

## Yes, She's a Girl

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"Excuse me."

Startled, Hermione raised her head from where she was sitting at her table in the library. Before her stood Viktor Krum; happily without the gaggle of fangirls who always seemed to accompany him.

"I was wondering," the Bulgarian continued haltingly, "if you would do me the honor of accompanying me to the Yule Ball."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in astonishment. She couldn't possibly have heard that right! Viktor Krum was asking *her* to be his date to the ball? It was inconceivable! She didn't even know him. She blinked her eyes several times as though to dispel whatever illusion had just been created here in the library. But nothing changed.

The Durmstrang champion still stood stiffly before her, awaiting her response.

Go to the Yule Ball with Viktor Krum? Well, she supposed she could, but ...

She hesitated. How would that look? Harry Potter was her best friend, and it would be pretty strange for her to accompany his competitor. But she did want to go to the ball, and so far no one else had asked her, particularly either of the two boys who were supposed to be her best friends.

"I ... I'm not sure," she stammered. "I'm very close to Harry, as you know, and ..."

Krum gave a small nod of acknowledgement, indicating that he was aware of this; evidently he didn't consider it to be an insurmountable problem.

"Well ... can I think about it for a while?" she pleaded, wanting some time to consider the idea, and ponder any other options.

"Of course," Krum agreed, stepping back and giving her a short, formal bow. Flustered, Hermione quickly gathered up her books and parchment and stuffed them into her school bag.

"All right, then," she blurted out. "I ... I'll see you later." With that, she hurried out of the library and headed back to her common room, her mind spinning dizzily at what had just happened to her.

At her destination, a related drama was playing out. Ron had completely embarrassed himself by asking Fleur Delacour in the middle of the Entrance Hall. Ginny was trying to console him without success, partly because she was having difficulty controlling her mirth at his predicament. That ended promptly when Harry revealed his own news, that he had just been turned down by Cho Chang.

It was at that moment that Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole.

"Are you two ready to go to dinner?" she inquired, having managed to mostly calm herself down by this point, and anxious to do something normal for a while.

Harry and Ron's heads simultaneously turned in her direction as she approached, and she was puzzled at how red their faces were. Ginny, noting her expression, burst into giggles.

"That would probably be for the best, seeing as they've both just been turned down by girls they asked to the ball!" she teased.

The two boys grimaced. "Thanks a bunch, Ginny," Ron grumped.

Hermione couldn't resist tweaking Ron about his criteria for asking a girl. "Well, you did say you'd take the best looking girl who'd *have* you, as I recall," she pointed out loftily. "I guess the *second* part of that standard might turn out to be the more important one.

But Ron was staring at Hermione, as though suddenly seeing her in a whole new light.

"Hermione, *you're* a girl," he observed as though this was somehow news to him. Beside him, Harry winced at his friend's obtuseness and lack of tact.

"Oh well spotted," she snapped back, now fuming at the perceived insult.

"Well – you can come with one of us!" he declared triumphantly, somehow not picking up on her growing irritation.

Oh, can I now?" she hissed back, eyes flashing. "Well, I'd certainly go with Harry if he asked me, but with that attitude there's not a chance that I'd ever go with you!" And she stormed off to an empty corner of the common room and turned away from them, crossing her arms over her chest and taking large breaths of air to try to regain control of her emotions.

An awkward silence settled over the common room as everyone within earshot processed her last declaration. Harry glanced at Ron, then at Ginny, then back at Ron again. For his part, Ron avoided his eyes, staring at Hermione with a confused expression that was slowly changing to one of resentment. Harry now realized that the next move was up to him.

Swallowing hard, he moved quickly across to the room to his other best friend. When he reached her, he tentatively raised a hand to her shoulder. She twisted her head to look back at him without turning around, and he noted the moisture in her eyes, and the clenched fists at her side, and the scowl on her face.

"What?" she snapped, with a challenge in her voice. Not wanting to make any more of a scene in front of everyone, Harry inclined his head toward the portrait hole. Hermione's eyes followed his, and understanding his silent inquiry, she sighed and nodded.

Neither spoke as he led her down the corridor a ways and into one of the secret passageways they used as a shortcut to the Great Hall. There, assured of relative privacy, he turned to her again.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out.

Hermione regarded him for a moment. By now she had calmed down, and in her normal, rational manner inquired, "Why?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, besides being sorry that Ron's such a prat and that you were embarrassed in front of everyone, I'm sorry for not thinking to ask you myself." Hermione nodded for him to continue.

"Somehow I got it into my head that this was a date, and I should ask someone I fancied," he explained. "You're my best friend, but I've never thought about you that way. I do enjoy spending time with you, and now that I think about it, I'd much rather go with you than with some random girl I hardly know."

Hermione managed a chuckle at the clumsy way he was asking her, but knew he was sincere. She decided to help him out.

"I'd also much rather go with you than some random guy I hardly know," she assured him, realizing, as the words left her mouth, that this description actually applied rather accurately to Viktor Krum. And in that moment her decision became obvious.

"So," she continued with a grin. "Are you asking me to the ball?" Harry looked up; he'd been nervously studying the tapestry that covered the entrance to the corridor while waiting to hear her response.

"Oh ... yeah, erm ... Hermione, will you go to the ball with me?" he asked, trying for a solemn tone of voice. He didn't quite succeed, and the corners of his mouth turned up by the end of the invitation.

"I'd love to," she declared as her grin blossomed into a broad smile. She gave him a quick hug, before the two of them began to walk back to the common room.

"I should tell you, I don't know how to dance," Harry confessed.

"That's all right, I can teach you," Hermione reassured him. Then she paused a moment before deciding to come clean with him. "And I should tell you, Viktor Krum asked me to the ball this afternoon. I'll need to turn him down, of course."

This caught Harry by surprise. "Oh ... well, erm ... I guess you should go with him then, if you really want to. I can find ..." Hermione cut him off before he could finish.

"No, not at all," she corrected him hastily. "Like I said, I'd rather go with a friend than someone I don't really know. I told him I'd have to think about it. I actually wanted to see if you or Ron would ask me, but with the way Ron acted, that turned out to be just you." She reached out and gave his hand a small squeeze. "I'm quite happy to be going with you."

When they reached the common room again, they found that things had changed. Ron and Ginny were glaring at each other, while Neville stood there red-faced. It turned out that Neville had asked Ginny to the ball, and Ron was none too pleased about it, which in turn set Ginny off.

The newly arrived pair managed to separate the siblings before hexes were exchanged, and Hermione led Ginny away while Harry remained with Ron.

"So, what happened with Hermione," Ron demanded irritably. "Did you ask her?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, we're going together. Just as friends, of course," he added quickly. Ron scowled, although this had been what he'd expected. "What about me, then?" he complained.

Not certain how to answer that, Harry glanced around the common room, noticing Lavender and Parvati coming down the stairs from the girls' dorm. The time had come for the direct approach. He hurried over to intercept the two girls before they could get to the portrait hole.

"Hey," he greeted them as he skidded to a stop in front of them. "Would either of you be interested in going to the ball with Ron?" The two girls took in his hopeful expression, then glanced over at the tall redhead before looking at each other and giggling.

If Harry had been asking for himself the answer would probably have been different, but they informed him that they had just agreed to go with

Seamus and Dean. Harry's other two roommates had apparently decided to get moving after witnessing the earlier scene.

