harry attacked? He certainly didn't mention it in any of his letters, though Cedric could pinpoint where it was that Harry's tone had changed. He supposed that Harry didn't want him to worry, but all the same Cedric felt a little bit bitter, knowing that the teen had kept something as significant as a threat to his life a secret from him.

He didn't think it would help matters now if he asked Harry, not when the trial was sure to be sometime during the week. For all he knew, the trial would be the day after, and he wouldn't be able to make it then, not when he lacked knowledge of the events to take place.

If he were to connect the dots, Harry would have used the Patronus Charm in light of the Dementor attack, prompting the Improper Use of Magic Office to take action. He had a vague sort of idea as to who to contact to get more information, though success would be a far cry. He was going to have to play subtle, yet refrain from being entirely manipulative.

He didn't know Susan Bones very well, but they did know each other from various House activities. If anything, she would have a hint as to what had been going on in the Ministry, and maybe with the Wizengamot, since her aunt had a seat in it as the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He set to work, sliding into his desk and thinking of what to say as he penned a casual note of introduction. He was going to have to butter Susan up a bit, try and sound like he was in the mood for a chat. Then he could ask with a little less guilt about the time of the trial, and the place.

Come early Thursday morning, Cedric roused from sleep, purposefully shoving away his warm inviting sheets and pushing off his bed. In no time at all, he was washed, combed, shaved and dressed, albeit with some lethargy hanging off his shoulders like a monkey.

He had decided to don a set of fine burgundy robes for the occasion--one that he had procured roughly a year ago from Twilfitt and Tatting's when he had come of age. It was one set of a dozen or so other robes that he had bought with money solely from his trust vault, an investment that his father approved of. Standing in front of a full-body mirror, he inspected himself for a moment.

The robes fit perfectly, accentuating broad shoulders and a long torso that tapered into a narrow waist. But his face looked too sallow and bleary to be looking at itself in the mirror at that hour, and his hair didn't look as lustrous. With a short sigh, he left his reflection and headed downstairs.

While his parents were still slumbering, Cedric sneaked into the kitchen to catch some last minute grub of whole grain cereal and milk, before dashing off to the main parlor where the huge, stone mantelpiece contained the fireplace. It was clean and well-maintained by their house elf, so Cedric didn't have to worry about soiling his robes. With a gutsy breath, he took a handful of Floo powder from the pedestal by the hearth and climbed into the fireplace with little difficulty.

"Ministry of Magic!" he said with a clear, loud voice, before throwing down the Floo powder towards his feet. In an instant, sparking green flames engulfed him, and his vision went blisteringly bright for a moment. Soon after, the fires diminished, and Cedric was standing inside a much nicer onyx fireplace, his senses suddenly assaulted by sights and sounds.

Outside of the hearth, a bustling crowd of Ministry workers in their work robes and hats and various other magical garments filed in one direction, walking at a steady pace. Cedric stepped out, stumbling slightly, and was soon lost in a sea of people. He glanced back towards the lines of Floor networks flaring to life every now and then with a new visitor or worker behind its emerald flames.
He didn't quite know how he was going to go back to his house after this.

He had been to the Ministry a lot of times before, a privilege he owed to his father's job in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. For that reason, he brought his honorary visitor's badge, renewed by his father in the hopes that he would visit one of these days and bring excitement to the Ministry. Naturally, Cedric had adamantly refused showing his face in the Ministry halls, which caused disappointment in his father. Somewhere inside of him was the childish need to please him, but that had long been overpowered by Cedric's shattered idealistic view of his old man.

He remembered some of his childhood days spent playing in his father's office, watching the little paper plane notes with glee as they glided to and from his father's office door, lining up for him to snatch from the air and to give to his father. He couldn't recall when exactly it had all turned for the worse. Cedric had found himself drifting further and further away from him as of late, their relationship having gone from loving and intimate to strained and distant. It left a bitter taste in Cedric's mouth, still.

Moving forward, the Atrium had not changed at all, and he was still awed by the massive open space. It was not unlike a large amphitheatre devoid of seats, with thick, heavily embroidered banners containing the large 'M' seal draping from the dome-like walls, and white light bursting from the ceiling like sunlit clouds.

