

Wizards and Champions

by HogwartsHoney

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

New Beginnings

Chapter 1 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Jo owns them, and she'd probably be quite upset at what they do here! Any situations and/or quotes that you recognise have been taken from the book "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire"; what you don't know is mine, all mine! Enjoy. Rating is for later chapters.

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Cedric turned at the sound of his father's voice and saw a collection of redheads approaching – the Weasleys. His father had mentioned that the family would be taking the Portkey with them to the World Cup. He smiled and looked around at the group as it gathered around him, recognising the twins, their younger brother Ron and a young girl who could only be their sister. He also noted Hermione Granger, whom he knew to be good friends with Ron, and his eyes widened at the sight of ... Harry Potter.

Cedric knew about him from previous years of course, but really, *whodidn't* know about The Boy Who Lived. Harry was two years behind Cedric in their classes, and he was happy to see him in the company of the Weasleys. Cedric smiled warmly at the approaching group, although the twins still kept their distance from him.

'Come on, lads, it was only a house Quidditch match,' he said good-naturedly. 'Someone had to win and that time it was Hufflepuff. Give us a break already.'

Grudgingly Fred and George smiled, but Cedric knew that if any family were Quidditch crazy, it was the Weasleys. He was sure they were waiting for a chance to even the score.

His father made a big deal over Harry. Of course he couldn't have known that Cedric had secretly harboured a fascination of the younger boy since the previous year, but when Amos went on about how Cedric had beaten Harry Potter at Quidditch, Cedric felt the heat rise in his face. Nervously, he looked away and pretended to scan the horizon, while inside his chest his heart beat a tattoo like a wild thing.

'Good Merlin, why must he go on about that?' he muttered, finding it difficult to maintain his composure. He spoke quickly to his father who, oblivious to the feelings of those around him, continued to pontificate about his son's ability.

Mercifully, the time had come to Port and they all stood huddled around the old boot held by his father. Cedric looked around at his travelling companions and at Harry directly across from him. The younger wizard was sandwiched between Ron and Hermione and, as Mr Weasley counted down the time, Cedric was oddly delighted by the excitement on Harry's face that seemed to glow in the semi-light.

'Three ... two ...'

He glanced again at Harry, and their eyes met as they grinned at each other.

'One!' and they were off.

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They sailed through the air, spinning wildly as they Ported to the World Cup grounds. Cedric enjoyed riding by Portkey and thought that the sensation was closest to flying madly without a broom. The wanton confusion of it all appealed to him, a boy who had been brought up by the straight and narrow, to follow the path of societal convention, to be proper.

He looked around at his grinning Porting companions, and his eyes locked onto Harry's face. The look of sheer delight and excited wonder on the younger boy's face evoked sensations in Cedric's body and strangely delicious thoughts in his mind; excited fluttering thoughts that evaded clarity and floated just out of mind's reach.

He remembered his first Portkey when his father had taken him to work one day, and the Floo Network wasn't working properly. His father had removed what looked like a very small clock from his pocket and had placed it on the kitchen table. He withdrew his wand and tapped the object as he murmured an incantation. The object had glowed with an eerie blue light and had rattled around on the table before coming to rest. He had looked at his father questioningly, but Amos had simply smiled and held his son's hand. He then placed a finger on the small clock and Cedric had felt a jerk behind his navel for the very first time.

He was brought back to the present rather abruptly as their Porting group landed. He managed to keep his feet as the rest of the youngsters collapsed on the ground. Laughing, he leaned down and extended his hand to Harry as they clambered to their feet. As their hands met there was a definite *sssnnnnap!* as though a connection had been made, a connection more than a merely physical one. Cedric's eyes widened, as he was sure they both felt it. Their eyes met and sealed the connection into a self-perpetuating loop that briefly excluded the world around them.

'C'mon, Harry, let's get going.' Ron's voice stole into Cedric's altered consciousness, and he shook his head, releasing Harry's hand. Amos threw his arm around his son's shoulders, and they headed off, waving farewell to the Weasley group. Cedric could still feel the heat of Harry's palm in his own.

As they walked to find their tent, Cedric pondered the consequences of his thoughts about Harry and wondered just what his subsequent reactions were all about. He suspected that he knew and was surprised to find himself so drawn to the younger boy after just one meeting and one touch. One touch that had seemed so inconsequential to onlookers, but that spoke volumes to Cedric, and he couldn't shake the unmistakable feeling that things were going to change.

Significantly.

TBC

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A/N: Opinions? Questions? Reviews?

Dark Night

Chapter 2 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

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Later that afternoon as the excitement of the final match became more tangible, Cedric walked through the buzzing crowd in search of some World Cup merchandise. He had seen people walking around with Irish and Bulgarian national flags that played the national anthems when waved, and he was intrigued at what else was being offered. He didn't have to walk very far before he came upon a bunch of salesmen, and he was momentarily distracted by the volume of merchandising for the World Cup. The flags he had seen before, but there was more. Miniature figures of the team players, squealing Irish rosettes and shamrocks, as well as scarves and trading cards, all in all, an impressive selection. He purchased a rosette that squealed the names of the Irish players and was examining his newly purchased set of Omnioculars when something whizzed by his face. He turned in surprise and realized that it was a miniature Firebolt that had zoomed past his head, closely followed by two or three more.

He managed to catch one and examined it closer. It was perfect in every detail, down to the inscription of the brand name on the handle. Unbidden, a random thought swept through his mind. Harry has a Firebolt. Just as quickly, the thought fled and took with it all logic and reason. Impulsively, he paid for the broom and collected the gift box with which it came. He left the area without looking at anything else and returned to his tent, oddly happy with his purchases.

Later that night, he accompanied his father to the massive stadium. They found their assigned seats, and as his father walked off to greet some of his associates, Cedric looked around the arena. The crowd was enormous and very jubilant, and excitement thrummed through his body. He could see the Top Box slightly above him and to his right as it filled with visiting dignitaries. He looked through his Omnioculars and noticed that the Minister of Magic had entered the box and was being greeted by Mr Weasley. Cedric clicked the zoom knob of his Omnioculars and the scene immediately became larger, the view even closer than before. He continued along the line of redheads and smiled as he realized that nearly the entire Weasley clan was there. His eyes widened when Mr. Fudge reached out and shook hands with ... Harry! Cedric looked on as Mr. Fudge spoke briefly with Harry and then introduced him to some other wizards. Cedric hurriedly fiddled with the knobs on his Omnioculars and eventually had Harry's smiling face in his entire field of view. He was content to replay the scene over again many times until he was interrupted as his father took his seat beside him. Moments later, a booming voice echoed through the stadium, and he smiled at his father as they joined in the cheers of the crowd to welcome the start of the final match.

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The match proved to be absolutely spectacular with exciting plays and goals scored on both sides. After Ireland's win, despite Krum's capture of the Snitch, Cedric joined his father and some other Ministry workers for drinks in their tent. There was much hilarity and mirth and talk of the next World Cup was a hot topic when suddenly noise erupted outside the tent. His father and the other men hastened through the opening and into a melee of screaming, shouting wizards running in all directions.

Cedric was alarmed when he stepped out into the fray mere moments later and was almost thrown to the ground by the rush of running people. His nerves jangled as he stumbled back and looked around wildly for his father, who was gathering the dignitaries and their wives together. Cedric looked beyond the approaching crowd and felt an eerie surge of malevolence and bone-chilling cold. He realized the grim aura belonged to the group of hooded wizards that strode across the campgrounds a short distance away, casting destruction with every wave of their wands. He also saw Muggles suspended in the air above the hooded figures. Unconsciously, his thoughts turned to Harry and the Weasleys where were they? Were they safe?

All around him was destruction, tents in flames and broken chairs scattered about like kindling. He returned to the tent to grab his jacket and belongings, then made his way

outside again. The dark figures had passed, but he could hear sounds of battle not far away. He ran in the direction of the noise, his wand out and ready, desperately afraid, but determined to be of some use. He saw a glowing image of a skull with a serpent coming out of its mouth appear in the sky. He felt the blood in his veins run cold as an unnatural chill shook him to his core. Although he was too young to have first hand knowledge of that spectre, he knew enough to recognise the Dark Mark and to realize that it was a very bad sign.

Cedric didn't know when his father appeared at his side, but he felt Amos' fingers digging into the flesh of his upper arm. His father had his wand out and he was shouting.

'...and take this Portkey, Cedric, take it, and let your mother know that I'll be home as soon as I can. Do it now, Cedric, NOW!'

Before Cedric could open his mouth to object, his father pressed a tennis ball into his hand, and in mere moments he was in the front yard of his parents' home. Upon landing, he staggered and dropped to his knees, breathing heavily as the shock and horror of the recent events finally sank into his head. He looked around uneasily, checking to see that he was indeed safe before he caught his breath and went inside to wake his mother.

Cedric and his mother sat in the kitchen of their home and waited for Amos' return. Cedric had finally stopped shaking after his mother had wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and made him a cup of strong tea. He had paced back and forth in front of their fireplace, as though the repetitive movement would somehow hasten his father's arrival. His mother merely sat at the kitchen table and watched her son's movements as she grasped her cup of tea in both hands. They waited.

After an indeterminable time, Cedric heard the door open and his father entered, looking windswept, tired and nervous. His eyes met Cedric's thankfully for a moment before he quickly crossed the floor and embraced his wife. She returned his hug tightly and then busied herself with making her husband some tea. Amos sank wearily into the nearest chair and held his head in his hands.

'Dad, what happened? What caused that sign in the sky? Who were those people?' Cedric's mind was a clutter of questions which couldn't spill from his mouth quickly enough as he moved to kneel in front of his father. Amos raised a quieting hand; he looked as though he needed time to gather his thoughts.

'Amos,' his wife enquired gently. 'Cedric told me what he saw. Do you think he's... returned?' Her voice quavered as she placed a cup of tea into her husband's hands.

Amos sighed deeply and took a sip of his tea to steady himself.

'Sheila, Cedric, the sign in the sky was the Dark Mark. The dark figures, the ones you saw, Cedric, marching with the Muggles in the air and causing destruction, those were Death Eaters.'

Cedric's blood ran cold; he'd heard enough about the history of the Death Eaters and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to realize that things had taken a very bad turn indeed. He felt a cold and sickly shiver go down his spine and a large knot of fear deep in his gut as he looked to his mother for her reaction. Her face showed unmistakable fear and her eyes took on a faraway look, as though she were remembering horrors of the past. He looked to his father, who was rubbing his forehead as though trying to erase the scenes he had witnessed that night. Cedric understood that reasoning completely. He had the distinct impression that his father was holding back a lot of information, but he knew better than to try to get anything more out of him tonight.

Cedric rose to his feet; he was tired and desperately needed to sleep. He rubbed his knees where they had rested on the cold kitchen floor and placed what he hoped was a comforting hand on his father's shoulder. He kissed his mother goodnight, then turned and headed up the stairs to his bedroom. Once inside, he closed the door and leaned against it, almost too tired to think. He wondered if Harry and the Weasleys had managed to get out of the tumultuous campgrounds safely, and he considered the implications of the Dark Mark in the sky. He flung himself onto his bed, and was about to turn onto his stomach when he felt a fluttering in his jacket pocket. He reached inside to find the tiny Firebolt furiously trying to get free of its box. He smiled at the miniature broom and its single-mindedness of purpose, content simply to fly, fly, and fly. Wearily, he let the broom go and lay back in bed as he watched it swoop back and forth over his head, back and forth, and slowly his eyes closed until he saw no more.

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TBC

A/N: Again, snaps to my Nishie for all the ideas, and to both Jackie and Cocomachristy for their never ending help with commas ! Please review.

A New Year Begins

Chapter 3 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

A/N: Anything you recognise is taken from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. Everything else is mine. Thanks to my Nishles for the endless discussions about our boys!

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Cedric arose early after a troubled and sleepless night. Visions of the Dark Mark in the sky and dreams of him being trapped in a sea of screaming people haunted his few sleeping moments. His head was aching, and he clambered out of bed, rubbing his scratchy eyes as he made his way downstairs.

'Morning, Mum, Dad,' he managed in between expansive yawns.

'Good morning my boy,' his father said, trying to sound jovial as he too yawned.

'Good lord, Cedric, sit yourself down and have some breakfast before you faint,' his mother admonished with a twinkle in her eyes that belied her tone.

He took his seat at the table and poured himself a cup of orange juice as his mother placed two large plates in front of the men, filled with scrambled eggs, sausages, bacon, tomatoes, and toast.

'Well, Ced I have to be at the Ministry early this morning to meet with Arthur Weasley and the rest of that lot. Merlin knows there'll be lots of questions that'll need answering after that fiasco.' Amos sighed.

Cedric's mind slowly began working again. The Weasleys. What about Harry? His father hadn't mentioned anything about Harry.

'So, the Weasleys all made it through okay? Everyone?' he enquired carefully, trying to sound nonchalant as he chewed on a strip of bacon.

Amos barely looked up at his son as he ate his meal hurriedly.

'Yes, yes, they're all fine. Bit of a mess with that Potter boy though.'

Cedric felt a chill go down his spine, and suddenly the bacon in his mouth lost its taste. He looked at his father anxiously, even though he tried to appear only moderately interested.

'What mess is that, Dad?' he asked conversationally.