"What about Hermione?" Parvati suggested, having not herself been in the common room at that time.

"She's going with me," Harry informed her. Parvati's eyes widened and she shared a quick glance with Lavender, who looked delighted at the juicy morsel of gossip that had just been handed to her.

"So ... what about Ron?" Harry persisted.

"Well ..." Parvati replied slowly. "I suppose my sister might ... Padma, you know ... she's in Ravenclaw. "I can ask her if you like."

"Yeah, that'd be great," Harry responded enthusiastically. "Thanks a bunch. I owe you one."

-ooOoo-

The evening of the ball, the boys in Harry's room changed into their dress robes self-consciously, helping each other out as needed and generally providing mutual moral support. Once everyone was ready, they came down the stairs together in a group, then began looking around for their dates.

Parvati was the first one Harry spotted, looking very pretty in robes of shocking pink that caught his eye. As she took Dean's arm she informed Ron that her sister Padma would meet him in the entrance hall. Right behind her was Lavender, who smiled at the look on Seamus's face as she stepped up and he gaped at the plunging neckline of her deep blue robes. Harry glanced away, not wanting to be caught staring, and immediately spotted a head of long bright red hair.

Ginny, dressed in simple pale green robes, shot him a shy glance before finding Neville, who looked quite a bit more nervous than she did. They both stood hesitantly facing each other for several seconds before Ginny grabbed his arm and led him toward the portrait hole.

Harry continued to scan the crowded common room for Hermione. He spotted a pretty girl in light blue robes that he didn't immediately recognize, and began to move his eyes away from her to continue his search. Suddenly he snapped his head back in her direction and his jaw dropped.

It was Hermione.

He suddenly realized why he hadn't recognized her at first. Her trademark bushy hair had disappeared; it was now sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot. He was stunned by the way she looked in her robes of a floaty, periwinkle blue material.

To some extent it was because she was holding herself differently, confident and self-assured in her appearance, and not burdened by the oversized backpack she usually hauled around. But it was also because of her smile. Harry didn't understand how he hadn't noticed it before, but she had a very nice smile, especially now that her front teeth were normal sized.

She beamed at him as he caught her eye and worked his way through the throng of students toward her, and her smile broadened when he stammered, "You look amazing!"

"You look quite handsome yourself this evening," she declared. "Come on, let's go downstairs."

The dancing turned out much better than Harry had thought it would. He was now somewhat relieved that he had taken Hermione instead of Cho, because he still felt awkward around the pretty Chinese girl, but was comfortable with his longtime friend. After the mandatory first dance, she suggested another, and while his initial inclination was to decline, he changed his mind and accepted.

Eventually they'd joined Ron and Padma, who was looking miserable. Hermione noticed, and nudged Harry, nodding at the Indian girl, then asked Ron to dance with her. Harry took the hint and invited Padma to join him, and she gratefully accepted.

This time things didn't go so well. Padma tried her best to put him at ease, but Harry was distinctly more self-conscious with the pretty Indian girl. Twice he had to apologize for stepping on her feet. It didn't help that he kept looking over at Ron and Hermione, who seemed to be having problems of their own.

At the conclusion of the song Harry barely managed to avoid heaving a sigh of relief (which he knew would have been rather insulting to his partner) and remembered to thank her for the dance. She thanked him in return, but was noticeably less than enthusiastic when he began leading her back to where his friends were standing.

Harry stopped short before he reached them. Hermione was glaring at Ron, who was not in the best mood himself. Wanting to avoid a row in the middle of the ball, the youngest champion quickly stepped up and put his hand on Hermione's arm, turning her away from the confrontation. When she saw him she relaxed a bit, and allowed herself to be led out into the entrance hall.

Behind them, Padma took one look at the scowl on her date's face and decided that she had had enough of his grumpy attitude for the evening. Pretending to spot someone she knew in the crowd, she waved and moved quickly off to find a more pleasant partner for the rest of the evening.

"What happened?" Harry inquired once he and Hermione were by themselves. Outside the front doors they'd found a garden that had been decorated with twinkling fairy lights on bushes, ornamental paths, statues, fountains, and benches.

"Oh, it was just Ron being Ron," she sighed. "He just has that ability to really get under my skin. After all these years he knows just which buttons to push."

Harry prompted her for more details, and as they settled down on one of the benches she elaborated. Ron was still miffed that she had turned him down but agreed to go with Harry. When she'd reminded him, again, of her reason, he ignored her explanation and accused her of just wanting the attention of going with a champion and being in the spotlight. He supported that ridiculous assertion by pointing out how it was obvious she was trying to get noticed, as she'd dressed up so much that he could hardly recognize her.

Harry hissed angrily at that claim, since he knew that Hermione had actually turned down a date from another champion to go with him, but there was more. She'd responded by protesting hotly that she'd been friends with Harry for years, and it had nothing to do with his champion status or his being famous, and reminded Ron scathingly that she'd stood by him better than he had this year! Then, the irate redhead had shot back that Harry had taken her because he felt sorry for her, as there was no way anyone else would have asked her. It was at this point that Harry had interrupted them, which he now realized had been just in time.

Harry could only shake his head in dismay at how outrageous those statements had been. Nothing could have been further from the truth. She had been doing a favor to *him* by accompanying him, not the other way around!

"Hermione, you know that's all absolute rubbish," he assured her. "Look, I'll tell him if you like, how wrong he is. You know how much I appreciate you coming with me, right?"

She shot him a grateful smile, but shook her head, declining his offer, adding that she wanted to set Ron straight herself. They then spent some time talking about some of the antics of their fellow students at the ball, along with overhearing some interesting conversations between Snape and Karkaroff, and Hagrid and Madame Maxime.

Eventually Hermione informed Harry that she was ready to go back inside. As they returned she suggested they switch partners with Cedric and Cho for one song, and also that she felt that she owed Viktor a dance. Harry agreed with both of her suggestions, albeit with some trepidation.

He knew that his good friend was only trying to help him out, but his dance with Cho went no better than the one with Padma had. If anything, it was worse. He was just as flustered and tongue-tied as he'd been when he'd tried to ask her to accompany him to the ball in the first place, and he stumbled through the dance, actually relieved when it was over and he could rejoin Hermione. While she danced with Krum, he looked around for Ron to try to set him straight, but couldn't spot him. When she finished, he absolutely refused to consider the idea of swapping with Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies, and they spent the rest of the evening together.

As the ball ended and they were beginning to head back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry noticed Cedric beckoning him.

"Go ahead and find out what he wants," Hermione told him. "I'll see you back at the common room."

Harry nodded and met up with Cedric, trying not to notice Cho a little further back waiting for him. He listened in some confusion as Cedric made a cryptic suggestion about the golden egg. "Take a bath ... just mull things over in the water ... use the prefects' bathroom ... gotta go." With that he broke away and hurried back to Cho.

Harry was torn – Cedric was a genuinely nice guy, but it was hard to like a guy who was with the girl you were interested in. On the other hand, it wasn't like he'd exactly swept the pretty Chinese witch off her feet when he'd been with her, so perhaps he was just kidding himself thinking he might have a chance with her, even had the Hufflepuff champion not been in the picture.