Shaking his head to rid himself of his distracted state, he trudged along, being mindful not to bump into anyone and cause a commotion—Ministry workers tended to be short-tempered and finicky in the mornings, and so Cedric remained silent and alert. He didn't even glance at the Fountain of Magical Brethren, resplendent it was in gold. He was intent on getting some information as soon as possible, and the quickest way to do that was to ask the receptionists down by the lobby.

He made his approach, and sidled over to the main desk where a prim-looking witch sat. Cedric held himself regally yet spoke in a deliberately languid voice.

"My dear, I was hoping you could assist me with something," he said, silver eyes boring into the woman's expression. Her stony facade faltered in the presence of a young, desirable man who looked positively dashing in red robes, practically leaking magic from his fingertips. She looked a little less professional and a bit more uncertain and bashful.

"How may I help you, sir?" her eyes darted over to the small badge on his chest, and seeing his name made her eyes open wide. She made a move to speak, but Cedric held a hand up, shaking his head in amusement. His sweet smile made the woman shuffle in her seat.

"No need to cause a commotion, miss. I'm here on official business," he answered. "I'm here to see the Minister. We've a meeting that is long overdue." Susan had tipped him off saying that Cornelius Fudge would be presiding over Harry Potter's trial. She had overheard it from a fire call at dinner, when Amelia Bones contacted her mother to ask for advice. It was better for him to be indirect, use the pretense that he had gone to the Ministry to talk business instead of finding Harry.

The brunette looked startled for a moment. "Oh! But--the Minister has a full schedule right now ... I would know since I answer directly to his assistant."

Cedric raised an eyebrow, draping his hands casually over the counter and giving off the image of foregoing proper conduct. His hair fell to his eyes, and he smiled. He could follow her gaze drifting down his neck and collarbone. "I won't be too long, I promise. Just a few minutes of his walking time. The Ministry is a large place to get from point to point. Come now, Beatrice," he appealed with a gravel-on-silk voice, eyes flitting slowly from her nametag back up to her flustered face.
Beatrice looked badly distraught, caught between her work and the prospect of being entertained by a young, powerful wizard. Cedric nearly smirked—he half-wanted to fan Beatrice's face for her. He hardly ever turned on the charm, only in dire situations where his spotless reputation as a gentleman wouldn't be tarnished considerably. Beatrice fumbled for her datebook, blinking rapidly to rid herself of the sensual spell that Cedric had inadvertently cast upon her, and ran her fingers through the pages, looking for the exact time and date.

"Oh, er ... the Minister's at the Department of Mysteries at the moment—it isn't quite specified why ... but you can wait for him by the lifts if you wanted a chat, while he gets to his ten o'clock private meeting with a press representative—" she looked up expectantly, but Cedric had already turned with a billow of his magnificent robes, walking briskly towards the lifts where most people seemed to be filing towards.

Cedric trudged with purpose once again, ignoring the flitting recognition in some people's faces. His goal was to appear as busy and powerful as possible, so that no wizard or witch would dare sidetrack him. It seemed to work—some of them did a double take when they saw the imposing young man in royal red robes swooping into a lift box, but kept their excitement and interest to themselves, whispering frantically.

Cedric learned to ignore them, block out everyone else, unlike before when his mindset was to make sure everyone was well-accommodated. Not now, he thought, I need to change.

He informed the lift operator of where he intended to go, getting an incredulous look for it, but Cedric looked important and anyone who carried such influence on himself like shimmering armor was bound to have business in the lower recesses of the Ministry. Cedric flashed him a brief, indulgent smile, before readying himself.

All around him the people seemed to stick to the grates that served as the lift's walls, standing aside to get a better look of their companion. He heard his name murmured quite a number of times, and he figured that he had about half an hour before news would break out that the Triwizard champion was inside the Ministry. And with the press somewhere around as he had just learned from the desk worker, Cedric would have his work cut out for him.

When the pleasant female voice on the overhead speakers announced their stop, Cedric gingerly stepped out, apologizing to some people whom he had to get past. He looked over himself for a few seconds before huffing in satisfaction. He had only been in the Department of Mysteries once, during a Ghoul case that his father had to be involved in. He could vaguely recall it to be somewhat relating to Unspeakables, though he wasn't sure anymore.