'Well, there was a bit of bother over his wand. Seems it was used to conjure the Dark Mark, yet he swears he didn't conjure it. Don't suppose he could have really; he's just a young boy. Most odd,' Amos muttered, drifting off into thought as he sipped his tea.

'Harry's wand conjured the Dark Mark?' Cedric asked incredulously. 'But, Dad, surely that's ...'

Amos finished the last mouthful of his tea, wiped his mouth on his napkin and stood, shrugging into his travelling robes.

'Can't get into it with you right now, Ced, I must be off,' he said gently, clapping his son on the back and kissing Sheila on the cheek.

'Be back later,' he said cheerfully as he threw Floo powder into the fireplace and disappeared in a blaze of green flames.

Cedric stared absentmindedly into the flames long after his father had disappeared, mulling over the happenings of the past twenty-four hours.

He noticed a copy of the Daily Prophet lying on the kitchen table with a blaring headline that proclaimed: 'Scenes of Terror at Quidditch World Cup'. Cedric began reading the article and was angered by the reporter's insinuations that the Ministry had somehow been at fault. From what little Cedric knew of the dark forces, he doubted whether they ever gave much warning of their evil intentions. The article seemed to be more about sensationalist journalism than a quest for the truth.

'Prats,' he muttered under his breath as he crushed the paper angrily between his hands and tossed it aside. The photograph of the Dark Mark as it hung in the air was still partly visible, even though the paper was mangled by the force of Cedric's anger. He shivered involuntarily as his own images of the Dark Mark flashed through his mind, all the clearer because of his dreams the night before.

'Cedric! Careful, son, you nearly knocked over the teapot,' his mother's voice admonished, and her unusually sharp tone made him look up in surprise. In his bleary-eyed descent to the table earlier and his intense conversation with his father, Cedric had failed to realize that his mother was terribly worried. Her grey eyes met his searchingly, even darker than his own now as they clouded with worry. Deeply alarmed at his thoughtlessness, he hung his head in shame and moved to where she stood by the sink.

'Oh, Mum, I'm so sorry,' he began. 'I, I'm stupid. I didn't think...' he finished lamely. He held his mother's hands in his own, noting for the first time how much smaller she appeared. He had always known her to be a strong woman, and it unnerved him now to see her so uncharacteristically close to tears.

'Come, sit down here, and I'll get you something.' He helped her into a chair and looked around for the blanket he'd had around his shoulders last night, but it was nowhere to be found.

'Oh, Cedric, after your father told me what happened I was so worried,' she moaned and dropped her head into her hands. 'Please, tell me what happened, what you saw.'

Cedric wasn't sure he wanted to go over it again; he'd been haunted by the scenes in his dreams. He knew that he couldn't refuse her and made her a cup of tea while he tried to organize his memories. He managed to delay his reply until he sat in front of her at the table and placed the cup in her hands, but as she looked up at him expectantly, he sighed and began.

'Well, it happened quite long after the match, I was with Dad in the tent. We were making lots of noise, and there was a great deal of noise inside coming through from outside too, you know, with the celebrations and all that. Suddenly there was a very different set of screaming and shouting.' Cedric shuddered as the images flashed through his mind, almost like they were being seared into him once again.

'Dad ran outside almost immediately and I could see through the open flap of the tent that people were running outside, frantically running in all directions. The tent was almost empty by the time I'd managed to get outside, and I was almost knocked over by the surge of people.' Cedric could see his mother's eyes grow wider and wondered at the wisdom of telling her everything.

'I could see Dad in the distance; he was helping some of the foreign dignitaries get organized so that they could find safety, or Port back to their homes, I don't know which. I felt a horrible chill inside me, colder than the air around, but this chill, it seemed to ... I don't know really, it seemed to almost ... crawl inside me.' He shuddered at the memory, and he saw that his mother had done the same.

Sheila reached out and grasped her son's hands in her own, stroking them soothingly as she'd done when he was a young boy. Cedric breathed deeply and then continued.

'I saw them then, the Death Eaters. They were in a tight group, casting spells and destroying tents. They had a Muggle family too, Mum, with children, all suspended above their heads, and the Muggles were screaming. There were people running everywhere, falling over themselves to get out of the way, but they just kept marching through the campsite. Not long after that, I saw it. The Dark Mark just hanging in the sky, and that's when I knew, but I felt so helpless. There was nothing I could do.'

He bent his head as he acknowledged both his fear and his shame, and his mother placed her hands on the back of his head. She smoothed his hair and patted his back, rocking him gently as she had done all his life when things had been too hard to handle. It didn't occur to him to mind.

He brushed the back of his hand across his eyes and raised his head again.

'Then Dad found me, and before I could say anything, he'd Ported me here.' A flash of something akin to anger crossed Cedric's face briefly, but it was enough for his mother to notice.

'Now, Cedric, you mustn't be too harsh on your father. He did what he thought was best, and even though you might have wanted to stay behind and fight, you don't know the enemy enough to properly appreciate what you would have been up against.' Cedric started to protest, but she quietened him with her hand, a sense of urgency evident in her eyes.

'No, son, believe me, the Death Eaters are a considerable force and your father was absolutely right in doing what he did. Bravery is a wonderful thing, but it's no good to you if you're ... dead.' Her voice faltered at the end, and her grey eyes filled with tears as her hands rushed to her mouth. As her muffled cries turned to wracking sobs, Cedric could do nothing. Helplessly, he wrapped his arms around his mother and held her until her weeping subsided.

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The morning that Cedric was due to return to Hogwarts, he descended the stairs to find his father fully dressed. Amos Diggory shook his son's hand firmly and clapped him on the shoulder with a regretful smile.

'Sorry I can't come with you and your mother, m'boy, but I have to get to the Ministry to send off some urgent owls. I'll expect to hear from you by the end of the week, alright?'

Cedric smiled ruefully and nodded his understanding, as he knew that his father was still trying to settle things at the office since the World Cup fracas. Amos kissed his

wife and, with a nod to Cedric, Disapparated.

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Sheila Diggory hugged her son tightly and bade him farewell at King's Cross station. He smiled and stepped through the wall to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, where he felt an immediate sense of security at the sight of the Hogwarts Express, gleaming red as it waited for its passengers. He'd always thought of the train as an extension of Hogwarts itself, a tunnel that joined the school to the rest of the world. He noticed Ernie McMillan standing with several other fourth and fifth years from Hufflepuff and they smiled as he approached the small group. They found their seats on the train and proceeded to chat about their summer adventures. Cedric was happy to delegate his Prefect duties to the fifth year Prefects, so he relaxed, half-listening to the conversations around him. Even though everyone had their version of the goings on at the Quidditch World Cup, the basic information seemed to be the same. He sighed and leaned back into his seat as he closed his eyes and thought about the World Cup and all that had transpired since.

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In the week following the Death March at the World Cup, his father had worked long hours every day at the Ministry as he and the other members of his team attempted to recreate the events that had transpired. It appeared as though Harry had been exonerated of any wrong doing, but the question of how his wand fell into another's hands had still been a matter of much debate.

His father had also taken him aside one night after dinner and had mentioned the Triwizard Tournament. Cedric had vague recollections of such a thing but remembered it mainly from stories told when he was a boy. His father had informed him that the Tournament was to be reinstated at Hogwarts during the upcoming year. He had listened as his father extolled the competition, and Amos' eyes had glowed as he described the glory and honour that awaited a Triwizard Champion.

'I don't want you to think of it as an easy thing, m'boy,' he had said, his eyes twinkling. 'The Tournament is a very serious, magically binding undertaking, and it is designed to test not only your skills as a wizard, but also your ability to cope with all kinds of danger.' He had given his son a meaningful look. 'But the glory, Cedric, the honour, the power afforded to the winner! The possibilities are endless!'

Cedric had pondered his father's words that night as he lay in bed wondering what the implications of the Tournament were. He had been caught up in his father's excitement and had envisioned himself holding the Cup above his head, victorious. He had felt rivers of exhilaration down his spine at the mere thought of winning, and he had known then that he would certainly enter the Tournament and pit his skill against the other competitors.

Cedric had been groomed for success most of his life to attain excellence, both in his academic life and in the sporting arena. Being chosen as both Captain and Seeker of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team in his fifth year had pleased his father to no end, and when he was chosen as Prefect, Amos Diggory had been almost beside himself with joy and pride. This upcoming competition was sure to be a natural continuation for him and a new opportunity to hone his skills and apply his talent.

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The rocking movement of the train must have lulled him into sleep, but he was suddenly awakened by rough hands shaking him. Bleary eyed, he turned to see who his tormentor was, only to be greeted by the laughter of Markus Hughes and Jamie Bryers, two of his roommates and his best friends.

Markus was tall and appeared to have gotten even more muscular over the summer. He was dark haired, dark eyed, powerfully built in an almost Italian sort of way, and his deeply tanned skin enhanced the overall image of swarthinness. A definite lady-killer, Markus was loud, gregarious, funny and desperately good looking a combination that virtually ensured that he could have anyone he wanted at any time. Cedric was slightly in awe of that kind of power.

Jamie was a lighter version of Markus in almost every way. He was shorter than both Cedric and Markus, but long and lean. His light brown hair had been lightened further by the summer sun and shone with the golden vigour of youth and health. His blue eyes were deep, gentle, and caring, and whereas Markus was the troublemaker, Jamie was the peacemaker. Jamie was less likely to offend people; certainly not the way that Markus could with his quick wit and sometimes sharp tongue. No, Jamie tended to be more like Cedric. He valued fair play and honesty above all else and was a gentle, quieting and comforting presence in the wake of Hurricane Hughes.

'Cedders, old mate, good to see you again!' Jamie exclaimed.

'Diggs! You old goat!' Markus' brown eyes gleamed with mischief, and Cedric knew that their attack was inevitable.

He braced himself as they flung themselves down on him and messed up his hair. They scrabbled and tugged on his robes, and he fought valiantly to stave off their assault. After a few minutes, they all collapsed in a laughing heap as they regaled each other with stories of their summer vacations.

'So out with it, Diggs, what was it like? The World Cup, I mean; the match and everything that happened afterwards?' Markus settled into his seat comfortably and put his feet up on Cedric's knees as he began to eat a Pumpkin Pasty.

'Gerroff there 'Kus, give the man some room.' Jamie came to Cedric's rescue as he swept Markus' feet onto the floor, but then he plonked himself down on Cedric's lap and posed like a young child about to be told a bedtime story.

Cedric laughed so hard he thought his sides would burst. These two idiots, his best friends in the entire world, hadn't changed one iota since their first weekend at Hogwarts.

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They had all been sorted into Hufflepuff and had spent the first week together trying to learn the layout of the castle. By Friday of their first week, they had been physically and emotionally drained by Professor Snape's Potions classes and had all agreed that they had wanted nothing more than to fall into their beds and sleep. In fact, they had spent that entire Friday night telling each other the most outrageous stories they could think of and eating all of the large box of treats and biscuits that Jamie's mother had sent with him. They had been severely ill for most of the following day, but their time in the infirmary hadn't dampened their spirits. They had staggered out sometime on Sunday, stomachs empty and ears full of Madam Pomfrey's 'tut-tuts' and mutterings of 'silly first years'. Markus had pushed his way between them and draped his arms lazily around their shoulders, and they hadn't realized at the time that their bond had been forged that day, or that they would continue to be as close as brothers all the way through their school lives.

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Markus and Jamie gave Cedric their full attention and he knew they were eager to learn about the confusion after the final match from his point of view. He told them almost everything in great detail but was careful with some of the information; he left out the part about Harry's wand being used to conjure the Dark Mark, as he didn't want the boy to suffer any further at the hands of Hogwarts students. Of course, he *completely* left out what he considered to be the most significant part of the entire experience, the fact that he and Harry had formed an unusual connection of uncertain implications. No, he'd be sure to keep *that* information all to himself. Although these two lads had known him for all of his Hogwarts life, he still considered Harry to be too much of a private thought and was still unsure of its significance. He just knew somehow that it *was* significant, and he didn't know how his friends would feel if he told him that little bit of information.

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Many hours later after the Sorting Hat had arranged the first years into their houses and the students and faculty feasted on the delicious meal, Professor Dumbledore went through his usual start-of-year notices. The students were most unhappy when he advised that the school's Quidditch Cup would not be held that year, and Cedric joined his teammates in groans and shouts of disapproval. Markus made a big show of banging his head on the table in mock-frustration as Professor Dumbledore raised his hand in an attempt to quiet the crowd, but just then the great oak doors at the end of the Hall were thrown open, and they boomed as they collided with the stone walls of the building.

The echoes surged through the Great Hall, and the enchanted ceiling above them flashed angrily as lightning streaked across it, which gave greater impact to the unexpected arrival. There was barely a sound as the man made his way towards the head table and every pair of eyes in the Hall followed his clumsy steps. Cedric could hear the ripple of whispers all around him.

'Moody, that's Mad-Eye Moody!'

'Who's he?'

'Moody?'

'The Auror!'

Yes, that was Mad-Eye Moody all right. Cedric had seen him once in passing a few years ago when he'd spoken with Cedric's father inside the Ministry of Magic. Cedric remembered that his father had appeared to be persuasive, perhaps even cajoling, and although Cedric had been too far away to hear the words and too young to care much about the contents of that meeting, he could see the tension between them evidenced by their body language. Cedric had always been intuitive that way, able to get a very strong sense of people by their auras, their 'vibes,' for lack of a better term. His father's vibes had been urging and a little pleading that day; Mad-Eye's vibes had been very scattered and uneasy then and were certainly no different tonight.