Back at Gryffindor Tower, he climbed through the portrait hole to find Hermione and Ron in a blazing row. He later learned that it had been ignited by Ron snarking that her dancing with Diggory and Krum just proved that she was just after all the attention she could get, and that she was being disloyal to Harry on top of everything else. That had been the final straw.

She proceeded to loudly and thoroughly demolish his contention, making a point by point rebuttal of his earlier comments – evidently she'd been working up these arguments in her mind all evening – as well as this last claim. She finished by reminding him and everyone within earshot just *who* had faithfully stood by Harry all year, and who had *not*.

Seeing Ron clenching his fists and on the verge of exploding back at her, Harry stepped in between them.

"OK, that's enough now!" he declared. "Hermione, you've made your point. Ron, you were completely out of line tonight. Everything she's done has been to help me out. I suggest you clear out of here and go up to the room until you can cool off."

"What! How can you take her side?" the furious redhead demanded. "I was just ..."

"I said enough!" Harry shouted, overriding whatever excuse Ron was about to make. "I'm taking her side because everything she said is right, *and* she's always there for me when I need her. Now back off!" Ron stared at him for a few seconds, then whirled and stormed up the staircase to the boys' dorm.

Harry stood and stared after him until he disappeared, then took several deep breaths to regain his composure. He felt Hermione come up beside him and weave her arm through his, and waited while she calmed herself in the same manner. Then he led her to a quiet corner of the room and they settled down on a sofa.

He could tell she was still upset, and was at a loss how to comfort her. If the situation had been reversed, she would probably give him a hug, but he wasn't comfortable initiating gestures of affection like that. Glancing over at her, he noted the tension in her body, and had an idea.

Standing up and moving behind her, he began to massage her shoulders. Startled at first, she took a few seconds before she began to relax, then began to lean back into his touch. The dress robes she was wearing bared her neck and shoulders, giving Harry easy access for his ministrations. Along with this, he also discovered that he needed to be careful not to glance down, as the low neckline was quite revealing from this angle. His

best female friend was most definitely *female* !

Finishing with a light squeeze of her upper arms, he reclaimed his spot next to her on the sofa and ventured a smile. She returned it with an appreciative smile of her own.

“Thanks,” they both said simultaneously. After sharing a chuckle, Harry allowed her to go first.

“Thanks for sticking up for me,” she continued. “And thank you for an otherwise lovely evening. I really enjoyed it.”

“Thank you for going with me,” he responded. “I meant what I said about you always being there for me, and I appreciate it. And I had a good time too.”

“So, what did Cedric want?” she asked.

-ooOoo-

Harry found himself to be as nervous about this clandestine quest as he’d ever been about any of the late night adventures they’d undertaken during their years at Hogwarts. And it technically wasn’t even against the rules! He and Hermione were merely sneaking off to the prefects’ bath with his golden egg to try to figure out the clue it contained. It was just that it was ... a *bath* .

He had been speechless when she had announced that she’d come with him. When she’d noticed the horrified expression on his face, she’d merely rolled her eyes and informed him with a huff, “Honestly, Harry, of course we’ll wear swimsuits into the water!”

“Do you even have a swimsuit?” he asked in surprise. “Here at Hogwarts, I mean?” She’d allowed that no, she hadn’t packed her suit, this being Scotland after all, but that she could easily owl her mum to send it.

“What about you?” she’d continued, realizing that it might not be so easy to get the Dursleys to do the same for him, if he even owned one. He’d confirmed that he did not. “Hmm,” she’d mused. “Why don’t I have my mum send one of my dad’s old ones then, and I can resize it to fit you.”

That had taken a couple of days, but it was still during the Christmas break when they decided to undertake their excursion, which they decided was a good time since fewer students would be about. Things had been chilly with Ron since the night of the ball, so it was just going to be the two of them.

Upon reaching the correct room on the fifth floor, Harry gave the password and they hurried in. While Harry tucked away the invisibility cloak, Hermione sealed the door to ensure that they’d be undisturbed. Then they looked around, and were astonished at what they found.

The facility was absurdly opulent. What sensible person could ever think that schoolchildren should have a bathroom with a candle filled chandelier, a white marble sunken swimming pool sized bath, surrounded at the edges with a hundred golden taps, each spewing a different special effect of foamy water ... and a diving board?

After staring for a full minute, Harry and Hermione turned to each other with ‘can you believe this?’ expressions ... and burst out laughing. It was the only possible rational reaction.

Hermione was the first to find something to say. “You and I will have to be prefects, if only so we can come back to use this place in the future.”

“Well, that’s a sure thing for you,” Harry joked, “but somewhat questionable for me.”

“Oh, Harry, it’s a certainty for you, too,” Hermione insisted. “Who else would it be, Ron?” Both of them laughed again at that idea.

Finally they settled down to do what they’d come for, and both removed their dressing gowns. It was another eye-opener for Harry. Although Hermione wore a plain red one-piece tank suit, it revealed even more of her figure than her dress robes had. Seeing what he was staring at, Hermione crossed her arms and sighed.

“Harry, I’m a fifteen year old girl. I have breasts. Deal with it,” she demanded, albeit with a touch of amusement.

While he stammered and tried to reign in his thoughts, she dove into the water and swam across the pool. When she reached the other side, she climbed out, deciding to give the diving board a try. It didn’t help Harry’s struggle for control, as he discovered two more things as she stepped out onto the board. First, she had a really cute bum. And second, her swimsuit was even sexier when it was wet. He promptly decided he’d better keep those observations to himself, and jumped into the water before she noticed the effect she was having on him.

While Hermione surfaced and swam back toward him, Harry began treading water, forcing himself to clear his mind and concentrate on the egg. “What do you think we’re supposed to do differently?” he wondered as she came alongside him.

“Exactly what did Cedric say?” she queried. Harry shrugged, and closed his eyes as he tried to recall the older boy’s precise wording.

“He just said to take the egg with me into the bath, I think,” he decided. Then he picked it up and carefully lowered it beneath the foamy surface. Nothing happened, and both teens let out disappointed sighs. Harry shared a look with Hermione, glanced at the water, and she nodded. Both took a breath and ducked their heads under, stared at the golden orb for a few seconds, then surfaced again.

“Let’s try it again, but open it this time while we’re under the water,” she suggested. Harry nodded, and they submerged again.

Half an hour later, with the aid of a clever charm by Hermione to waterproof some parchment and ink, and a dozen or so dunkings until she was positive that she had the wording right, the two of them sat on the edge of the pool, wrapped in two of the fluffy white towels provided by the

amazing room.

Hermione stared at the parchment, her mouth moving soundlessly as she pondered the riddle.

"All right, we've decided that the task will be in the lake, and it will involve the mermaids, who will be holding something you value highly, that you'll have to retrieve," she stated, summing up their conclusions. "And you'll have an hour to complete the task. What do you think they'll take?"

"Dunno," Harry replied. "My Firebolt maybe. What worries me more is that I'm going to have to be able to breathe underwater for an hour."

"And it's in the middle of February," Hermione added. "Which means the lake will be cold, perhaps even coated with ice."

Harry groaned. "Thanks, that makes it even worse." Hermione shot him a sympathetic smile and patted him on the arm.

"Don't worry, I'll help you figure something out," she promised. Harry smiled back.

"You always do."