He went down along the empty hall, refamiliarizing himself with the interior—the stone used to line the walls and floors were jet black and shimmering, and he knew there was some magical property to them that prevented Dark magic of any sort from being used. He wasn't quite sure of that, either, for he hadn't caught whiff of any reports about Dark magic actually becoming ineffective there.

Where to turn, he thought, as he scanned the intersections, and followed his instincts as he went left, all the while picking up distant murmuring bouncing off the quiet walls. The unintelligible sounds turned into muffled whispers that he can just barely pick up.

"I'm sure that our current agreement should more than suffice, Minister," he heard a dark, silky voice carry through the next hall, and he stopped, firing a silencing charm towards his feet and sticking to the nearest hall. Hearing the title 'Minister' made him freeze, training his ears to pick up the rest of the conversation.

"Oh yes, yes ... quite an extraordinary amount. How do you do it, Lucius?" the gratified voice of one
Cornelius Fudge replied. Cedric's eye narrowed into slits. What was going on?

"Our line has always been masters of trade. The economy now is different, but we're adaptable. The right investments here and there ... oh, but I didn't come here to discuss trivial matters."

"Of course, of course. Now, you do know that this is beyond my jurisdiction?"

"I am aware, yes. I'm just asking for ... assistance."

"And you shall have it. It is no business of mine what the Unspeakables do beneath the Ministry. Why, their organization is just as old as the very institution itself! If you have business with them, we'll be sure not to interfere."

"Very good. I trust you have at least some idea how it looks like further down?"

"I'll have my associates contact you. Now, I must be going. We're about to entrap a problem our campaign has had for quite a while now," the Minister said dismissively.

"I wish for success in your endeavors. Adieu."

"Yes, yes. 'Til next time."

Cedric almost jumped out of his skin when a hand landed on his shoulder.

Cedric turned swiftly, eyes blown wide. He could have screamed, but his singular goal of being as quiet as possible thankfully stopped the reflex from happening. His eyes searched, and it took him a bit longer than necessary to identify who it was.

"Mr. Weasley," he breathed, the tension still lingering in his shoulders. "What are you doing here?"

The older man regarded him for a moment, but then shook himself out of his gaze and trained a curious eye on him. "I could say the same for you, Cedric. The last place I'd expect to see you is in the Ministry."

The man could be trusted, he told himself. The last he had seen him, he was dragging Harry along with the rest of his children to the Quidditch World Cup, as if the boy was his own.

"I came for Harry," Cedric admitted. "I've gathered that he would be here. For the trial."

Mr. Weasley's eyebrows went up. "Really? Why, how did you manage to 'gather' that?"

Cedric looked uncertain. "I have my sources. I wanted to see if Harry was okay."

Mr. Weasley looked pleasantly surprised. "Ah, well. Seems you timed it perfectly. I just ushered Harry into the court room. Come, let's wait by the hall outside it."

Cedric followed him, still processing what he had just heard and heart thumping madly in his chest.

"It's all up to Harry now, I'm afraid," Mr. Weasley told him with a hint of apprehension. "But I have faith in the system. It was a just a case of self-defense, if you didn't know yet. Imagine, being cornered by two Dementors. Of course you'd fight back, won't you? It's simple enough to understand."

They arrived near a set of double doors that stood so high they nearly reached the ceiling. Cedric peered at them, as if he could see through the wood and locate Harry.
"Yes, but ..." Cedric started, stepping back and leaning against the wall. "He's all over the papers, isn't he? Public opinion's all been bought completely. I'm sure some of those members of the Wizengamot have read Prophet. And it is rather far-fetched, Dementors in London."

Mr. Weasley glanced at him for a second, his mouth seeming like it was preparing for a retort, but Mr. Weasley sighed in the end, turning back towards the doors. Cedric ducked his head.

"Sorry, but it all seems kind of planned, isn't it? Like he was being lured into a trap. Why is his hearing this early in the morning? I thought I would have some time to kill ... but then I found out the Minister would be down here, hearing Harry."

"We were lucky to have gotten here early. I didn't get the memo that the time's been changed. Or rather ... I wasn't sent the memo at all. I had to find out from someone in my office. Thank Merlin we made it on time," Mr. Weasley remarked.

"It's all just a matter of waiting now, isn't it?" Cedric sighed. He wondered what Harry was feeling then, being questioned like a criminal.