After Moody had been introduced to the student body, Professor Dumbledore continued with his announcements, and Cedric shivered with excitement a moment later when Dumbledore proclaimed that the Triwizard Tournament would be held at Hogwarts later that year. His father had been right!

'You're JOKING!'

A loud exclamation came from the Gryffindor table; a voice that sounded suspiciously like Fred or George Weasley, and Cedric's laughter joined that of the rest of the students. He tried to stop himself as he glanced furtively in the direction of the sound, knowing that Harry wouldn't be far from the Weasleys, but even with his height, he was unable to lay eyes on the smaller boy. He wasn't sure whether or not he was disappointed.

He turned his thoughts back to the Tournament as Dumbledore explained its history, and he thought again about the importance of the Cup, of how winning the tournament brought with it untold fame and opportunities to the victor, and Cedric understood his father's motivation. The thousand Galleon prize money was one thing, but Amos Diggory wanted more for his son and his family name than to be merely a Ministry official. Cedric knew that his powers had grown significantly through puberty, and he enjoyed competitions that challenged those skills, but this Tournament was huge and would pit school against school. Still, the honour of being selected to represent both his house and Hogwarts was certainly worth a try.

More groans and shouts of disapproval echoed through the hall as Professor Dumbledore imposed an age limit on the competition. Cedric had turned seventeen earlier that year and was somewhat pleased to realize that most of the student population would be excluded by that rule alone. He felt that his chances were more than average that he would be well in the running for the position of Champion.

'Blast, well, that means we're out, Markers and I, but you, Cedders! YOU could enter the tourney though.' Jamie's eyes were on fire beside him as he considered the possibilities.

'Yes, that's true, Diggs! You're the oldest, seventeen already. And you're smart. And brave. And a vewwwy powerful wizard!' Markus chimed in, laughing.

'But most of all, you're SOOOOO handsome!' the two boys chorused and then collapsed in laughter as Cedric bashed them playfully.

'*idiots,*' he thought laughingly, but he knew that their sentiments were sincere under all the mocking. Markus and Jamie; they were his band of brothers and they often referred to themselves as the Gleesome Threesome.

They righted themselves and stood up as Dumbledore dismissed the students and Markus winked at the two of them as he took the opportunity to approach Hannah Abbott. Cedric watched his progress with interest; he knew that Markus had been interested in Hannah since the previous year, but with their OWLs as their foremost priority he had elected to wait until sixth year to see what would happen. Cedric's eyes followed Markus as he joined Hannah and her friends and marvelled once again at how easily his friend could insinuate himself into various groups. He watched as Markus threw one arm around Hannah and the other around a younger Hufflepuff, whose name Cedric didn't know, and swept them both from the hall, the sound of their laughter lingering behind as Cedric and Jamie gave each other knowing looks. Markus was on the hunt no lives would be spared!

TBC

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Dark Arts and Visitors

Chapter 4 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Jo creates, I play.

A/N: Thanks to Nishles for the nitpicking, and to Cocoachristy for her infinite patience with my commas!

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The new term began quite innocently enough, in spite of the upcoming Tournament and the pending arrival of the foreign students. Cedric sent an owl to his parents, letting them know that the Tournament would indeed be hosted at Hogwarts and that he was planning to enter. He received two letters in return: a congratulatory one from his father full of encouraging words and grand ideas for his victory, and a more cautious one from his mother written in her careful script. For some reason, her letter encouraged him more than his father's.

My darling Cedric,

We received your letter and are thrilled at your wonderful

news. I know that you have learned many things in your five years at Hogwarts and continue to do so. Please know that although you are my only son and the pride of my life, I support you completely in your decision to become Champion. To me, you always were.

Much love,

Mum

Cedric felt hot tears well in his eyes and was thankful that he had opened the letter alone. His mother was not a person who showed undue emotion, but he knew that she loved him completely and beyond compare.

~*~

Cedric's first Defence Against the Dark Arts class took place on Monday afternoon. They had class with the Gryffindors, and as they filed into the classroom, chatting and laughing, the doors slammed shut behind them. The noise from the heavy wooden doors as they impacted on the brick walls echoed through the classroom. Startled, they all turned to see Professor Moody standing at the back of the room against the closed doors, his wand in his outstretched hand. His magical eye whirled and spun rapidly as he looked around the room maniacally. Cedric wondered whether the man had really lost his mind, as many people suspected, and silently questioned Dumbledore's wisdom in having the man in a school full of young wizards.

'CONSTANT VIGILANCE!' the Auror roared as he pointed his wand at each of them in turn. Many people from Gryffindor, as well as his own house, recoiled from his mad stare, and a few actually stepped away from him as he prowled up the middle of the room.

'The Dark Forces don't care a whit whether you're a good student,' he growled. 'The Dark Forces don't *care* who your parents are,' he looked pointedly at the Weasley twins before continuing, 'nor do they care whether you are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their job is to kill you, to **destroy** you,' and again he paused for effect, taking in every face of the class, 'and believe me, they will not for one moment show any remorse.'

Moody had reached the head of the class and he turned. He stood with his back to the desk and again surveyed his students, all of whom were frozen to the spot and most of whom were too dumbfounded to utter a single coherent syllable.

'Constant vigilance!' he intoned. 'Do you understand, all of you?'

Heads nodded; voices unwilling to speak.

'WHAT DID I SAY?' Moody roared again.

'C... constant vigilance,' stammered a few of the students, and then more echoed the phrase as their professor glared at them.

'Very good. Now sit,' he said simply as he walked around to sit at his desk.

The scrapes of the chairs and rumbles of the desks were the only sound in the classroom as the students settled humbly into their seats. Cedric caught Jamie's eye, and his eyebrows rose in surprise at the force of Moody's delivery. He could see Lee Jordan mouthing something to one of the Weasley twins, but no one was smiling.

Professor Moody proceeded to take attendance and fixed his magical eye firmly on each person as he called their name. Cedric had the uncomfortable feeling that Moody could see *through* him, and the thought sent shivers down his back. He would remember to ask his father for a little more information on the Auror.

He brought his attention back to the room as Professor Moody rose and began to speak once more.

'Now, I know that you've all passed your Defence Against The Dark Arts OWLs, and to that I say, "Well done." However, even though you have learned about Dark Creatures and curses in *theory*, what you will need to learn this year is how to defend yourself against a curse that is cast against you by someone who actually *means* it.'

Cedric noticed that most of his classmates joined him in casting furtive glances at each other; Professor Lupin had certainly not been this vehement in his delivery.

'You know that a curse or spell is rendered more effective by the power of the wizard or witch that casts it, of course. That's basic enough for third years, but also, the conviction behind the curse will have significant impact on its potency.'

Moody looked around the classroom wildly as the students began to twitch. Cedric could barely take his eyes off the man as he prowled between their desks.

'As for those books, put them away. They won't teach you a damn thing about how to survive,' Moody admonished, and there was a rapid scraping as the books were removed from the desks.

'You there, Mister Jordan.' Lee Jordan snapped to attention as Moody stalked towards him.

'Sir?' Lee said nervously.

'What would you do if two Death Eaters cast simultaneous Stupefy charms at you?'

'Uh ...' was Lee's only answer as Moody began to move more rapidly between their desks, pointing his wand at each student as he barked questions.

'Mister Hughes, the Cruciatus curse. How do you parry such a curse when your insides feel as if they're being ripped apart?' Markus' eyes flashed wildly as Moody continued, barely pausing to hear an answer.

'Mister Weasley!' he shouted at one of the twins; Cedric couldn't tell the difference between them, but they both jumped as if burned and stared down at the tip of Moody's gnarled and battle-scarred wand.

'How would you throw off the Imperius curse?'

He shot the words at them as his eye whirled frantically.

'How can you tell that you're being controlled?'

He didn't wait for an answer.

'What does it feel like?'

Both Weasley twins could only stammer as they tried to put two intelligent words together, and Moody paused in his diatribe. He looked around the room as complete silence fell over them like a shroud. Moody was breathing heavily, and Cedric wondered whether he was having a psychotic episode, but he also had to admit that after Professor Lupin, who was kind but largely ineffective, Mad-Eye Moody would certainly be the person to tell them what it was like to actually do battle with the Dark Arts. Cedric couldn't help but be impressed, and as he glanced at his classmates, he suspected that they felt much the same.

Moody turned and fixed both eyes firmly on Cedric, who felt his insides glaze over with a chill he could not describe. He felt waves emanating from Moody that were strangely akin to malevolence and had a fleeting sense of *deja-vu*. Images of marching Death Eaters and screaming Muggles flashed across his mind ...

'Mister Diggory,' Moody carefully enunciated every syllable as Cedric fought to maintain eye contact, not willing to let the professor know that he felt threatened.

'Sir?' Cedric managed and hoped that his voice sounded a little stronger than he felt.

'Mister Diggory, who can defend themselves against the Killing Curse?'

Cedric struggled against the uncomfortable fluttering of his heart in his chest, and another image flashed into his mind -- Harry's face with his legendary scar.

'No one,' he said simply, and although Harry had been the only one to ever do so, he figured Moody wasn't interested in talking about that.

Moody held Cedric in his stare for a moment longer before turning back to the rest of the class.

'That is correct,' he said. 'The Killing Curse is the ultimate mark of Dark Magic, the power to take life, and to destroy a human soul. Make no mistake, my young wizards; the Dark Arts are not for the faint hearted. You **MUST** be prepared.'

~*~

Moody's magical eye had whirled endlessly during his ranting, and he paused often to drink from his hip-flask. First, he had demonstrated the Imperius curse on a ferret and then described in detail the effects of the curse on a person's mind. Finally, he had performed the curse on every student over and over until they were able to throw off the curse easily. At the end of the lesson, both he and the students were sweating profusely, and he dismissed them roughly with another warning.

'*CONSTANT VIGILANCE!*

~*~

The warmth of September gave way to the cooler days of October, and Cedric began to feel both the pressure of the impending arrivals, and the subsequent opening of the Triwizard Tournament, a little more acutely. He had also thought that life after his OWLs would be easier, but it seemed that the push for NEWTs began with full force in the sixth year. Luckily, most of the work came easily to him, but the volume of homework and extra research papers for Transfiguration and Potions in particular made his days and nights equally as full as the previous year.

Cedric, Jamie and Markus were walking towards the Great Hall after their Transfiguration class and contemplating the volume of their homework. It was only Monday and already Professor Flitwick had assigned them a three-page paper on the history of Mood Altering Charms and how they differed from Potions.

Markus was objecting strenuously to the idea of copious amounts of paperwork.

'I should write a paper on how *Flitwick's* bloody essays alter my mood,' he grumbled as he strode angrily through the corridor. Jamie and Cedric's eyes met in amused agreement; Markus was always the hot-headed one.

'C'mon now, Markus, surely the quest for Hannah Abbott can take one night off,' Jamie joked.

Markus pulled up short as he rounded on Jamie.

'Hey, listen, it's not *about* that, all right?' he growled.

Cedric stepped in between them and laughingly put a hand on either boy's chest as Jamie took a surprised step backwards.

'Right then, lads, let's go to our separate corners shall we?' He could sense that Markus wasn't angry with Jamie and that he'd just allowed himself to get sucked into the swirling vortex of aggravation that was their sixth year.

Markus had the decency to look ashamed, and he, too, took a step back while shaking his head. Cedric could feel waves of regret emanating from Markus, but Jamie merely stared at his taller friend.

'Sorry, Bryers. Didn't mean it,' Markus mumbled, looking at the ground between them before meeting Jamie's eyes. Both Cedric and Jamie knew that the apology, although brief, was sincere. Jamie clapped Markus on his shoulder and laughingly pantomimed that his hand had been injured by the considerable musculature there. The slight tension vanished, and they proceeded down the corridor as before.

Jamie and Markus were discussing homework once again, and Cedric was pondering the bulk of time that would be required for just the research, when Ernie Macmillan emerged from around the corner at a full run. Red-faced and breathless, the fourth year slid gracelessly to a stop in front of him and almost pulled Cedric down in his attempt to stop from cannoning into the wall. Books, pieces of parchment, and quills flew everywhere.

Jamie and Markus collapsed against each other, and Cedric shook his head, laughing as Ernie apologised profusely. They all bent to pick up Cedric's books, and when they stood, Ernie finally told Cedric the news.

'They're coming, Cedric! Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, there's a notice! They'll be here on Friday!'

Cedric shivered unconsciously as he felt the pieces sliding into place. Soon the waiting would be over; soon the Tournament would begin, and he would pit his skills against the other hopefuls. He smiled broadly at Ernie as the other two whooped their joy and excitement.

'Show me,' he said, and they all ran towards the Entrance Hall.

~*~

That night in the Hufflepuff common room, the excitement ran high, in spite of the workload of the fifth and sixth years. Cedric was in his favourite seat, a slightly battered, but extremely comfortable, high-backed armchair that was close enough to the fire to keep its occupant nicely warmed. A stack of books for his Transfiguration homework was spread out all around him, but he was deep in thought. A loud laugh brought his attention back to the room, and he glanced up to see Markus talking with the same fifth year boy he'd been with their first night back at Hogwarts. Cedric thought he heard the word 'Hannah' in their conversation, and he smiled knowingly. Markus seemed to be in full attack mode where this girl was concerned.