By the time they reached the common room, it was empty and nearly dark, with only a pair of torches still burning on either side of the fire in the fireplace. Harry walked Hermione over to the staircase to the girls' dorms, where she stopped and turned to him.

"First thing tomorrow, then, we'll get started at the library," she announced. Harry couldn't help but smile – this was quintessential Hermione behavior.

"Good night," she added softly. Then she leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Harry surprised both of them by returning the gesture and giving her a brief peck on his own. "Good night," he responded breathlessly. Then he hurried over to his own stairs, and two pink-faced teens hastened up to bed without saying another word.

-ooOoo-

February 24

Harry stood by the side of the lake, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet as a way to deal with his nervous energy. He was much more prepared for this task than he usually was for one of his 'adventures', due primarily to Hermione's relentless drive to do everything conceivable that could be done to get him as ready as he could be. Hanging out with her all the time was beginning to have an effect, he mused wryly.

Things with Ron were still strained, but not hostile. Harry had decided that Ron needed to actually apologize this time, for what he'd said to Hermione, before they could all go back to being best friends. Ron, on the other hand, wanted to just forget about it and move on. Harry was fully aware that he had a double standard in this regard – if it had just been for himself he'd probably have simply brushed it off again, but since it was Hermione who'd been wronged, it was somehow different.

Regardless, with nearly two months to research and plan, he was ready. He had gillyweed (thanks to Neville, who'd read about it in a book Moody had given him – odd coincidence, that), a knife, and a wand holder strapped to his leg. He had even practiced in the lake with Hermione casting a warming charm on him, which he discovered he didn't need, due to a side effect of the magical plant. That made things simpler, giving him one less thing to worry about.

This was fortunate, because that morning he'd learned something much more worrisome – Hermione did not come down to breakfast, and when he'd asked, Parvati and Lavender revealed that they hadn't seen her since the night before. He had a sinking feeling what the reason was. His fear was pretty much confirmed when he'd talked to Cedric, and learned that Cho was missing too. And he could now see that Krum and Fleur were both rather upset as well.

Hermione was at the bottom of the lake as his hostage.

As determined as he'd ever been, Harry raced into the lake the moment the whistle went off, and never looked back. With a bit of help from Moaning Myrtle, and only minor, easily dealt with interference from a band of grindylows, he got to the hostages in the merfolk village first. While cutting Hermione loose with no problem, he noted that as expected, Cho was there for Cedric, along with a young girl who resembled Fleur, and an older boy who shared Krum's distinctive features.

There were no further obstacles, and he broke the surface with plenty of time to spare. Instantly, the spell on Hermione broke and she opened her eyes, blinked twice, and snapped her head around to look at him.

"Are you all right?" he asked, even as a relieved grin broke out on his face. She took a couple of large gulps of air before responding, then nodded.

"Just fine," she decided. "Although the water's starting to feel cold. Did everything go OK?" He ducked his head under the water to take in a few swallows before his air supply ran out, then pulled it out again and smiled. "Just like we planned," he replied. "Although it was a bit of a shock when I found out you were the one I was to rescue. But let's get back and get you out of the water," he concluded, when she started shivering.

Back at the dock, he stayed in the water while Hermione was helped out, since he needed to wait for the effects of the gillyweed to wear off. A few minutes later, there was a commotion out in the lake, and two mermen surfaced with Fleur. He watched while she was revived, and then was startled to see her begin screaming for her sister, begging to be allowed to return to the water.

It didn't take long for him to make a decision. Checking his new waterproof watch (a late Christmas present from Hermione's parents) he flipped over and headed back to the underwater village. On the way there, he passed first Cedric, returning with his arm around Cho, and then a few

minutes later, Krum with his brother.

Knowing now where to look, he found the site much more quickly the second time, but was delayed by the armed mermen for several more precious minutes before they allowed him to take the still unconscious blonde girl. He gestured first at her, then at the surface, then at his watch. Then he drew his wand and they backed off.

It was a close call, as the gillyweed wore off just as he reached the surface. This time the swim back took longer, towing a frightened girl who didn't speak English, and with no flippers, but they eventually made it. Without the warmth provided by the gillyweed, they were both shaking from the cold by the time they got back to shore. To his surprise, Ludo Bagman waded in to help him out, assisted by Dumbledore, while Madame Maxime effortlessly hoisted the girl from the water and hastened over to Fleur.

Before Madame Pomfrey could even finish wrapping him in a blanket, Hermione had her arms around him in a rib-cracking hug.

"I'm so proud of you!" she whispered.

As soon as she released him, Fleur stepped in and kissed him twice on each cheek while thanking him profusely for saving her sister. Hermione scowled in irritation, then was annoyed with herself for being irritated. It wasn't as though the French witch was putting a move on Harry, she was just showing her gratitude. *And even if she is, what of it? It's not like I have any claim, or romantic feelings of my own for Harry. Right?*

Before the brilliant Gryffindor could continue her self-examination, Bagman announced the results. Harry received the highest score, and was now in the lead. This despite Karkaroff once again showing his bias by scoring him much lower than he deserved, which led to widespread booing, even from some of the Durmstrang students.

But that didn't bother Harry and Hermione overmuch. They were both relieved that the task was over, and everything had turned out well enough. Now, hopefully, they could relax for a while before gearing up for the final task four months hence.

-ooOoo-

Much as Harry would have liked to fade into the woodwork for a while, it was not to be. Another sensational Rita Skeeter article turned the spotlight on him again. This time it was with a lurid tale of a love triangle.

Somehow the annoying reporter had gotten wind of the unpleasantness between Ron and Hermione during the Yule Ball, and the reason for it – Hermione's decision to go with Harry instead of her redheaded friend. Harry wondered which Gryffindor had leaked the story – he suspected someone like Lavender Brown, but had no proof – but in any case Skeeter had managed to spin it into a story of heartbreak and betrayal of best friends. She even managed to suggest, without actually coming out and saying so, that Hermione had resorted to love potions to toy with the affections of both boys.

Hermione insisted on taking the high road – "Just ignore them," she advised as calmly as she could manage whenever they encountered pointing and whispering in the corridors. While Harry admired her for her restraint, he didn't think it worked very well. People everywhere were fascinated by celebrity gossip. Hogwarts students were no different, and right now there was no bigger celebrity in the school than him.

The worst was when Snape decided that it was necessary to read the offending article out loud, during Potions class, accompanied with his typical sneering, desultory comments. It was all Harry could do to keep from blowing up his cauldron, and Ron wasn't much better. He seethed bitterly while mashing up his scarab beetles, wondering what hold this vile man could have on Dumbledore that he was allowed to get away with this vindictive behavior – not only toward him but also toward his friends, who hadn't done anything to deserve this sort of treatment.

Aside from the excesses of their nemeses in Slytherin house, however, the two friends couldn't help wondering – was it possible that there could be something to the story?

Harry had to admit to himself that he was certainly seeing Hermione in a different light, since the night of the ball and the evening in the prefects' bath. She was an attractive girl! How, or when, that had happened he had no idea, but there was no denying the fact. But did that necessarily mean that he wanted *that* sort of a relationship with her? What if it didn't work out? Could he risk losing her friendship?