Dumbledore burst from the double doors like wind from a storm, just as things were getting a little too boring, and Cedric jumped along with Mr. Weasley when it happened. But the old wizard spared them no words, just went about his way as if he was on urgent business. Cedric and Mr. Weasley exchanged a glance of confusion.

"Where did he come from?" Cedric wondered, turning towards the end of the hall to see Dumbledore disappear.

"I don't know ... but to think that Dumbledore was in there, well, it all certainly seems a bit more hopeful, doesn't it?" the man said hopefully, though he was still pale and twitching with impatience.

A minute passed, and Mr. Weasley was just about to go to the doors himself, when the doors shot open again, and Harry nearly collided with Mr. Weasley.

"Dumbledore didn't say--"

"Cleared," Harry interrupted, looking like he had just went through a sermon. "All charges were cleared!"

Cedric let out a breath he didn't know was there. Some of the tension left his body, and he settled into a more comfortable stance. He regarded Harry for a moment, taking him in for the first time.

Things had changed. Harry had shot up, sprouted into a taller version of himself. It had only been a month, but he stood clear over Cedric's and Mr. Weasley's shoulders with ease. He was still shorter by a few inches, but Harry didn't look like such a kid anymore. It was an odd development--Cedric had gotten used to his mismatched frame and maturity, but now he looked to fit the part of a young hero.

Harry finally noticed him, and his expression morphed into startled surprise. "Cedric! What are you doing here?" Cedric was still lost in his wonderment to fully register what Harry had said.

"I, er, I came to support you," Cedric said almost sheepishly, looking for a place to put his hands in. "I'm sorry, I mean, I couldn't just sit back in my home when you're going through a hearing, of all things. Really, Harry, are ever going to have a day without trouble?"
Harry beamed. "It's pretty much predictable at this point. There's no use going against it," he shot back.

"You're getting too used to it. You're not supposed to be happy. Merlin you're a loon," Cedric said almost fondly, and they exchanged smiles, but the doors opened yet again, this time to allow a steady stream of old witches and wizards to pass through. He and Harry and Mr. Weasley all stepped back towards the opposite hall to allow the people to pass, and Cedric noticed that most of them didn't even spare them a glance. They completely skirted by them, and their disdain was so apparent that Cedric could make out a small sphere around them where the old wizards didn't cross.

"What was that about?" Cedric said, perturbed as he turned to them. Mr. Weasley looked almost appalled, but not for the reasons Cedric thought.

"I cannot believe it. Merlin's beard--you were tried by a full court?"

"Yes, I think so," Harry said quietly. Cedric eyed him. The rest of the wizards filed out, going to their separate businesses for the day, and Cedric couldn't shake the air of still coldness lingering in the atmosphere. It was as if Harry was being treated like he was diseased. Cedric didn't quite understand.

"Cedric," Mr. Weasley called to him. "I've just told Harry here that we were going back. Are you going to be alright?"

Harry shot him a look. "Mr. Weasley, let's have Cedric come along. I'm sure it'll be fine, I mean--the house could use more company for the day." Harry's eyes flitted towards him and then back to Mr. Weasley, blinking almost hopefully.

"Are you sure? I mean ... although Padfoot wouldn't mind in the least, Molly would cause quite a fuss ..." Mr. Weasley tread carefully, shooting an apologetic look at Cedric almost immediately after.

Cedric shook his head. "There's no cause for worry, Mr. Weasley," Cedric told him. "Harry and I have been writing each other everyday ... Well, until quite recently it has been a daily correspondence, though I've connected the dots when it spanned out and the letters sounded a bit happier. Harry's with his godfather, isn't he?"

Mr. Weasley looked taken aback yet again, but had already Cedric turned to Harry to explain further.

"He's worried about my ... allegiances, so to speak," Cedric pointed out. Harry's eyebrows furrowed above the rim of his glasses as Cedric watched his face. "He knows how my dad is, and his connections to the Ministry. And he's right to doubt me, seeing as my name and face are plastered all around this damned place."

"Allegiances? I don't understand ..." Harry said cluelessly, but then it dawned on him, and he turned on Mr. Weasley so fast his hair whipped around.

"I trust Cedric," Harry said firmly. "And whatever's been going around about him aren't true."