Jamie emerged from the hall with Ernie Macmillan, and the two boys grinned as they approached Cedric. They sat on nearby chairs and proceeded to outline their plans for the proposed 'Triwizard Nomination Party'.

Cedric groaned inwardly. He didn't want them to make too big a deal of his intention to run for Champion, especially if his submission was denied. Undeterred, they regaled him with details of the drinks and food to be served, of banners and decorations to be hung, and were so enthusiastic that Cedric had to laugh. Whether or not he

succeeded with the Tournament, at least he knew that his friends were genuinely interested in his intentions to enter and planned to support him fully.

~*~

The days flew past at an alarming pace, and suddenly Friday was upon them. As instructed, classes had ended half an hour early, and Cedric, Jamie, and Markus joined the rest of their House in front of the castle under Professor Sprout's watchful gaze. The Slytherins were gathered loosely to the right of the crowd, and Cedric could sense excitement rather than their usual malevolence. The Ravenclaws and Gryffindors were freely intermingled with his own house, and he noticed that Markus had moved and now stood next to Hannah Abbott. He'd have to keep his eye on that one, thought Cedric as he scanned the assembled crowd. Sure enough, standing next to a quartet of carrot-haired Gryffindors stood Harry Potter. *Speaking of keeping an eye on.*

Cedric observed Harry carefully. He watched in fascination while Harry craned his neck, struggling to see over the heads of the taller Weasleys. Cedric's heart leapt in his chest as his eyes roved over the boy's untidy hair. He loved the way Harry ran his hands through that hair; it was an unconscious habit on Harry's part, he was sure, but Cedric was very, very conscious of the reaction it evoked within his own mind and body. Blinking rapidly and trying to force the inevitable thoughts from his mind, Cedric again scanned the crowd, but his betraying eyes inevitably found their way back to the collection of Gryffindors, and to one Gryffindor in particular.

Again, almost against his wishes, Cedric's eyes roved over Harry's body; the side of his face, his ear, his jaw and down his neck. Cedric felt a delicious tingling in his stomach, and lower, *much* lower. He wondered what it would feel like to run his own fingers through that unruly black hair ..*What the hell? What is happening to me? Why does the mere sight of this boy make me think of things like that, and WHY does it affect me so?*

Cedric barely had time to acknowledge *those* implications before someone in the crowd shouted and pointed, and the enormous carriage of the Beauxbatons Academy loomed into view. The gasps continued as the carriage swooped closer and landed on the front lawn. It rolled to a stop, and the door to the carriage opened, revealing who could only be the Headmistress. Cedric blinked in disbelief she was easily the same size as Hagrid, and that was saying something. She disembarked and glanced around the grounds as her students filed out of their carriage. Even from this distance, Cedric could almost feel their disdain, and they were greeted by Professor Dumbledore, after which the troop proceeded into the castle.

Cedric was still pondering the lingering effects of Harry on his body when another shout went through the crowd that signalled the arrival of the Durmstrang ship in the Black Lake. The delegation of heavily cloaked men approached Dumbledore amid many gasps, and as they walked past, Cedric realized why. Viktor Krum swept past the crowd and led the group of Durmstrang students into the Great Hall. Cedric turned to Jamie and Markus, and they exclaimed in unison.

'No freaking way!'

~*~

Cedric and Jamie sat at the Hufflepuff table in the Great Hall and watched as a scowling Markus took in the sight of Hannah Abbott and a few other girls hovering over Viktor Krum. The girls had banded together to ask for his autograph, and Cedric knew that, since girls only moved in packs, Viktor would be inundated with many requests. He couldn't help but smile ruefully at Markus' expression though; it wasn't often that his friend was the one doing the pining after.

Cedric also noticed that most of the male members of his house, actually, most of the male members in the Great Hall, had their eyes firmly fastened to the Ravenclaw table at which sat the Beauxbatons students. He could feel the pull of the half-Veela as she radiated a certain *something*, and he recalled the stories he'd heard since the World Cup about the seductive power of Veela. This year promised to be truly interesting.

After dessert had been cleared and the plates had been cleaned, Professor Dumbledore stood and made his announcement. Whereas the entire Hogwarts student body had been eagerly waiting for this night since the start of term, Cedric was suddenly filled with an acute pang. He was surprised at its intensity as well as its brevity, but it was unmistakable. Fear. He tossed the thought aside as he listened to Dumbledore's speech while the casket was brought forth, and then the Goblet of Fire was revealed.

'There it is, Diggs,' Markus announced as they gazed upon the Goblet. 'That's your future, mate. *That's* your glory.'

Dumbledore gave his final instructions regarding submissions into the Goblet and informed the assembled crowd of his Age Line. Again there were groans and shouts of disapproval from the students, but in this matter he stood firm.

Jamie looked appraisingly at Cedric.

'You up for it, Cedders?' he asked quietly, not so much a challenge as a genuine question.

Cedric paused for a microsecond and considered the odd fear that he'd felt. He decided that it was due to the unknown, and people always feared that which they did not know.

'Hell, yes, boys, *more* than up for it!' he declared in what he hoped was a confident voice, and instantly his friends' faces were wreathed in smiles.

'Right then,' Markus said, draping his arms around their shoulders as he always did, 'let's go write the Goblet a little love note, shall we?'

They all laughed, and Cedric allowed himself to be dragged out of the Hall.

TBC

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Champions

Chapter 5 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Jo owns it all.

A/N: Thanks to my poppet for help with the boys.

The morning following the Welcoming Feast, Cedric climbed out of bed and dressed nervously. Markus and Jamie had sat with him the night before as he had written his name on a piece of parchment, and his hands had trembled slightly as his head filled with his father's words.

'You'll be set for life, Ced. Anything you want, any job, any position, yours for the taking,' Amos had said excitedly, his eyes shining with the possibilities.

'I know, Dad, it's a wonderful opportunity.'

'Ah, it's more than just the opportunity, m'boy. Think of the pomp. The fame! The grandeur!' Amos had said reverently. 'Think of the everlasting glory you'd bring to the Diggory name!'

Everlasting glory.

~*~

Those words resounded in Cedric's mind as he walked into the Entrance Hall and approached the Triwizard Cup. He had been too preoccupied to notice that his roommates were not in their beds, and was therefore shocked to see them, along with many members of his house, gathered around the Cup, laughing and wiping their eyes.

'What's happened?' he enquired.

'That idiot, Summers,' managed Ernie Macmillan. 'He tried an aging spell on himself to get around Dumbledore's Age Line. We all told him it was for naught, but he said he HAD to try!'

Cedric grinned. Everyone knew Professor Dumbledore's sense of humour, and he wondered what the outcome of that failed potion would be.

He soon felt himself locked in a powerful grip as Jamie and Markus grabbed him in a joint bear hug.

'C'mon, Cedders, are you ready?' Jamie's eyes twinkled with excitement.

'Yeah, Diggs, c'mon, do us all proud,' Markus echoed, and they caught Cedric in a bear hug playfully.

Cedric took a deep breath before he carefully stepped over the Age Line and looked around to the cheers of the crowd. He took another deep breath as he raised his hand and placed his slip of parchment in the blue-white flames. For a moment there was silence; then a roar of excitement echoed through the Hall as his fellow Hufflepuffs claimed their new prospective champion. He felt a surge of excitement, and the warmth of it swept through his body as many hands congratulated him and clapped him on the back. The cheering crowd ushered him noisily into the Great Hall and sat him down for breakfast, but he was too excited and nervous to eat much.

The rest of that day seemed to take forever, and everywhere Cedric went he was greeted with good wishes and shouts of good luck from members of his own house and many from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. He knew that Angelina Johnson, the Gryffindor Chaser, had put her name in the cup and her entire house was supporting her at every turn. The waiting was almost intolerable; made worse by the fact that the entire school now knew of his candidacy for Champion. Everywhere Cedric went he seemed to be surrounded by people, throngs of schoolmates, all around him, all the time. Markus laughingly suggested that his popularity rivalled Krum's, and they should sell tickets for an audience with 'The Hogwarts Champion'. Jamie had laughed but viewed him with a concerned eye, and Cedric knew that his friend was both excited and worried for him. He sensed Jamie's disquiet like a beacon - Jamie didn't realize that he broadcast his feelings without ever saying a word.

Finally, evening rolled around, and although a magnificent spread was prepared for everyone, Cedric could barely eat anything. His only concern was the Goblet of Fire and the names it would reveal this very night. The tension in the Great Hall was palpable as Professor Dumbledore began the proceedings. The Goblet shot out pieces of parchment, announcing firstly Viktor Krum, then Fleur Delacour and finally, Cedric heard his own name as the entire hall erupted in cheers and thunderous applause.

His first reaction was one of total shock as a thrill tinged with fear danced through his body, for this was indeed unknown territory. Cedric had willingly placed himself in danger to be a Hogwarts Champion, and there was no turning back. As he walked past the long tables, he could feel all eyes upon him, the cheering and shouting carrying him along like a wave. As he turned with what he hoped was a confident smile towards the crowd, his eyes searched the Gryffindor table and locked briefly with those of Harry, whose green depths followed his every step. Cedric felt his heart pounding in his chest as he approached the heavy wooden door of the chamber behind the teachers' table. He closed the door behind him and took what felt like his first breath ever, as the muffled sounds of the applause continued.

He stood and looked around the room as he noted that Fleur Delacour and Krum stood close to the fire, each apparently consumed with their own thoughts and emotions. He moved over to join them and, after exchanging brief nods, he stood and gazed into the fire as he allowed the mesmerizing flames to soothe his fervid mind. After what seemed like only moments, the door opened once more, and Harry stepped inside, looking very confused and uncertain.

'What's going on, Harry?' Cedric asked the young Gryffindor. He saw the confusion in Harry's eyes mingled with something akin to fear, and his own betraying stomach leapt at their proximity. Try as he might, he couldn't sense anything from the boy; Harry's aura was like a jumbled mass of colours with no pattern. That he was agitated was obvious, but what wasn't obvious was *why*.

When Ludo Bagman arrived and announced that Harry was chosen as the fourth Triwizard Champion, Cedric's mind whirled with questions while Fleur ridiculed the possibility. He saw the look on Harry's face and felt a twinge of regret that he had to deal with Fleur's contempt as well as the suspicious glares of the others, but Cedric himself was bewildered at the announcement. *Surely that was impossible?* Harry and Cedric's eyes met, and there was significantly more now than just his usual appraisal of the Gryffindor. He conceded that Harry was now his competition and that changed things. He mused at the potential complications of not only having to compete against the other school Champions, but also against someone from Hogwarts. Compete *against* the Boy Who Lived. Then there was the knowledge that he also had to compete against someone for whom he had... uncertain feelings. Were he true to himself, Cedric would admit that the final point proved to be the most telling.

The door banged open again, and in strode Professor Dumbledore, closely followed by a very agitated Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr Crouch and Professors Snape and McGonagall. Cedric witnessed Harry being grilled repeatedly by Dumbledore and the other Headmasters, as well as Professors McGonagall and Snape, and was surprised at how vehemently Harry defended his position. Cedric didn't want to think of the boy as a liar, but *how* could this be?

The ominous words of Professor Moody still rang in their ears as the two Hogwarts Champions left the room together. Simply being in close proximity to Harry had elevated Cedric's state of anxiety significantly, and the Gryffindor's hesitant smile spurred Cedric's heart rate even higher. From his brief conversation with Harry, he understood that the younger boy was as confused as everyone else and insisted upon his innocence, but Cedric truly didn't know what to think.

They walked along the corridors in silence, and Cedric could feel Harry's aura as it swirled in chaotic waves around him; the boy was obviously in considerable distress. Cedric wished that he could get past the drama and confusion and just *talk* with Harry one on one. What would he say? What *could* he ask the Gryffindor? What did he really want to hear anyway?

'Did you really do it?'

'Are you lying?'

'What do you hope to gain from this?'

No, Cedric mused, his own head spinning with all manner of implications. Tonight was not a good night for questions, and he had to admit to himself that he was still a bit uncomfortable with the situation surrounding Harry's inclusion in the tournament.

They approached the steps, and Harry turned to face him. Cedric looked down at the younger boy and wondered again why someone as famous as Harry Potter would bother to enter such a competition. Harry didn't seem to be the type of person who craved attention, despite what the Slytherins and some members of the faculty thought. Cedric just didn't see it that way. There had to be something more.

'Well, good night,' Harry mumbled before Cedric could say anything, and he started up the staircase towards the Gryffindor common room. Cedric paused, half wanting to follow Harry up the stairs, and although he contemplated Dumbledore's words, '*Courage in the face of the unknown is very important*', he was not yet prepared to act.

'Night,' Cedric muttered to Harry's disappearing shadow.

Shaking his head, Cedric continued down the passage to the Hufflepuff common room and, upon entering, was greeted with the yells and shouts of congratulations and encouragement from his entire house; a sea of human faces and bodies all wanting a piece of him. He had forgotten the plans for the party and groaned privately as Jamie and Ernie rushed to him through the crowd and pressed a glass of something into his hand. He smiled at his friends and shook hands all around as the throng moved him this way and that, but his only thought was 'I need to get away, I need time alone and I *need to think*.'