Hermione had to admit to herself that she had enjoyed the look in Harry's eye when he saw her, in both her dress robes and in her swimsuit. And she also couldn't deny the tingly feeling it had given her inside. It had come as a bit of a shock that he could generate that feeling in her – partly, she decided, because she had never received that look from any other boy and so had no experience with it – but still ... So did that necessarily mean that she wanted *that* sort of relationship with him? What if it didn't work out? Could she risk losing his friendship?

And so in an ironic twist, even as the two young Gryffindors drew closer to each other, spent even more time together, became ever more reliant on each other, and grew increasingly aware of their mutual attraction, they each independently became ever more determined to ignore it.

-ooOoo-

"That's odd," Harry commented one day as he checked the Marauder's Map as he and Hermione were preparing to leave the library.

"What?" she queried reflexively.

"I can't figure out how it is that Barty Crouch is in the castle so often, but we never actually see him," he responded, scratching the back of his head in bewilderment. Seeing Hermione's eyes narrow, he showed her the magical parchment. "He's nearly always up in the DADA office with Moody," he pointed out.

Hermione huffed. She'd not had much respect for the man ever since he'd so cruelly dismissed his house elf at the World Cup. "So why is he

always too ill to show up for the tournament tasks, if he's here so many other times?" she commented acerbically.

Harry shrugged, then hastened to clear the map and stuff it in his pocket when Madame Pince glanced their way.

Over the course of the next week, Harry continued to look for the head of International Magical Cooperation whenever he got a chance, and every time he was to be found in the Defense Against the Dark Arts office. Then, one day, he spotted him moving from the library to the Great Hall. But when he hurried to intercept, only Mad-Eye Moody was in the corridor. When the suspicious ex-Auror turned his magical eye on him, Harry could do no more than stammer and nod a greeting, unable to ask the battle-scarred wizard if he'd seen which way Crouch went.

That night he talked it over with Hermione and they began to wonder if something sinister was going on. The only thing they could think of that would fool the map like that was polyjuice potion, but they couldn't imagine why either Moody or Crouch would want to take the appearance of the other. They decided to write to Sirius again, as they'd promised to let him know if anything odd happened.

"Chocolate Frog ... Sugar Quill ... Cockroach Cluster ..." The stone gargoyle suddenly moved aside, exposing the spiral staircase to the Hogwarts Headmaster's office. Hermione threw Harry a curious look, but he only shrugged.

"He always uses some kind of candy as a password," he informed her as they stepped through the opening. "It's just a matter of guessing until you hit the right one."

The response from Sirius had urged Harry to go to Dumbledore with the disturbing information about Moody and Crouch. When they reached the top of the revolving staircase Harry knocked on the door, and was promptly invited inside.

While Harry had been in this office several times previously, this was Hermione's first visit, and she couldn't resist gazing around the fascinating room as the two students took seats in front of the headmaster's desk. On one side, Fawkes sat on a golden perch, calmly regarding Harry. Behind the desk hung an array of portraits of former headmasters and headmistresses, many of them snoozing in their frames. To the other side were bookcases and shelves, including one containing the Sorting Hat. Behind Fawkes was mounted a glass display case, which held a ruby encrusted sword. Hermione gasped softly as she recognized the Sword of Gryffindor, which Harry had used to slay the basilisk during their second year. Somehow that seemed like a long time ago now.

The clearing of a throat snapped her attention back to the issue at hand. Harry was stammering, trying to figure out how to explain what he'd seen without revealing the existence of the Marauder's Map.

Hermione sighed. "Harry, I think you just have to show him," she advised. Reluctantly, Harry withdrew his treasured heirloom and activated it. Hermione caught an amused twinkle in Dumbledore's eye as he heard the Marauder password – 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good'. Then the headmaster's face turned grave as Harry directed his attention to the dot on the map labeled 'Bartemius Crouch'.

"Are you certain that this map is always accurate, and cannot be deceived by any means?" Dumbledore asked sharply. Harry shrank back slightly, but gathered himself and nodded firmly.

"It even identified Pettigrew last year while he was in his animagus form," he responded. Dumbledore nodded his head but said nothing more, stroking his beard with an expression of deep concern.

"Thank you Harry, and you too Miss Granger, for bringing this to my attention," he declared at length. "I will look into it, but in the meantime please do not pursue the matter further, or talk about it with anyone else." He peered over his glasses at the two of them, his gaze conveying the message that he knew very well their tendency to investigate dangerous matters on their own. Both teens nodded quickly, and promised to keep it to themselves.

Less than a week later, Harry received a message as he and Hermione were leaving Transfiguration. "Mr. Potter, the Headmaster would like to see you immediately," McGonagall informed him. "He also notes that he prefers ice mice to peppermint toads. Harry shared a quick glance with Hermione, but before he could say anything the stern professor looked down at the parchment in her hands again. "Yes, you may bring Miss Granger with you."

Hastily calling out their thanks, Harry took Hermione's hand and quickly wound their way through the crowded corridors, dodging around several clumps of students, a few of whom noticed the linked hands and grinned, recalling Skeeter's salacious story.

When the two students arrived at the headmaster's office, they were surprised this time to find several others present. Both were immediately on their guard as they confronted the two professors who made them most ill at ease – Snape and Moody. But their attention was immediately drawn to the fourth person in the room, a stranger with pale skin and straw colored hair, who was unconscious and bound to a chair.

The teens edged nervously to a corner of the room, uncertain about what was happening, and what their role was supposed to be. Then the office door opened and two more people entered, Professors Flitwick and McGonagall. The latter shot a sharp look at them and they both blushed, as it dawned on them that she had perhaps intended to accompany them, but that they had left her behind in their haste to learn what was happening.

"Now that we are all here, let us proceed," Dumbledore announced, drawing everyone's attention. For a moment Snape looked like he was going to object to the presence of the students, but a glance from the headmaster silenced him. "Severus, the potion please."

"Good heavens, that's Barty Crouch!" McGonagall exclaimed as Snape moved so that she had a clear look at the captive in the chair. Beside her Flitwick gasped. Hermione and Harry shared a look of puzzlement. *Was there more than one Barty Crouch?*



“Yes indeed,” Dumbledore confirmed. “Bartemius Crouch, Jr., to be precise.” He turned to the two perplexed teens. “Sentenced to Azkaban some thirteen years ago, if I recall correctly. Alleged to have died in prison a year later.”

“But clearly did not,” a gruff voice interjected as Moody now spoke for the first time. “Curious to know where he’s been hiding all those years up to last summer.”

“Which I’m sure we will learn in due time,” Dumbledore continued. “But just to bring the rest up to date, this young man apparently captured Professor Moody last summer just before the start of classes, and has been impersonating him ever since. It is thanks to our two alert students here that he was found out and unmasked, as it were.” Moody scowled, clearly vexed with himself for having let his guard down enough for such a thing to happen to him.

Dumbledore gestured to Snape, and the latter stepped up and administered three drops of a clear liquid to the bound man. “Veritaserum,” Hermione whispered to Harry. “A powerful truth serum.” Harry nodded, not even questioning how she could know that just from seeing a few drops of the potion.

For the next twenty minutes, the five professors and two students were treated to an astounding tale of deception and intrigue. Harry found Hermione’s hand squeezing his several times during the narrative, particularly when the unmasked Death Eater revealed that it was he who had put Harry’s name in the Goblet and tricked it into selecting him as the fourth champion, and most tightly when he divulged the reason – so that Harry Potter could be captured during the final task and used in a ritual to restore the dark lord to power.