Cedric felt a surge of warmth run through him, but he ignored it in favor of backing Harry's statement. He looked Mr. Weasley right in the eye. "It's true, sir. I don't stand for anything my father comes up with these days, and the dirt in the papers are all lies. I don't have any attachment to the Ministry."

Mr. Weasley was at a loss for words, but seeing their united front made him relent, ushering the both of them back towards the ninth-level hall. Harry had a satisfied look on his face, and Cedric was surprised it had turned out well. He was suddenly going back with them to Harry's home.
It's not like he had anything better to do, really. Plus he could use the Harry's company, and maybe the Weasley twins, too.

"I'm going to let you two boys go right ahead," Mr. Weasley muttered low on his throat, coming into a stop. "Meet me at the Atrium in ten minutes." Cedric raised his eyes to Mr. Weasley's face, and then followed his line of sight. Across the hall, Lucius Malfoy and Minister Fudge were huddled together, talking among themselves. When they approached, the two wizards paused short, turning their heads towards them at the same time.

Cedric frowned in response, and put his hand on Harry's spine reflexively. Harry turned instantly wary, eyes changing into hard emeralds.

"Harry, let's go," Cedric said, pushing him along, and Harry kept his eyes locked on Lucius Malfoy's sneering face.

"We shouldn't have left Mr. Weasley with that, that ..." Harry shook his head, glaring towards the lifts, and Cedric sighed, looking over his shoulder.

"He'll be fine. He deals with these kinds of things on a daily basis. Besides, you're on thin ice as it is. We're just going to have to steer clear of this one." They waited for the lift grates to open, and Harry kept shooting looks back down the hall, where Mr. Weasley could be seen in conversation with the Malfoy patron and the Minister.

"Sure he'll be alright? Lucius Malfoy's a slimy bastard," Harry muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets as the life operator opened the grates and stepped aside to let them in. Cedric kept his hand on Harry's back, guiding him as they entered.

"The Atrium, please," Cedric told the operator, and then turned to Harry. "I'm not really sure--but it's better to not get involved. Not after what I heard ..." he shook his head suddenly, debating against telling Harry about the shady conversation the dark wizard and Minister Fudge exchanged about Unspeakables.

"What?" Harry needled.

"It's fine. Nothing," Cedric dodged, not meeting Harry's eyes.

When they stepped into the Atrium complex, Harry had gone quiet, and his face looked like a storm was brewing underneath it. Cedric patiently bore it, opting instead to walk back to the fountain with the Gryffindor.

"Wait--Harry, no, this way," he quickly said, tugging on Harry's arm and pulling him towards a hallway. Harry snapped out of his reveries and sputtered.

"What the--hey! Where are we going?" Harry yelped.

"There he is! That's Cedric Diggory ain'it? Look!" some man with a camera exclaimed, and a crowd which Cedric had guessed correctly as a horde of paparazzi turned their head in comical unison. It took only a second, and they were racing towards him, cameras pressed to their faces and firing flash upon flash.

"Run!" Cedric ordered, breaking into a sprint with Harry in tow. "Run, Harry! It's the press! Fucking Morgana ... I knew they were going to be here somewhere!"

"Merlin's beard! That's Harry Potter that is! In his arm, look!" another reporter shouted. The crowd had turned into a full-on mob, chasing after them through a hall of offices, and Harry could barely
They sharply turned around a corner and Cedric had to half-drag the bewildered Harry into the first door he could find. He shoved Harry in, and then went after him, shutting the door quickly behind him. All the while, they heard a stampede of feet and mass shouting from the other side of the door.

"They went this way!" a woman exclaimed, and the stomping grew distant as the reporters searched somewhere else.

Cedric sighed in relief, yet started when his breath caused a lock of Harry's hair to tickle his nose.

"What--Harry?" It was dark, and he didn't know where they had hid.

"Something's pressing hard against my rib," Harry complained, and his breath in turn ghosted across Cedric's collarbone. The Hufflepuff flushed, but it was so dark no one would be able to tell, least of all Harry.

"I think it's a broom," Cedric said helpfully, reaching around Harry's frame and pushing away the protruding wooden shaft.

"A broom closet? Really?" Harry laughed, and Cedric had to pause for a few seconds before he realized. He snorted, too, and their snickers went on through the darkness. "You shoved us in a broom closet. Is this always going to be my fate?"