~~

Cedric sent an owl to his parents the next morning telling them that he'd been chosen as Hogwarts' Champion. He elected to remain silent about Harry's involvement, although he couldn't exactly say why. There weren't many things he didn't discuss with his parents, even where his feelings were concerned. Many times during his young years and early adolescence, Cedric had longed for a sibling with whom he could share his thoughts. His parents were both wonderful and understanding people who loved him dearly, but somehow, as he got older, Cedric was less inclined to open up to them about his preferences.

Although he was naturally handsome and had long been the object of desire by females, since becoming Champion his appeal seemed to quadruple and was apparently evident to more than just the female students of Hogwarts. On several occasions, members of the Beauxbatons Academy had cornered him in the halls and tried to engage him in conversation or to sign their schoolbooks and bags. He sighed and wished it wasn't that way and that he could live a more 'normal' life. As if there was anything normal about his particular situation.

Cedric didn't know much about the Muggle world and whether there were hang-ups about that sort of thing. Certainly his parents would have preferred him to have followed a more conventional sexual orientation, and he wondered whether Muggles took a very strict line on the matter. Although Cedric wasn't new to this world of galloping hormones, he couldn't help but wonder whether a feeling so strong and so natural could possibly be wrong, even if that feeling were for a boy, and a much younger boy at that. He had to admit that Harry was beginning to grow into a young man and, as his body developed, he became all the more desirable.

~*~

Almost two weeks had passed before Cedric noticed the badges. He doubted that they'd been around much before then, since the commotion created by their introduction was obvious. He was walking through the courtyard after lunch, trying to catch up with Markus and the others from his year, when he noticed Draco Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins approaching. They all had large badges pinned to the front of their robes which declared in vibrant lettering, "Support CEDRIC DIGGORY the REAL Hogwarts Champion!" As they approached, Malfoy slowed his pace and pressed his badge, whereupon the message changed to a glowing green, 'POTTER STINKS'.

'Hey, Cedric, do you like it? Everybody's got one.' Malfoy's face was contorted as he gloated.

Cedric groaned inwardly but was careful not to let any of his feelings show on his face. He felt sorry for Harry, as he knew that the boy would not cease to be the brunt of all the unkind jokes by many of the students. He gave Malfoy what he hoped was some form of a smile and continued walking, his long legs taking him away from the Slytherins' fetid aura.

He caught up with his classmates as they approached the door to their Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom and groaned as they all grinned and flashed their badges at him.

'Look, guys, don't wear those, okay?' he began and the smiles disappeared, replaced with quizzical looks.

'Why not, Diggs?' Markus was the first to speak. 'That little punk somehow got his name in the Goblet. He's a rotter.'

Cedric understood that their reactions were out of loyalty to him, and he nodded as he tried to think of a quick and reasonable explanation.

'I know, guys, and I understand. Truly I do. I just don't think that we need to use the *Slytherins'* idea, that's all. You know I don't want to associate with those people, so please, just take 'em off, okay?'

He searched their eyes as they grudgingly nodded, and he knew that they'd accepted his explanation, much to his relief. He watched as they removed the badges and threw them into a nearby bin. Markus turned to him with a slightly quizzical expression as he adjusted his robes and schoolbooks.

'Satisfied now?' he enquired.

'Quite,' was Cedric's reply, and although he was, he was also disconcerted by his own feelings. He knew that he hadn't given them the real reason, and he didn't want to. He simply felt an unusual need to protect Harry, although he couldn't say why. *Not such a good idea to want to protect your competition though, is it?*

Perhaps the voice in his head had a point.

~*~

Cedric received a summons from the Headmaster to meet in one of the upstairs classrooms. Upon entering, he noted that Fleur and Krum were already present. Mr Bagman was also in the room and stood next to a bespectacled witch in bright magenta robes, as the other Champions posed for a photograph. Mr Bagman walked over to greet Cedric with an enthusiastic handshake and then returned to his conversation. At a single glance, Cedric could see that Viktor Krum was in no mood for conversation, light or otherwise, as the Bulgarian seeker stood alone facing a window. He walked over to Fleur, who was very happy to have someone to converse with, although Cedric suspected that her main objective was to get away from the leering glances of the photographer.

'And 'ow are you, Cedreec?' Fleur asked throatily as she tossed her silvery hair over one shoulder and fluttered her perfect eyelashes at him. He smiled, knowing that, Veela or not, she would have no effect on him that way.

'I'm doing well, thanks, Fleur. Are you enjoying your visit to Hogwarts?' he enquired politely, all the while mentally checking the door in anticipation of the fourth Champion's arrival.

'Eet eez very deeferent to where eye come from, Cedreec, but eye hev my sister and ozzer schoolmates, so eet eez not too terrible.' Cedric could understand most of what she said with difficulty, and smiled encouragingly when he did not. Although he still held her in his gaze, his every nerve was focused on the door as he mentally reached out and felt for a certain aura.

After roughly five minutes, the door opened and revealed the owner of said aura, an anxious Harry Potter. Mr Bagman announced his arrival with a flourish and explained that there would be the weighing of the wands and a photo shoot. Cedric groaned. He instinctively disliked the purple-clad witch, who looked devious just standing still. He noticed how she looked at Harry, almost as though he was a meal to be devoured, and not in a good way. She steered the youngest Champion away and out of the room as Cedric watched with a carefully hidden eye.

Moments later, Professor Dumbledore entered with Mr Ollivander, from whom Cedric had purchased his own wand so many years ago. He remembered the day in that

dusty shop as he had looked around at the thousands of boxes, containing wands of all shapes and descriptions. He had tried a number of wands before Mr Ollivander had finally handed him a finely crafted one. He could still remember the rush of magic he'd felt as his fingers curled somewhat protectively around the wand's handle, and he had known, as surely as he knew his own name, that this was *his* wand. He couldn't remember having felt so... connected... to any one thing before.

'Now, where is our fourth Champion?' Dumbledore enquired as he glanced around the room.

'I believe Rita Skeeter took him off for a bit of a private interview, Dumbledore,' managed Mr Bagman, who looked as though he ought to have known better.

'Blast!' Dumbledore hastened from the room, and Cedric sighed and felt the twisting of his stomach as he joined the other Champions and sat in one of the five chairs to await the Headmaster's return. He felt the pressure of the impending Triwizard Tournament a little stronger today, as the weighing of the wands signified yet another step towards their First Task.

Professor Dumbledore soon returned, sweeping Harry into the room before him as Rita Skeeter followed and closed the door. Cedric could see a look of shaken relief on Harry's face and wondered what the reporter had spoken to him about. Harry looked in Cedric's direction and walked towards him, his eyes never leaving Cedric's as he ran his hand through his hair. *Oh, do that again!* Cedric could feel the distinct increase of his own heartbeat as he strove to maintain a pleasant yet neutral expression. Harry sat in the chair next to Cedric, who was acutely aware of Harry's every breath as Professor Dumbledore introduced Mr Ollivander and announced the start of the proceedings.

Fleur's wand was checked first, but Cedric barely noticed much more than the human form to his right. Harry's legs bounced nervously under the table, and Cedric empathized with him; Cedric's own propensity to pace the room was also being severely hampered.

Cedric heard his own name called and stood, allowing Fleur to pass before he walked up to Mr Ollivander. The old man beamed as Cedric handed over his wand, whereupon the Wand merchant proceeded to recite the properties of Cedric's particular piece. Cedric smiled as Mr Ollivander complimented him on the condition of his wand, as he took special pride in keeping it at peak performance. He grinned as Mr Ollivander enchanted silver rings of smoke from the tip of his wand that floated through the air in a line, after which he proclaimed the wand to be in satisfactory condition. Cedric received his wand and bowed slightly, then turned and walked back to his seat next to Harry.

He glanced at the younger boy who appeared excessively nervous.

'Relax, Harry, just breathe. It's only the weighing of the wands,' he whispered.

'It's not just that, Cedric. That Rita Skeeter woman, she's up to no good, writing things about me that I never even said...' Harry's agitated voice trailed off as his legs started bouncing again.

Cedric's mind raced. What could that... *witch* ... have said or done that would have upset Harry this way. He felt a protective wave of empathy for the boy, and he placed his hand on Harry's thigh to quieten his leg's activity.

'Stop the bouncing, Harry. You'll be fine,' he said, but then gasped as he felt an enormous surge of energy flow from Harry's body to his. One glance at the expression on Harry's face revealed that the boy had felt it too and was as surprised as he.

'... Mr Potter, your wand please.'

Obviously puzzled, Harry broke Cedric's gaze as he rose from his seat and approached Mr Ollivander. Cedric watched him as he walked away and wondered just what in the hell was going on between him and Harry Potter.

~*~

TBC

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A/N: All recognisable quotes are taken from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Pressure

Chapter 6 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Jo Rowling owns everything and everyone except Markus and Jamie. Those boys are MINE!

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Through careful observation of Harry, Cedric had noticed that he looked at Cho Chang quite often lately, especially when he, Cedric, was with her. His heart sank with the realization that Harry was like most of the other boys: totally girl-crazy. Cedric knew that the pretty Ravenclaw girl was very interested in him, and although she was very interesting as well as one hell of a Seeker, he knew that he could only return her interest in him up to a point. In spite of that, he felt that they could be very good friends and resolved to invite her to the Yule Ball, mainly because he enjoyed her company and they made a wonderful couple, but also to ensure that she'd be within his sight at all times.

He reasoned that if Harry was in fact interested in Cho, then Harry's eyes wouldn't be far from her all night, which might give Cedric the opportunity to have ~~his~~ eyes on Harry for much of the night. He was certain that Harry wouldn't have any trouble getting a date for the Yule Ball, and he wasn't exactly sure why he couldn't stop thinking about the younger boy. Images of the young Gryffindor flashed into his mind daily at random intervals, and he found himself wondering what it might be like to get closer to him. He even wondered precisely what that meant.

~*~

Several days went by before Cedric was able to get Cho alone. She smiled as he approached, a broad, winning smile that seemed to light up her whole being. Cedric sighed inwardly, and for a second, questioned his decision.

'Hi, Cho, how are you?' he asked lightly.

'Oh, hi, Cedric,' she replied, her cheeks flushed from more than just the cold air.

'Um, I was wondering whether you'd like to accompany me to the Yule Ball.'

The words sounded rushed to his ears, and he wondered fleetingly whether he'd made an ass of himself. He saw her face light up with obvious delight, and he relaxed just a bit.

'Oh, um, yes,' she breathed. 'That ... that would be lovely, Cedric.'

He felt the relief pour over him as he exhaled, not even realizing that he'd been holding his breath.

'Well, that's wonderful, Cho. Great! I'll let you know about the details as soon as we find out, okay?' he half-croaked, wishing for the tiniest fraction of a second that he could have this conversation with someone else. A certain unreachable someone else. His eyes clouded briefly, and when he snapped back to the present he noticed Cho looking up at him enquiringly.

'Are you all right, Cedric?' she said, concerned.

'Oh, yes, I'm fine. Wonderful, in fact,' he said quickly, and continued before she could ask anything further. 'I'll talk to you later?'

'Sure, Cedric, see you later.'

He turned from her beaming face and walked down the hall, his long legs carrying him quickly from the small knot of girls that now gathered around Cho. He could hear them giggling and gasping excitedly, as she no doubt furnished them with every detail of their conversation.

~*~

The Monday before the first task dawned in spite of his anxiety, and although he could barely eat any breakfast, he realized that he would have to put something in his stomach. He and Jamie had walked down to breakfast together, but it wasn't long before Markus arrived and folded his long frame into the bench.

'So tell me, Diggs, just what *does* a Champion eat for breakfast?' he asked flippantly, earning jovial laughter from the surrounding Hufflepuffs.

Cedric had to smile; Markus had the uncanny ability to make fun of any situation. Markus and Jamie grinned at each other, as they proceeded to place one of every item of the breakfast menu on Cedric's plate, and then insist that he finish it all or else.

Markus clapped his friends on their shoulders and left them for his Potions class, while Cedric and Jamie made their way to Charms with the rest of their class. As they ascended the marble staircase, Cedric's brand new bag split open, and the contents spilled out onto the floor.

Blast!

Aggravated, he motioned for them to continue.

'Tell Flitwick I'm coming, go on ...'

Jamie nodded and continued up the stairs, and as Cedric gathered his quills and parchment, he noticed that a shadow fell across the floor in front of him. Cedric raised his head, and grey eyes met green; he had to catch his breath. Those intense eyes, mere inches from his, and bearing some anxiety within their depths, belonged to none other than Harry Potter.

Hello, Champion, he thought, eternally thankful that nobody in Hogwarts was a Legilimens. He heard himself babbling '... it just split, and a brand new bag too,' and grabbed even more quickly at his supplies while he mentally slapped himself for sounding so inane. He focused on Harry's mouth and willed himself to concentrate on what the Gryffindor was saying, on the words that he was using. Instead, he managed only to reflect on Harry's lips as they parted and moved and the movement of Harry's tongue over his lower lip as he paused. When Cedric realized that Harry had stopped speaking, he snapped himself back to the matter at hand. He hadn't heard most of what Harry was telling him, but he was pretty sure he'd said the word '*dragons*', and a surge went through his body like cold water being emptied into a deep well.