When he finished, there was silence for several seconds, as all of the professors stared at the fanatical wizard in horror at what he had confessed. Finally, Harry broke the stillness.

“Erm, so what do we do now?”

Dumbledore actually smiled briefly at the question, Snape sneered at the audacity of it, Flitwick regarded him thoughtfully, and McGonagall turned to gape at him in astonishment. Hermione rolled her eyes, but couldn’t keep a smile of her own off her face.

“*You* don’t need to do anything this time, Harry,” the headmaster assured him. “I think the rest of us can take it from here without any further assistance.” Harry started to object, but then thought better of it, deciding it would be rather presumptuous of him to insist that they needed his help. “But we’ll be sure to let you know if we need you for anything,” Dumbledore added with a twinkle in his eye.

After impressing all present with the need for absolute secrecy, he dismissed them back to their regular duties, except for Moody, whom he ordered to visit Madame Pomfrey.

A week passed, then another. Just as Harry was beginning to think that nothing was going to come of his discovery of the imposter, a meeting was announced for all four champions, this time in the room off the Great Hall where they had originally gathered after being selected by the Goblet of Fire. Hermione accompanied him to the Great Hall, and let him know she’d wait there until he was finished.

To her surprise, she was joined by Cho Chang, who was evidently doing the same for Cedric. She shot her a brief half-smile of acknowledgement before sitting down at the end of the Gryffindor table.

“We seem to both be in the same boat,” the older Chinese girl observed. Hermione turned to see that she’d seated herself at the Hufflepuff table, which was next to Gryffindor. “Two faithful witches supporting our men in this great adventure.”

Hermione considered and discarded a feminist retort objecting to women being relegated to a supporting role before shrugging. “Not exactly unusual for Harry and me,” she pointed out. “Given the adventures we’ve shared for the past three years.” She couldn’t help putting a slight emphasis on the word ‘shared’. They’d been equal partners in at least some of those exploits after all, particularly the most recent one where they’d gone back in time to save Sirius.

Cho acknowledged her point, then grinned slyly. “So, you and Harry are together, then?” she queried.

Hermione gave a well-practiced sigh. “We’re just friends – very good friends,” she corrected. But Cho didn’t give up that easily.

“Why?”

This brought the Gryffindor witch up short. “I mean, why aren’t you together?” the pretty Ravenclaw wondered. “You’re so well suited. And anyone can see how fond of each other you are.”

Hermione managed to mumble something about not wanting to risk their friendship if things didn’t work out, but Cho just waved that objection off.

“Nonsense,” she declared. “As close as the two of you are, there’s no way that would happen. You’d still be good friends even if you decided that’s all you wanted. I’m sure that Cedric and I would stay friends if this doesn’t work out, and we don’t have nearly the history you and Harry do.”

But before Hermione could come up with another counter, the door opened and three champions, along with Maxime of Beauxbatons and Karkaroff of Durmstrang emerged. The three students were shaking their heads in disbelief. After a brief conversation, the two professors departed, while Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor came over to join Hermione and Cho.

“Unbelievable ...” Cedric muttered as he approached.

Hermione was ready to burst, and Cho wasn't far from it. "What happened?" they chorused.

The Hufflepuff champion revealed that Dumbledore had informed all of them that he'd recently discovered what had happened at the beginning of the year. Harry's name had been entered into the Goblet of Fire by a Death Eater impersonating Professor Moody. His intention had been for Harry to win the tournament, then kidnap him as he claimed his victory. (He didn't say why, but all present assumed that the intention was to kill him.)

The headmaster went on to assure them that the plot had been uncovered and foiled, and the perpetrator in custody, but they could not completely rule out the possibility that some danger remained. Each champion was given the option to withdraw, but none took it. With that, he'd dismissed the rest of them but asked Harry to stay behind.

Once the room had cleared, the headmaster gestured to Harry to come closer. "I feel you have the right to know the rest of the story," he revealed. "Once we were certain we were in full possession of all the details, a group of us paid a visit to Riddle Manor, which was the location you saw in your vision last summer."

Seeing the question on Harry's face, and knowing what he wanted to ask, he elaborated. "The party included myself, Professor Snape, Professor Moody, the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Amelia Bones, and three of her most trusted Aurors. We were successful in capturing both Pettigrew and Voldemort himself in the form of a small, baby-like creature. We also killed his snake, Nagini."

Harry released a long, heartfelt sigh of relief. Dumbledore allowed himself a brief smile and continued. "The creature that contains the essence of Voldemort is being held in secret by the Unspeakables, who are studying him to learn how he kept from dying that night." A look of alarm flashed in Harry's eyes and again, the headmaster anticipated his concern.

"All those involved are completely trustworthy," he declared. We acquired the names of all the Death Eaters and their sympathizers in the Ministry by interrogating both Barty Crouch, Jr. and Pettigrew. And you will be delighted to know that as a result of these events, Sirius will be cleared ..."

Harry couldn't help himself – he interrupted the aged professor with a whoop of delight. This elicited a broad smile from Dumbledore, accompanied by the familiar twinkling in his eyes. "While you should keep these things to yourself until the time is right, I can also tell you that Barty Crouch, Sr. has been relieved of his position. The announcement will cite his illness, and he will require around the clock care." Harry nodded, understanding that this was in reality a house arrest. "Minister Fudge has agreed to resign after the tournament has concluded," Dumbledore went on. "We have negotiated an agreement that I believe will be best for all concerned."

Harry shrugged. He was aware that politics sometimes required compromise, and knew that such things were best left to others with more experience than he had. Dumbledore finished by saying that things looked very positive, indeed, better than at any time in recent memory.

"Now, I believe Miss Granger, as well as several others, are waiting for you out in the hall," he concluded with a twinkle. Harry thanked him and grinned, then turned to take his leave.

To his surprise, he found all three of the other champions had remained, along with Hermione and Cho. Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor immediately began to talk at once, all apologizing for not believing him from the start. Then, individually, they each informed him of how impressed they were with his performance in the tournament.

"Wait, you don't understand, I had help," he protested. "The fake Moody was seeing to it that I would win, remember?"

"If you'll recall, I had help as well," Cedric countered. "On both tasks."

"As did I," Viktor chimed in. Fleur nodded, to indicate that she did too.

"We all knew about ze dragons, and you still did ze best," she pointed out.

"And you beat all of us to the hostages in the lake," Cedric added.

Harry shrugged helplessly, glancing toward Hermione for assistance. She merely beamed at him, Cho struggling to stifle a grin beside her.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, it's over now," Harry declared. "I'm not even going to try to complete the third task. You three are the legitimate champions; your names were selected fair and square. One of you deserves to win."

This pronouncement was greeted with disbelief.

"What about ze fame and ze one zousand Galleon prize?" Fleur stammered out.

"I already have enough of both of those," Harry reminded them, pointing to his scar. She conceded his point, but next Viktor admitted that he too had plenty of fame and money, but asserted that he was competing for the honor of Durmstrang.

"And Cedric is competing for the honor of Hogwarts," Harry concluded firmly. "And that's the way it should be."