"It was this or face the wrath of those reporters," Cedric pointed out. Somewhere in the dark Cedric searched for Harry's face, only managing to find a dim outline of Harry's head.

"So ... are they gone?" Harry asked after a few moments. It was getting stuffy inside the cramped space, and Cedric was becoming all too-aware of how their bodies were merely inches from each other.

"I don't know ..." he whispered, and then thought of an idea. He fished his wand out from a secret pocket of his robes and cast *Lumos*, illuminating every surface inside the closet an instant. Cedric saw Harry duck his head and look to the side, the second he realized they were so close to each other. Cedric coughed, and Harry twitched.

Outside, the thumping of shoes started again, and Cedric trained his ears hard to pick up what was happening.

"Yeah, that's them," Cedric muttered irritably. "Bugger."

"What should we do? Mr. Weasley's probably there in the Atrium already." Harry shuffled around, his foot catching on something, and then perched his glasses further up his nose, his green eyes settling on Cedric. The blond blinked back at him for a moment.

"Well, if we bolted right out of here we'd be surrounded," Cedric said helplessly. "It must have been that witch, Beatrice from the front desk. Told everyone that I was here. I shouldn't have worn this outfit. I stick out like a sore thumb!"

Harry snorted. "Why did you wear that, anyway? You look like a red Malfoy." Harry didn't seem to have any misgivings, smoothing his hands along Cedric's shoulder. The blond sputtered indignantly.

"Red Malfoy? It's a fine set of robes, I'll have you know. Cost me quite a fortune. I had to look powerful enough to get the information I needed. Like your whereabouts."
"I would've told you, but this just sprang up on me. No time to really owl everyone that I'm about to get expelled," Harry huffed. They exchanged glances, and then smiled together. They were arguing in whispers while inside a broom closet. It was supposed to be uncomfortable, but they fell into conversation and ribbing almost too easily.

"I would've thought you'd have worn something similar--for the hearing and all," Cedric told him, eyeing Harry's simple coat and shirt. Harry snorted again, shaking his head at his shabby clothes.

"It's Remus'. We shrank it prior to the hearing. It was all I can get my hands on in such short notice," Harry said, brushing his hands down the front of his coat. "I'm not exactly swimming in riches like you."

Cedric's eyebrows knit together. "That's not true--you're Harry Potter, aren't you? You're supposed to be wealthy!"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I have my trust fund and that's it, really. All for schooling and practical expenses and stuff."

Cedric shook his head. "Harry, your parents are d--" he stopped, choosing his words carefully. "Your parents are ... gone. James Potter is a pureblood heir. The Potters should have a large vault in Gringotts other than your trust. And you should have inherited it, or at least, you should have asked if you had."

Harry looked like he had been slapped by a trout. He closed his mouth promptly and said, "well how am I supposed to know that I needed to do those things? Nobody really tells me anything!"

"You have to visit Gringotts," Cedric explained. "Claim your inheritance. Although you have your legal guardians, they wouldn't be able to touch magical money anyway, and you're the heir, not them."

Harry's expression turned dark. "You think they would've told me something so important. Sirius and Mrs Weasley and all."

Cedric shrugged. "I'm sure that it just didn't cross their minds." He pressed his ear against the door once again, to distract from the sudden change in atmosphere.

"I think they've gone and left. We should go out, run back to the Atrium and leave this place."

"Yeah," Harry responded quietly, lost in his thoughts once again. Cedric trained his eyes on Harry's face for a moment, before deciding that it was no use saying anything else.

When he turned the door handle and pushed the wooden door open, light from outside filtered in and Cedric had to blink a few times to gather his bearings. He stepped out, looking around, and he blinked fast when a couple of flashes ambushed him.

"Harry!" he cried, but behind him, Harry's leg had caught on something yet again, and he fell hard against Cedric, knocking the Hufflepuff off his feet. Cedric had twisted to catch Harry, but it was too late--they crashed onto the ground in a heap, with Harry on top of him, legs entangled, faces mere inches from each other.

The flashes increased tenfold to capture their compromising position. Cedric looked into Harry's eyes, the realization hitting the both of them full force.

"Bloody hell," the both of them groaned.
THIS STORY IS ON HIATUS.

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