Dragons! Cedric had never seen a dragon, although he had certainly heard enough about them to know their capabilities. His mind rapidly went through everything he'd read about them in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. 'Fire breathing reptiles' was a phrase that leapt immediately to mind. He pressed Harry for details, but the Gryffindor was evasive. Cedric reached for a stray quill, but Harry was quicker, and their hands touched as Harry handed it to him. He felt a startling pull in his groin, and his heart beat with such intensity that he felt the pulse behind his eyes. Suddenly, he fully realized what Harry had done.

'Why are you telling me?' he asked as he tried to keep his voice steady. He wondered precisely why Harry would give up his considerable advantage on this first task.

'It's just ... fair, isn't it?' Harry returned. 'We all know now ... We're on an even footing, aren't we?'

Cedric was pondering this thought with some suspicion when they were interrupted by Professor Moody. The Professor dismissed him roughly, and Cedric proceeded to Charms, where he took his seat next to Jamie, and spent the entire class lost in his own thoughts, considering dragons, honour and the motives of one Harry Potter.

~~~~~

Cedric spent most of that day considering his options. Not knowing precisely what the task would entail, he could only hope that a direct duel would not be necessary. He approached Markus and Jamie in the common room.

'Hey, Diggs, you alright?' Markus asked as he grinned at his friend.

'Um, guys, need to talk. Dorm in five minutes?'

The looks on their faces said that they understood his urgency, and they were seated on their beds well before the allotted time.

Cedric looked around cautiously before he cast a silencing spell on the door. He didn't want to be overheard.

Jamie and Markus exchanged looks but Jamie was the first to speak.

'Cedders,' he said hesitatingly, 'what's going on?'

Cedric quickly outlined what Harry had told him, and his friends leaned back on their beds in amazement.

'Dragons, Cedric? Are you SERIOUS? Actual ... *living* ... dragons?' Jamie asked. Markus was virtually speechless, which would have been funny under any other circumstances.

'Merlin,' said Markus succinctly.

'Anyone know anything about duelling dragons?' Cedric asked in what he hoped was a joking voice, but they all knew that the attempt fell flat.

None of them could think of anyone who'd won in a duel with a dragon. They all agreed that Cedric was strongest in Transfiguration and Charms, and since they doubted there'd be a suitable charm available for something of this magnitude, they concentrated on Cedric being able to configure various objects. Cedric wasn't sure precisely what he hoped to accomplish, but to do nothing would simply make him feel helpless.

~\*~

The morning of the first task felt to Cedric as though he were walking against a tide. He had lessons with the rest of the Hufflepuffs until he was called by Professor Sprout just before lunch. His throat was dry as he shook hands with Markus and Jamie, and left with the Professor. Their calls of 'Good luck' followed him as they walked down to the grounds where a tent had been set up at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

'You're more than capable of handling this task, Mr. Diggory,' Professor Sprout said as she looked up at him encouragingly, although the quaver in her voice belied her words. Cedric barely heard her. They arrived at the tent's entrance, where Professor Sprout wished him luck and squeezed his hands. He attempted a smile, pushed aside the flap and entered the tent. He briefly acknowledged Krum and Fleur, who both looked as unwell as he felt. Mr. Bagman greeted him heartily, opening his arms in a welcoming gesture which Cedric hardly noticed. His only thought was to keep moving, to keep a constant motion going that would hopefully help to calm his nerves. Five minutes later it hadn't worked, but he continued nevertheless.

Suddenly the tent opening swung to the side, and Harry entered, looking just as nervous as they all felt. Cedric nodded and smiled at him, or tried to, hoping that his muscles didn't draw his face up into a snarl. Harry's feeble return smile answered all his unasked questions, and Cedric felt a swirl of compassion for him. Harry was young, he was nervous, and he certainly hadn't asked for this. The boy stood near the back of the tent where he fiddled nervously with his wand. Cedric was so preoccupied with the task ahead that he was barely able to appreciate Harry's nervous habit of running his hands through his hair.

Ludo Bagman proceeded to explain their task, and Cedric looked in wonder as first Fleur, and then Krum, pulled a miniature dragon from a bag. He felt his way inside the bag, and his fingertips brushed against tiny wings as he grasped a little body. He withdrew his hand cautiously, only to behold a blue-grey dragon with the number 'One' tied around its neck. Resignedly, Cedric realized that he would be the first Champion to face their dragon in the ring. He watched as Potter pulled the remaining dragon from the bag, and then he resumed his pacing. He was dimly aware that Harry disappeared from the tent, and Cedric continued his numb pacing at the entrance of the tent, awaiting the whistle that would signal his match.

After what seemed like an eternity, the whistle was blown, and suddenly the pain of waiting was over. He collected his thoughts and walked into the ring, where he was confronted with the fifty-foot version of his miniature Swedish Short-Snout. Even with Harry's warning, Cedric's bowels felt as though they were filled with ice, and he was thankful for the forewarning, as this beast would more than likely have terrified most people. He found his bearings and immediately noted that the dragon, a female he presumed, was crouched over a bed of eggs, one of which was the golden prize. He attempted to approach, only to be blasted by a long and very hot blue flame. Realizing that he'd need more than speed, he mentally shuffled through his Transfiguration options while he scanned the ground for any inspiration. There was nothing but rocks, and he had just escaped the dragon's fiery breath for the third consecutive time when he decided to try something.

He focused his energy and his mind on a large rock, and concentrated on a large dog, a Labrador Retriever. He murmured the incantation, and the transformed dog leapt away from him as it attempted to put as much distance between it and the dragon as possible. Cedric crouched lower, waiting, and was rewarded when the dragon lunged at the dog. He wasted no time in grabbing the egg from the nest, and no sooner had his arms tightened around the hardened golden shell than he heard screams from the crowd. Turning, he observed that the retriever had managed to escape, and the dragon was turning her full attention and wrath upon him once more. Not even having time to think, Cedric lunged out of the way, as another wide swath of blue-hot flame passed dangerously close to his face, stinging the skin on one side. He clutched the egg close to his chest and rolled out of the way of the dragon, as the crowd erupted with roars of victory and support. Almost instantly, five men appeared in the ring with their wands out and launched what must have been Stunning Spells at the dragon. With a giant roar that seemed to echo everywhere, she fell immobile next to her nest of eggs. Cedric stood on shaky legs, and his heart thundered in his chest as he raised the Golden Egg above his head in victory.

Cedric was ushered into the medical tent, and he listened to the commentary of the other competitors, as Madam Pomfrey tended to his wounds, muttering her disapproval at the goings-on of the first task. His face and neck burned viciously, and after she had treated the wounds with some purple liquid which stung, he was able to concentrate better on the action in the ring. He surmised that Krum and Fleur had also been successful in acquiring their eggs; now only Harry remained. He felt an unnamed fear clutch at him, and he hoped that the young Gryffindor would make it through. Madam Pomfrey returned to interrupt his musings with a bright orange salve which she proceeded to paste over the burned side of his face. It smelled faintly like dandelions, but he couldn't be sure. Happily, the burning and stinging sensations disappeared almost immediately, and he was able to concentrate on the commentary for Harry's task.

The screams and gasps from the crowd didn't bode well for Harry's success, and the waiting seemed interminable, until the crowd suddenly erupted in cheers and applause the final Champion was successful. Cedric exhaled, not realizing he'd held his breath for a considerable time, and felt slightly faint-headed. *Harry was all right!* Some time later they all convened in the main tent, and Cedric smiled with relief to see that Harry was relatively unharmed. Harry flashed a triumphant grin at Cedric, and his eyes glittered as they shook hands firmly and acknowledged each other as equals. To Cedric, the gentle pressure of Harry's palm in his silently acknowledged a great deal more than that.

~~

Cedric was more than happy to put the First Task behind him. He mulled over Mr. Bagman's comments at the end of the dragon egg rescue and decided to give the egg some space. He wanted to enjoy his Christmas this year, as almost the entire school would be staying at Hogwarts through the holidays, and he was hopeful that somehow the clue would make itself known to him in time. It was time for him to concentrate on his studies, and although he had always attained high grades in his classes, the sixth year brought with it a special type of pressure.

Transfiguration was becoming more technical and the incantations were much more precise. Professor McGonagall was taking them through the beginnings of human transfiguration, and it was proving more difficult than merely changing snails and small animals into water goblets and watches for their OWLs. Cedric had mastered those techniques with relative ease, but a simple mistake of transposing two words in Latin could mean the difference between transfiguring his partner into a cabinet or a cactus.

Professor Flitwick continued to assign them pages of parchment on the ability to distinguish the effects of Charms versus Potions. Markus had been the only one brave enough (or silly enough) to continue with Potions for their NEWTs, and Cedric was secretly relieved that he'd decided to drop Potions after his OWLs. The mere sight of Professor Snape berating the fourth and fifth year students was enough to turn his stomach. Their Defence Against the Dark Arts classes with Professor Moody continued to be nerve-racking but informative, and even Markus had agreed that he felt better knowing some defensive spells and hexes.

Sixth year Herbology also proved difficult, although both he and Markus thought that the class would be a breeze after their success at OWL level. Professor Sprout had set a brisk pace at the beginning of term and showed no evidence of relenting. Their homework consisted of both the written and practical applications of growing and maintaining a batch of Mandrakes from seedlings to maturity, while keeping detailed notes on their progress. Markus had been less than amused.

In addition to all his class work, there was the problem of Cho. Not a 'problem' exactly, but an additional distraction that required his time. To be fair, she wasn't at all demanding, preferring instead to sit with him and hold hands as they did homework or research in the library. Cedric felt that he was being corralled into a boyfriend role much too quickly. All in all, his days were full from dusk to dawn, but it still didn't forestall his stomach from turning every time he passed Harry in the halls, nor did it prevent his palms from sweating every time he saw the young Gryffindor laughing with his friends. Cedric was beginning to feel slightly tortured, but he couldn't find a way to get clear and just breathe.

~\*~

The winter days turned into particularly unforgiving winter nights as November gave way to December. Cedric realized that he was no closer to figuring out the mystery of the egg, and he began taking it with him everywhere. He secretly hoped that he would be struck with a flash of utter brilliance and that, in an unguarded moment, the solution would jump out at him. Halfway through December, with Christmas and the Yule Ball a mere week away, he began to doubt himself.

His fellow Hufflepuffs had given him all their best ideas put it in the fireplace and hopefully it would burst open (Markus' idea, which didn't work), stroke it, sing to it, even play music. None of that worked, and even though most of the theories were amusing, the passing days with no solution were beginning to tell on Cedric. When he finally decided to open the egg, the common room was filled with a most horrific wail that reverberated from every surface. He had hurriedly closed the egg and apologised to the students gathered in the common room, before he ran upstairs to place the egg on his bed. He ran back downstairs and rejoined Jamie and Markus at the fireplace.

'Damn, Diggs, why don't you ask your pal Potter for some advice,' Markus growled as he rubbed his ears.

Cedric spun around and glared at Markus who realized, too late, what he'd said out loud.

'Will you shut *up*, mate?' Cedric hissed, as he glanced around to see whether anyone had heard. To his relief everyone was still shaking their heads to get the ringing sound out of their heads.

Jamie was quick to intervene.

'Will the two of you relax? Nobody heard anything, okay?' he said quietly, as he glared at each of them in turn. 'For the love of Merlin, just ease up alright?' Jamie was unusually forceful, but he realized that his friends were both highly agitated. Cedric, he understood; Markus was another question.

Cedric realized that Jamie was right, and he slapped Markus gently on his knee.

'Sorry, mate.'

'No worries.' Markus grinned in response.

'What's up with you anyway, Markers?' Jamie enquired. 'You've been as tense as Cedders, but he's the one with the egg, mate. What've you got that's eatin' your arse?'

They all laughed at Jamie's turn of phrase, and Markus raked his hands through his hair.

'It's the bloody Yule Ball, Diggs. You're going with Cho, Jamie's asked Katie, and she's said yes.'

Cedric's stomach lurched as he remembered his own date with Cho for the Yule Ball.

'Yeah?'

'Well, it's Hannah Abbott,' Markus said, and his uncharacteristically low voice set off alarm bells in the back of Cedric's mind.

'What about her?'

'I've asked her to go to the Ball with me, but she hasn't given me an answer yet,' he said quietly, and Cedric looked at his friend in an entirely different light. Markus actually *liked* this girl, and that was rare.

Ever since the summer following their fourth year, when Markus had gone on vacation with his family to Ibiza, he'd been very carefree with girls. He had come back to school deeply tanned, with stories of how he'd lost his virginity to a sexy, older Spanish witch with whom he'd fallen deeply in love. He had learned only one sentence in Spanish, 'Te quiero mucho mas', which meant 'I love you much more'. Cedric surmised that that was all Markus had ever really wanted to tell her, but she had gently dismissed his proclamations as merely a 'schoolboy crush'. She had given him the lessons of a lifetime, but Cedric doubted whether Markus had ever really gotten over her.

Jamie must have thought the same things that Cedric did, but he posed the question directly to Markus.

'Mucho mas?'

Cedric looked quickly at Markus, wanting to assure him that Jamie wasn't taking the mickey out of him, but he saw that Markus' face had cracked into a wide smile as his friend nodded his assent.

'Si, papi, mucho mas.'

The three of them dissolved into gales of laughter as they both assured Markus that any girl would be crazy not to go with him. Cedric privately decided to take matters into his own hands.