Seeing he was not to be dissuaded, the other three all accepted his decision and they all shook his hand. Fleur added a hug.

As the group broke apart to go their separate ways, Hermione wrapped an arm around Harry and squeezed hard. Leaning her head against his shoulder, she whispered. "Have I told you lately how proud of you I am?"

A warm glow filled Harry all the way back to Gryffindor Tower.

-ooOoo-

During the last week in May, another meeting of the champions was called. To their surprise, Bagman took them outside to the quidditch pitch, which they discovered to be covered with crisscrossing rows of hedges. Viktor Krum correctly identified it as a maze.

Bagman then explained the third task – they would be required to navigate to the center of the maze to reach the Triwizard Cup. Along the way would be obstacles in the form of spells and creatures to overcome.

Once again, the four champions stayed together after being dismissed to discuss what they had learned. If one of the goals of the tournament was truly to foster international magical cooperation, it seemed to be succeeding, at least for these four.

“An interesting challenge,” Viktor offered.

Fleur agreed. “Better than the first two, in my opinion.”

But Harry and Cedric were shaking their heads, which drew concerned looks from the other two. “If Hagrid’s providing the dangerous creatures, I’m worried,” Harry pointed out. “He thinks things like dragons and acromantulas make interesting *pets*. It scares me to think of what he might consider *dangerous*.”

“Don’t forget the cerberus,” Cedric reminded him. The guardian behind the forbidden door on the third floor corridor during Harry’s first year had been widely known due to the explorations of several curious students.

Harry grimaced. “Not likely,” he muttered, shaking his head at the memory.

“How big do you suppose the blast-ended skrewts will be by then?” he wondered. (Unfortunately, it would not turn out to be a rhetorical question.) Cedric tried to explain the characteristics of the new magical creatures that Hagrid had bred by crossing manticores with fire-crabs. The problem was that every month a new deadly feature manifested itself, and it was anyone’s guess what they’d be like by the end of June.

After some discussion, the champions agreed to practice together for the final task, and share any information they might uncover regarding specific threats. Before the gathering broke up, the other three persuaded Harry to practice as well, since he would at least need to enter the maze.

-ooOoo-

June 24

The morning of the third task, Harry and Hermione entered the Great Hall for breakfast together, as usual. But this day there were some different faces awaiting them. The families of all the champions had come to spend some time with them and lend them their support. To Harry’s surprise, Molly and Bill Weasley were there for him.

Harry took a moment to set Mrs. Weasley straight about Rita Skeeter’s story about him, Hermione, and Ron. To his relief, she let him know that the twins and Ginny had already explained the situation to her, and that she had little use for Skeeter’s scandal mongering.

The champions all introduced each other to their families, although Harry had already met Cedric’s father, and of course, Fleur’s sister Gabrielle. An odd thing happened when it came time for the Weasleys to meet the Delacours. Bill and Fleur seemed to connect with each other instantly.

Bill grinned, and Fleur shot him a dazzling smile. Then her smile grew even wider when she realized he was resistant to her Veela allure. Unconsciously, she released it in steadily increasing magnitude, such that Harry could feel the tug on his emotions, and noticed Viktor and Cedric start to go glassy-eyed. But then, in an instant, the feeling was gone as Fleur realized what she was doing and broke it off at a sharp word from her mother.

Bill only grinned more broadly, as Fleur blushed and looked away. But Harry caught her turning to follow him with her eyes as he led the Weasleys from the hall for a stroll around the castle, and he wondered if he was witnessing the start of something interesting.

That evening, the champions met one last time just prior to the beginning of the task. They each wished each other luck, and decided that they would all meet at the Cup and take it together, just in case. The other three told Harry to follow along behind them. He had been planning to find a deserted corner of the maze and just sit it out, but they persuaded him that it would be safer this way. The clincher was that he would be in a better position to help out if one of them got into serious trouble.

As it turned out, it was a good decision. As the leader, Harry entered the maze first, then waited at the first turn while Cedric, then Viktor, then Fleur came in and passed him by. He trailed Fleur at a distance, on the alert for anything that might sneak up on them from behind. Her scream was his first indication that more trouble awaited them up ahead.

He quickly overtook her, and discovered her battling a blast-ended skrewt. It was now ten feet long, with an armor-like shell that resisted any curse they fired at it. Finally, Harry remembered that its underside was uncovered, and managed to hit it there and immobilize it with an *Impediment* jinx. From that point on, the two of them continued through the maze together, cooperating against each obstacle they encountered, among them a magical mist, a boggart, and finally a sphinx.

The magical mist was extremely disorienting, causing them to feel upside down. Fleur found the counter first. “Close your eyes,” she shouted to him. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he felt solid ground once again under his feet.

The boggart first appeared as a bent, wrinkled old woman. As Fleur cautiously approached, the woman snapped something at her in French,

causing the Beauxbatons champion to sink to the ground in dismay. (1) But when Harry stepped forward to confront the old woman, she changed into a dementor!

"Riddikulus!" he shouted, now recognizing the creature for what it was, and the dementor shriveled up and vanished into a black mist.

The sphinx required each of them to solve a riddle. Fleur again went first, and once more Harry was in the dark as her riddle was spoken in French. Fleur thought a minute, then answered confidently, and the sphinx allowed her to pass. She stopped a few paces further on and waited.

Harry correctly solved the first part of his riddle – 'spy' – but was completely mystified by the second. *The middle of middle and end of the end? What could that possibly be?* he wondered.

"The letter 'D'," Fleur called out. The stone faced sphinx turned its gaze to her, and Harry tensed, readying his wand, fearing the powerful creature would attack her for assisting him. But it only stared at her for a short time, then turned back. Fleur remained silent as he worked out the third part and put it all together to identify a creature he wouldn't want to kiss – a spider. Silently, the sphinx stepped aside and he hurried to join Fleur.

"Thanks," he muttered as they moved forward. "Hermione usually handles stuff like that. She's great at word and logic puzzles." Fleur glanced at him and nodded, a light smile forming on her lips.

"Have you told her how you feel?" she inquired.

Harry was brought up short, and shot her a puzzled look. "Er, I think so," he replied uncertainly. "I mean, I've told her how much I appreciate what she does for me more than once."

"Have you told her you love her?" Fleur persisted. Harry's jaw dropped, and the French witch shrugged. "It's obvious to me, but perhaps not to a teenaged boy." She shot him a teasing grin, and Harry blushed, shaking his head in confusion. *Tell her I love her? Do I?*

The conversation abruptly ceased as they turned the final corner of the maze, spotting Cedric and Viktor ahead, sitting on the ground. Both looked somewhat the worse for wear, and the reason was evident – off to the side was an enormous acromantula, which they had apparently just finished subduing. And just beyond ... the Triwizard Cup sat gleaming on a pedestal.

Harry gazed at the scene before him for several seconds, imagining how the battle with the giant spider might have played out, and pondering how he might have fared against it. Probably not well, he decided.

"So, who won?" he asked. Viktor nodded toward Cedric, as both boys rose to their feet.

"He was here first," he explained briefly. "We both fought the creature. It was difficult. But he is the rightful champion." Cedric looked as if he wanted to object, and claim they should tie for the victory, but was cut off by a firm hug from Fleur. Harry followed her, offering his hand to the Hufflepuff in congratulations.