~\*~

The following day with Ernie MacMillan's help, Cedric managed to find Hannah in a quiet corner of the library. He approached the table, and cleared his throat to get her attention. She looked up in surprise and smiled at him.

'Hey, Cedric,' she said evenly.

'Hi, Hannah, can I have a word?'

'Sure,' she said and gestured to the chairs surrounding the table.

Cedric took the chair next to hers and sat quietly, not wanting to attract any undue attention.

'So, what's up?' she enquired as she placed her quill on the table.

Cedric didn't know where to begin.

'Well, um, it's about Markus,' he began and was taken aback when a broad smile played across Hannah's pretty face.

'What?' he asked. 'What's that smile for?'

Hannah's smile had turned into an almost rueful grin, and she covered her mouth with her hand as she giggled quietly.

'What?' Cedric pressed again, although he couldn't help the smile that came across his face. He detected no malice whatsoever from Hannah.

'Well, Cedric, you know how Markus is, right? He thinks he's the big stud of the school, and that any girl will simply fall at his feet when he so much as *looks* at them.' Cedric nodded wryly. Hannah had just summed up his friend perfectly.

'Okay, then, so I'm just making him wait a bit before I accept, that's all. I do like him very much, Cedric, but I don't want him to think that I'm just like any of the other girls he's had.'

*Mucho mas*, Cedric thought as he laughed out loud at her words. Madam Pince came around the corner, and her furrowed brow spoke louder than words. Impulsively, he kissed Hannah on the cheek, and departed with a wave and a shared grin. Markus had definitely met his match.

Two days later, Hannah relented and put Markus out of his misery. Cedric had to concede that women really were the smarter sex.

TBC

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A/N: I don't speak Spanish, but this translation is the best I could do. Any recognisable dialogue is taken directly from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.

*'Anyone know anything about duelling dragons?'* is a nod to my favourite ride at Islands of Adventure.

## Revelations

*Chapter 7 of 21*

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Jo owns them. Anything recognisable belongs to her.

A/N: Thanks to Allison, my beta, who agreed to take on a slashy fic even though she doesn't like them!

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Two nights before the Yule Ball, Cedric decided to have a peaceful and quiet bath in a seldom-used prefects' bathroom on the fifth floor. After muttering the password, he filled the bath with warm water, stripped and climbed inside. He frowned at the egg as it sat among his bundled clothes and, again, wondered what he could do differently. Nothing came to mind. He gave up in disgust and relaxed into the bath, enjoying a soak alone with his thoughts.

His mind wandered and his thoughts turned to Cho. Oddly enough, even though they had pretty much been "an item" for the past few weeks, he knew that his feelings for her were not what they should be towards a girlfriend. Cho was a year younger than he, and she was very cute, full of fun, easy to be with, very attractive and obviously attracted to him. He had asked her to the Yule Ball because he genuinely liked her, but also because, as Hogwarts Champion, he was required to bring a date. He knew to himself that he wasn't all that romantically interested in girls, although they made great friends. Thus far, no one had been able to push any Diggory buttons. No one, that is, except Harry Potter.

He had seen Harry occasionally since the first task, usually between classes or during meals in the Great Hall. His stomach always fluttered at the sight of the Gryffindor, and he noticed that Potter also wore a slightly strained expression. Cedric could only assume that Harry's egg was presenting a similar problem. Although they had smiled and acknowledged each other whenever they came into contact, Cedric found that his heart beat entirely too quickly after such brief moments. He still wanted more interaction with the younger Champion, and his feelings of longing often waged war in his mind with other feelings of unease, uncertainty, and anxiety. He thought it strange that he should feel such complex duality whenever he was around the dark-haired boy.

He leaned his head back against the side of the tub and closed his eyes, smiling as thoughts of Harry played and replayed in his mind. Images of his laughing face that morning at breakfast evoked tingling sensations in Cedric's mind and goose bumps along his flesh, despite the warmth of the bath water. He pictured how the corners of Harry's mouth turned up when he laughed, and recalled Harry's tousled look after completion of their First Task. He remembered the night they had been chosen as Hogwarts Champions and how the adrenaline had coursed through his own body when he and Harry shook hands. That night, and again after their First Task, the mere touch of flesh on flesh had caused alarming reactions along Cedric's entire body. He had found those reactions to be a bit disturbing, but in retrospect they were also very ... nice. He found himself wondering what the rest of Harry might feel like ...

With a shock he realized that he was quite aroused.

He stood up in the water and quickly grabbed for his towel, upsetting the pile of clothes under the egg. The egg bounced once on the tile and sprung open, wailing as it fell into the warm soapy water.

"Blast!" he fumed, and ducked his head under the water to retrieve the bane of his existence.

Oddly enough, the egg didn't shriek underwater, but instead he heard voices singing. He came up for air and checked around, wondering if the sounds were coming from somewhere else. When he realized that the submerged egg was the only source of the music, he again ducked his head below the bubbles and listened.

*"Come seek us where our voices sound,*

*We cannot sing above the ground..."*

"What could that mean?" He pondered the words as he floated on his back in the tub, muttering them over and over.

"The only time the voices sounded was when the egg was under the water!" he exclaimed to the room.

His mind raced as he considered water, and since Hogwarts had no swimming pool, his only logical choice was the Black Lake. He pondered the possible inhabitants of the lake for several minutes before raising his head. Suddenly, he realized that the mermaid in the picture on the wall was flapping her tail flukes at him. He studied her for many minutes as she giggled and splashed the water, turning her tail and tossing her hair.

"Mermaids," he exclaimed, "in the lake!" He looked to the painting, and the mermaid clapped her hands together in joy. Amazed, he sank beneath the water once more, and listened to the rest of the song.

*"An hour long you'll have to look,*

*And to recover what we took ..."*

He would have to survive in the Black Lake for an hour. Cedric was a good swimmer, but still, the prospect of spending an hour searching the cold lake in February filled him with dread. He resolved to visit the library to research Warming Charms and to figure out what would allow him to breathe for an hour underwater.

Cedric's thoughts turned again to Harry, and he wondered whether the younger boy had made any headway with his own egg. He resolved to speak with the Gryffindor the



following day, and his face coloured as he recalled his condition immediately preceding his breakthrough with the egg. Sighing, he drained the now lukewarm tub water, dressed and made his way back to his room, hoping that he wouldn't run into anyone who might question his flushed face.

~~

Cedric spent the next morning trying to track down Harry Potter. Under other circumstances, his actions might be looked upon as odd, but he thought that their Champion status would be enough to cover any questions from the student population. He was unable to get him alone as the school was in the throes of preparation for the following night's Yule Ball. Cedric had taken out his dress robes earlier that morning and tried them on, turning to view himself in the mirror of his dorm. He had to admit that he made a striking picture, and sighed as thoughts of him and Cho sprung to mind. He was certain that she would expect more than the chaste kisses they had exchanged thus far, and he was nervous at the prospect of what that might actually entail.

The Castle was abuzz with excitement. Cedric saw Cho briefly at lunch, but couldn't get close as she was surrounded by a pack of giggling girls. He smiled at her from afar, hoping that his nervousness wasn't as apparent to them as it was to him. He'd noticed that girls seemed to be in packs everywhere, no doubt going over their dresses and hairstyles for the Ball. He was actually looking forward to the ball, and although he knew he and Cho would make a dashing couple, he still harboured a hope that he would be able to get more than fleeting glimpses of the tournament's youngest Champion. He knew that his musings about Harry had intensified since his decision to tell him about the egg, but there was something else that nagged at him.

~\*~

Immediately after lunch, Cedric sat alone in his dorm and pulled the curtains around his bed as he opened the small box containing the Firebolt. It zoomed back and forth, periodically performing various manoeuvres such as the famed Wronski Defensive Feint and the Double Eight Loop. Cedric smiled as he pictured Harry's body miniaturized on the broom, and interspersed those images with others of Harry's face wreathed in smiles as he received Cedric's gift.

Cedric snapped back to reality as he acknowledged his problem. He couldn't risk giving Harry the gift while they were face to face, and he wasn't even sure that he could write his own name on a card to Harry. He sighed heavily. No, this would have to be an anonymous gift. He was relieved that both Markus and Jamie weren't around, for although he loved his best friends like brothers, he wasn't yet ready to face their inevitable questions regarding the gift.

Cedric picked up Harry's gift, which he had wrapped in simple green yuletide paper adorned with twinkling silver stars. He returned to the Entrance Hall and walked down the staircase and through the corridor that lead to the Hufflepuff common room and the kitchens. Upon entry into the kitchens, he took in the sight of dozens of house-elves working feverishly to clean up after lunch. He was amazed as always that so many elves could be at Hogwarts, working alongside each other, yet they were almost never seen by the students.

He looked around for the one elf that was different. Dobby, a former house-elf of the Malfoys, was running around with mismatched socks. Somewhat hesitant, Cedric approached the elf, whose eyes opened wide in shock. Before Dobby could prostrate himself, Cedric shoved Harry's present into the elf's hands and asked for his help in a low voice. Dobby listened intently and nodded severely when Cedric insisted that his name never be mentioned in connection with the gift. Feeling slightly foolish for all the subterfuge, Cedric nevertheless thanked the elf and hastened back to the common room.

~\*~

That evening after dinner, he and Cho walked through the Entrance Hall and through the corridor leading to the courtyard. They sat together on a bench and, shivering slightly, Cho moved closer to him in the brisk night air. He gallantly performed a Warming Charm over the two of them.

"Oh, thanks. That's much better," she breathed, not changing her position, but gazing up at him with her enormous brown eyes.

He smiled uncertainly and masked his slight unease as he withdrew her Christmas present from inside his robes. He presented it to her with an exaggerated flourish, and they laughed easily as she, in turn, presented him with her gift, shyly placing the box into his hands. He smiled at her fondly and wished that he could feel for her the way she obviously felt for him.

"Shall we open them now?" she asked excitedly, her eyes dancing in the reflected lights of the castle.

"No, no, my dear, it's not yet Christmas!" he admonished jokingly, but relented when he saw that she could no longer contain her excitement. He nodded, and she began to open her gift, taking rather more care to not rip the paper than he thought absolutely necessary.

She gasped delightedly as she opened the box to reveal a silver chain with a pendant in the shape of an eagle in flight. Intricately carved and obviously magically enchanted, the eagle's wing feathers appeared to ruffle as it glided through an imaginary wind. It was, in a word, exquisite.

"Oh, Cedric, it's beautiful," she exclaimed, and he smiled again at her words. He had chosen this particular pendant because, being a Ravenclaw, her house's emblem was an eagle. This one reminded him of how she looked when she played Quidditch and her hair flowed out behind her, similar to the eagle's feathers as they tracked the wind.

Her eyes misted over as she hugged him, and their lips met in a warm embrace. She broke their kiss quickly and smilingly urged him to open his own present. He complied, partly out of curiosity, and partly because he was enjoying their worry-free time together. He'd had precious little of that recently.

His fingers quickly removed the wrapping and he opened his own box, catching her eye as he reached in dramatically. He was surprised to feel something moving and withdrew what appeared to be a small chest. He glanced at Cho quizzically and she blushed, suddenly looking like a little girl. He shrugged off the image and returned his attention to the chest now sitting in his lap. He opened the lid and peered inside, unconsciously gasping in his surprise. There before him was a miniature Quidditch set, painstakingly crafted, and perfect in every detail. The two Bludgers were made of bronze, the Quaffle of silver and the tiny Snitch of pure gold. He shook his head in stunned amazement.

"Cho, this is wonderful!" he exclaimed, truly at a loss for words. Her smile was stellar as she explained.

"I wanted to get something that would mean as much to you as it does to me, Cedric, and Quidditch is something we both love." He had to agree with her there, and realized that he'd probably found a very kindred spirit in the person of Cho Chang. Why then couldn't he love her?

But he knew the reason why.

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TBC

Yule Tides

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Jo owns them. Sad, really.

A/N: Thanks to Allison, my wonderful beta who reads even faster than I do! Anything recognisable comes from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire!

~*~ Chapter 8 ~*~

Christmas morning dawned with little difference from most other days, save for the presents at the foot of every student's bed. Cedric could hear the howls of joy from his dorm-mates and wondered what Harry's reaction to his mystery gift would be. He was just able to shake the thought from his mind when Markus and Jamie landed on his bed simultaneously and proceeded to pummel him in a mock-fight. Cedric laughed and rolled out of bed as he threw them to the floor, engaging them both in a full-on mock battle.

Several minutes later, they all sat on the floor at the foot of their beds and opened their presents. Cedric's parents had been very generous this year, more so than usual. He admired the three new sweaters that his mother had sent, along with his father's elaborate promissory note from Gringotts, which would allow him to purchase anything he wanted up to the value of 50 Galleons.

'Certainly pays to be an only child doesn't it, Diggs,' Markus mused, as he examined his own gifts from Cedric. One was a deluxe potion-making kit that appeared to contain every ingredient needed for their sixth and seventh year spells. Markus' eyes widened at Cedric's extravagance, but then he laughed outrageously as he unwrapped the second, smaller present; a Screaming Yo-Yo. His eyes were alight with mischief, and Cedric was sure the yo-yo would be banned from the school almost immediately by Filch.