Then the four conversed about how to proceed. They didn't want to discount the possibility that the Cup was trapped in some fashion. Eventually they decided that all four would hold on to each other, wands out and ready, as Cedric claimed the prize. Viktor linked arms with Cedric, then Fleur took hold of Viktor, then Harry wrapped his free arm around Fleur, representing their order of finish.

Cedric grabbed the handle, and in a swirl of color, the portkey in the Cup activated.

Hermione had decided to sit with Cho in the stands to watch the final task. She'd become friends with the bright and pretty, but somewhat shy Ravenclaw during the past month, as the four of them spent increasing amounts of time in the library, and in an empty classroom practicing spells. And she had continued to ponder the Chinese witch's assertion from their conversation of two months previous. She was indeed very fond of Harry, and was certain he would make a wonderful boyfriend. But did she have the courage to take the next step?

Sitting there, she realized how tedious the second task must have been for the spectators, staring at the surface of the lake for an hour. This time there wasn't much to see, but they could hear shouts, spells being cast, and the occasional crashing noise. Each girl clung tightly to the others' hand as the sounds of conflict moved closer to the center of the maze. Fortunately, no red sparks had emerged yet, to signal a competitor that was injured and in need of emergency assistance.

As they approached the two hour mark, the maze fell silent, following one final loud crash. The two witches shared a glance. Some very large creature must have just been defeated. Hopefully, whichever champion it was battling remained standing. A minute passed, then two, then five. The tension was becoming excruciating.

A flash of rainbow colors suddenly exploded at the entrance to the maze, and both girls leapt to their feet. Without pausing to converse, they jointly hurried to the steps and clambered down from the stands as four figures appeared. A quick glance showed that each was standing, alert, and at least not too badly injured.

Loud cheering greeted the four champions when they landed, wands out and each in a defensive crouch. Gradually, they relaxed their stances as they took in their surroundings, recognizing that the task was concluded and they were out of danger. They all turned to grin at each other in relief as the tournament officials began approaching. Then two smaller figures pushed past Bagman, Percy Weasley, and the three school heads and raced toward them. Cedric and Harry's grins turned to smiles as they recognized the new arrivals.

Cho didn't slow down at all, but raced up and jumped into Cedric's arms, hugging and kissing him vigorously, and more cheers broke out from the watching students at the sight. For her part, Hermione paused only briefly before wrapping Harry in a crushing hug, her mind awlirl.

*Should I do it? Could I do it?* In a split second she made her decision – she’d kiss him, but only briefly, tentatively. Afterward she could pass it off as the excitement of the moment if necessary.

For his part, Harry, with Fleur’s words still on his mind, resolved to let his Gryffindor side take over. He would tell her how much she meant to him, and worry about the consequences later.

Hermione had tilted her head back and was moving forward when Harry blurted it out.

“I love you Hermione.”

The kiss that followed was not at all tentative. And, like the cheering that followed, not restrained in the slightest.

-oooOOOooo-

## Epilogue

The summer that followed was completely unlike any Harry had ever experienced. It began with Sirius and Dumbledore getting into a quite vigorous discussion over whether he had to return to the Dursleys. Legally, the headmaster had no leg to stand on, but managed to obtain a minor concession – Harry would stay at Privet Drive one week, and Padfoot would accompany him. The Dursleys only accepted the arrangement after being assured that once that week was over, he would be gone. As far as Harry and Sirius were concerned, that meant permanently.

Viktor Krum had invited Harry to visit him in Bulgaria, and Fleur had invited him to France. He spent three exciting weeks training with Viktor, seeing up close what the life of a professional quidditch player was like. He recognized that the level of play was far beyond what they did at Hogwarts, but regarded that as a benefit, since competing against better players would raise the level of his own game.

At the end of July, he returned to England and the Burrow for his birthday, allowing Molly to throw him a party. Hermione attended, of course, as did Cedric and Cho, and to Harry’s surprise, Fleur. She was in England interviewing for a job at Gringotts, and when Bill saw her there, he invited her to Harry’s party. Or at least, that was their story.

After a week with the Weasleys, he accompanied the Granger family for the better part of the month of August on a vacation to the south of France, which included a visit to the Delacour chateau. And last but not least, a week on the French beaches, where Harry made an eye-opening discovery regarding swimwear customs.

His potential embarrassment was curbed by the fact that Hermione did not follow that particular custom. Even if she had been so inclined (at the age of fifteen), the presence of her parents dispelled any possibility of her participation. (Not that she would necessarily rule it out for future visits with Harry, preferably in a less crowded setting.)

In the political arena, the new Minister of Magic took an aggressive position toward Voldemort’s remaining followers, aided by the no nonsense Director of Magical Law Enforcement, Madame Bones. The lists of names they’d obtained from their interrogation of Crouch and Pettigrew were put to good use. The Death Eaters who’d bought their way out of prison had not been acquitted; the charges had merely been dropped. And there was no statute of limitations on murder, in either the muggle or magical world.

Lucius Malfoy was the first to be arrested, interestingly in connection with his actions during Harry’s second year, on charges of coercion and endangerment with a cursed object. The strategy, it turned out, was to get him in custody for whatever reason, then use Veritaserum to uncover additional crimes. He soon had a one way ticket to Azkaban.

Seeing which way the wind was blowing, his fellow Death Eaters began to flee the country, along with their families, including Avery, Crabbe, Goyle, Macnair, Nott, and Yaxley. Some found sanctuary elsewhere, some would be caught and returned. But either way, Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, and Theo Nott would no longer strut the halls of Hogwarts.

To his initial delight, Draco was enrolled in Durmstrang. Unfortunately, his father’s name carried no weight at the German school; to the contrary Viktor Krum’s friendship with Harry and Draco’s inability to keep his mouth shut about his antipathy for the Boy Who Lived ensured his relegation to the bottom of the social order. The last time anyone heard of him, he’d joined a pureblood supremacist movement in Eastern Europe. He was eventually captured in a failed robbery attempt to secure funding, and spent the rest of his life in prison.

As their lives moved forward, all of the Triwizard champions kept in touch, becoming close friends. Cedric was named Head Boy the following school year, one of the most popular choices in many years. Harry and Gryffindor did beat him and Hufflepuff out for the quidditch cup, but he accepted the loss graciously. As it turned out, Cedric and Cho did eventually break up, but as she had predicted, remained good friends.

There were also changes at Hogwarts, the most significant being the resignation of Severus Snape, who with the final defeat of Voldemort no longer needed to subject himself to having to pretend to teach what he regarded as dunderheads. He was replaced by a former professor and head of Slytherin house named Slughorn.

As for Harry and Hermione, they were, as Hermione expected, both named prefect that year. This served to expand their circle of friends, which grew to include Hannah Abbott and her best friend Susan Bones of Hufflepuff, Padma Patil (who assured Harry that she bore him no ill will for her miserable date to the Yule Ball) and Anthony Goldstein of Ravenclaw, and most surprisingly, the Slytherin prefects Blaise Zabini (the only boy left in Slytherin in his year) and Tracey Davis, along with her friend Daphne Greengrass.

And lastly, true to the plan they’d agreed on that long ago December night, Harry and Hermione made good use of the Prefects’ Bath for the remainder of their stay at Hogwarts – eventually without the use of swimsuits.

But that’s a different story.