He smiled at Jamie's excited gasp as his friend opened his gift. Jamie had long been a fan of the Great Britain Lions Rugby team (a Muggle sport that Cedric didn't fully understand), and he had been chuffed when the team had an impressive winning streak against New Zealand and France the previous year. The team ultimately won the 1993 series against New Zealand, and Cedric had managed to procure both a World Series team pin and a red long-sleeved team jersey for his friend. Jamie's eyes reflected his awe at the collector's items as he ran his hand over the jersey's team crest, but the waves of happiness and satisfaction that emanated from Jamie told Cedric all he needed to know. His gift had been a resounding success.

'Cedric,' he began, 'I don't know what to say. It's wonderful.'

'Ah, yes, Bryers, it's simply wonderful,' Markus was quick to interject, 'but it's not THIS!'

They dived away from Markus as he slung the yo-yo into their midst and the shrieking began.

~*~

The rest of the day passed quickly, as everyone's attention turned to that night's Yule Ball. Quite by chance, Cedric had spied Harry out on the grounds, engaged in a snowball fight with the Weasleys, and he realized that he'd no more be able to speak with him today than any other day. Frustrated, he walked back to the Hufflepuff common room which was almost deserted. He stood near the roaring fire for several minutes, staring into the flickering flames, and shivered as he remembered how close he'd been to dragon fire. Interrupted by a bunch of giggling third-year girls, he muttered to himself and continued through to his room.

~*~

Cedric donned his dress robes and walked into the Entrance Hall. He looked around at the throng of students, and it was refreshing to see the changes in his schoolmates and their guests. The men from Durmstrang wore robes of a deep red which echoed the Christmas spirit, while the Beauxbatons men were smartly outfitted in light blue. Ordinarily clad in Hogwarts black, tonight the girls glittered in jewel-toned dresses, while the boys were elegant in their dark grey or black dress robes. He checked his reflection once more, and smiled as he saw Cho in the mirror as she approached.

'Cho, you look ... wonderful,' he said as he walked to meet her, and he meant every word. She looked resplendent and very elegant in a dress of shimmering silvery-blue, and for a moment she looked much older than she was. He gallantly offered her his arm and she blushed, looking demurely at the ground, and the image faded. She was once more the girl he knew.

'Thanks, and so do you!' she breathed, obviously as awestruck as he was at the splendour of the Castle.

They laughed a little nervously, and she took his arm as they lined up at the entrance to the Great Hall. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Harry a short distance away trying not to stare at them. Cedric was unable to discern the meaning of Harry's expression, but thought that he appeared conflicted and maybe a bit resentful. His own stomach churned alarmingly, and he was taken aback at how desperately handsome the younger boy looked in his dress robes. The elegant outline of his formal wear foreshadowed the man that he would soon become, and as Cedric briefly caught Harry's gaze, the green eyes flickered for a moment before he turned away, pulling viciously at his raven locks in a way that made Cedric shiver unconsciously.

Cedric mulled over the possibility that Harry cared a bit more for Cho than he'd originally thought and wondered if their triangle would ever have a happy outcome. Cho wanted him, he wanted Harry, and Harry obviously wanted Cho. It seemed as though nobody would win in this game.

He mentally shook himself as the music began, and turned to look down at Cho. She smiled nervously as the enormous oak doors opened, and the four Champions and their partners walked through into the Great Hall. Cedric followed Fleur and Krum to the large round table where the judges were already seated. He smoothly guided Cho to an empty chair and took his place beside her. He watched Harry steer his date around to the opposite side of the table and wondered how he was going to get through this dinner with Cho beside him and Harry in his full view. His heart beat a quivering tattoo which made him feel anxious and rather unable to eat. He noticed Harry in conversation with a young red-headed man who looked like a Weasley, so Cedric turned his attention to Dumbledore as the wizard spoke to his plate and food appeared. Cho giggled, and they both ordered their meals from the menu, chatting easily as they dined.

Cedric began to relax and enjoy the evening. He looked around the Great Hall, admiring once again the sparkling decorations and enchanted snow that fell from the ceiling. He heard snatches of Dumbledore's conversation with Karkaroff and noted that the Durmstrang headmaster seemed most anxious to preserve the air of mystery that surrounded his school. Cedric mused *'all these secrets that we feel so compelled to keep.'*

As the meal wound to a close and the tables were moved to the sides of the room, Cedric led Cho to the dance floor. They took their places with the other Champions, and he stole a glance at Harry as the music swelled and the dance began. The boy looked nervous and out of his depth, but his date seemed more than capable of handling him. Cedric was a naturally good dancer, but this was his first official 'date' with Cho, and they had not danced together before. He guided her through their hesitant first steps, and they soon relaxed into each other. She seemed to float along in his arms, an image aided by her shimmering robes flowing around her like a cloud. He couldn't help but enjoy himself; the music and the dancing made him feel momentarily free.

He looked around the dance floor and saw the faces of his schoolmates, some nervously asking girls to dance, some sitting glumly on the sidelines. Jamie was laughing with some of his friends from Ravenclaw while his arm curled around Katie's waist, and Markus and Hannah spun past as they danced their way around the dance floor. Cedric smiled at them, and as he looked past them, he noticed Fred and George Weasley standing at the bar, trying to look innocuous. He suspected they were up to something. Fleur Delacour and her date were engaged in conversation, although it looked as though she was doing all the talking. Davies appeared to be so mesmerized by her every move and every word that he wasn't actually contributing to the conversation, but rather agreeing with everything she said. Cedric smiled. Fleur's Veela blood certainly had a way about it. Viktor Krum was dancing in elegantly elaborate circles with his date, who Cedric belatedly realized was Hermione Granger. How different she

looked tonight! How different they all looked.

The teachers and staff were also in full attendance, and they were interspersed among the students. Madame Maxime was easy to spot dancing with Professor Dumbledore, and Karkaroff was doing a violent-looking waltz with Professor McGonagall, who barely managed to keep an expression of horror from settling on her face. He noticed that Professor Snape approached Karkaroff after that song, and they left together, as Dumbledore swooped in to rescue a slightly flustered Professor McGonagall.

He and Cho danced three songs in succession, then they stepped off the dance floor and Cedric went to get drinks. He had just left Cho in the giggling company of her friends and walked to the bar when he came face to face with Draco Malfoy and his two cronies. Malfoy quickly closed the distance between them, his trademark sneer being replaced with something akin to a smile.

'Hello there, Cedric, enjoying the festivities?'

Cedric hesitated, knowing full well that Draco Malfoy was never friendly to anyone but the Slytherins unless he was up to something.

'Yeah, it's okay. You?' he enquired politely, nodding to Malfoy's sidekicks.

'It's alright, I suppose. Dumbledore certainly has gone all out to impress our guests.' Malfoy's tone didn't convince Cedric that his words of praise were genuine.

'Oh, its fine, Malfoy,' Cedric replied.

Draco moved even closer to Cedric, lowering his voice in spite of the blaring music.

'Look, I wanted to wish you good luck, you know, in the next task. We want Hogwarts to win of course, but most of all, we want you to beat Potter.'

Ah, there it was: the *real* reason for Draco's sudden interest in his welfare. Cedric began to feel uncomfortable, as though Malfoy's malice was somehow pervasive. His feeling of disquiet was not easily dispelled when his every move was being shadowed by Harry's careful gaze. He suppressed a groan as he imagined Harry's thoughts at seeing him in discussion with the Slytherins.

'Well, um, thanks,' Cedric said, unable to come up with a clever retort. He noticed the bartender returning with his order, so he collected his drinks and bade the Slytherin trio farewell, relieved to turn his back on them.

He returned to Cho with their drinks, and they chatted amicably with members of their Quidditch teams. He noticed that Harry continued to ignore his own date while his eyes followed him and Cho for much of the night. He looked darkly beautiful and broodingly sexy, yet a little tortured at the same time. Cedric thought he understood at least some of what the young boy was feeling, as he too wanted someone who was both unreachable and unattainable.

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Much later in the evening, as the Weird Sisters performed on stage to the frenzied screams of the crowd, Cedric sought a quieter area. Cho was in the centre of a large group of girls that were pressed up against the stage, so Cedric excused himself from his group and walked out through the Entrance Hall and into the rose garden. He heard noises and noticed Professor Snape speaking in hushed tones with an agitated Karkaroff, but was unable to hear their words. He was about to go back inside when he noticed Harry and Ron being berated by Snape. He paused a while and hoped that they would walk back inside, but he saw them turn and continue down the path, a move which left him feeling oddly disappointed without knowing precisely why.

Much later that night, after the Yule Ball had wound to its close and the Great Hall was almost deserted, Cedric walked with Cho into the Entrance Hall. A few couples were saying goodnight to their partners from Durmstrang or Beauxbatons before heading back to their own dorms, and Jamie had left to escort Katie to her dorm. Cedric was walking with Cho and was distracted by Markus' laughter as he swept up to them with Hannah in tow.

'Rather enjoyable ball, that.' Markus' eyes were shining, and as Hannah met Cedric's eyes in a moment of shared amusement, Cedric smiled warmly and clapped his hand on Markus' shoulder. Yes, his friend appeared to be very taken with Hannah.

'Agreed, my boy. A most enjoyable dance.'

Cho and Hannah were busily discussing the Ball with excited and hushed whispers when Cedric spotted Harry and Ron ascending the stairs. He excused himself with a quick word to Cho and hastened up the steps, calling Harry's name in a voice that sounded foreign to his own ears. Harry and Ron turned, and Cedric was slightly taken aback at the blue and green-eyed versions of the same stony expression.

'Uh, hi guys,' he began nervously, not wanting to speak in front of the redhead. As he paused and wondered how to proceed, Ron got the hint and turned abruptly, muttering under his breath as he ascended the stairs.

Relieved, Cedric once again turned his full attention to Harry, whose flinty expression had not changed. He stepped closer to the younger boy and lowered his voice, while his heart threatened to drown out his very thoughts with the force of its cadence. He quickly suggested that Harry take a bath with his egg, gave him the location of the Prefects' bathroom on the fifth floor and the password, all the while checking over his shoulder for intruders.

'What... are you joking?' Harry's voice was cautious, but his expression had softened considerably. He looked up into Cedric's eyes earnestly as though searching for some falsehood and Cedric's stomach fluttered in a deliciously unnerving way. '*Get it together man*,' he admonished himself, and wondered whether any of his internal reactions to Harry were outwardly noticeable. Merlin! He hoped not.

'But Cedric, what am I to do with the thing?' Harry's voice interrupted his musings.

'You'll see.'

A moment of silence.

'Cedric...'

The way that Harry's mouth moved as it spoke his name sent shivers up Cedric's spine, and the sound of his name spoken on those very lips echoed in his mind long after the actual sound had faded.

Eventually, Cedric's brain kicked in.

'Yeah?'

As the young Gryffindor leaned in closer, the movement was enough to make Cedric's breath catch in his lungs. Harry's green eyes shone in the flickering torchlight and seemed to dance from within as they held Cedric's gaze.

'D'you ever get the feeling that you and I are the only people who know how this feels?'

Cedric froze. Harry's breathy whisper caused a fiery rush of adrenaline to course through his body with the resulting familiar sensation of falling through the floor. Couldn't anybody else feel this energy? Weren't there sparks flying everywhere, and wasn't the electricity in the air as painfully obvious to everyone else as it was to him?

Rapidly, his mind cycled through every conversation, every interaction, and every look he'd given Harry since the year began. How could he know? And *why* could he

sense nothing but confusion when this boy was near?

'What?' Now it was Cedric's turn to be speechless.

A slightly abashed look played across Harry's face and he hesitated.

'Um, well, being Champion. I mean, you know, you and me. We're sort of... it.'

You and me, you and me... The words whirled through Cedric's mind, and he wondered whether those bloody Weasley*shad* put something in the pumpkin juice after all. *You and me... you and me...* The words seemed to take on a life of their own as they pulsed and swirled in his mind, taking on all manner of double meanings.

'Oh, yeah, that. I suppose we *are* the only ones,' he said and tried not to groan at how vacuous his words sounded. He was thankful that at least his voice sounded steady, as his insides were still in total bedlam. He shifted from one foot to the other nervously, suddenly realizing that he and Harry were actually having a conversation.

'So, how's Christmas been for you then?' Harry asked. 'You know, not being home with your family.' Cedric wondered that Harry could think to ask something like that, especially as he'd lost his own parents so very young. How could Harry ever know the true love of family, this boy orphaned by the darkest power in the wizarding world?

Cedric must have looked as surprised as he felt because Harry looked a bit disconcerted.

'Um, fine. Great. Okay, thanks. How about you?' Cedric felt that he was struggling to link two intelligent words together, and he mentally kicked himself for appearing to be such a dolt.

'Fine really. Just about everybody's here this Christmas anyway.' He grinned, and Cedric unwound just a smidgen.

'Hey, funny thing, have you ever seen a miniature flying broom?'

Cedric Diggory was convinced that he would die. Right there on the stairs in front of Harry Potter and everyone.

His knees buckled slightly, and he shifted his weight to mask the movement. He blinked furiously and shook his head, more to clear his thoughts than to actually provide an answer.

'A miniature broom?' Certain that he'd been found out, he tried to buy time so that he could do... something.

'Yeah, a Firebolt actually, just like mine. I'd seen some at the Quidditch World Cup, and one appeared in my room this morning wrapped with my other presents, but it had no tag or note on it. It's a wonderful replica, perfect down to the last detail.' Harry's tone was nonchalant, and Cedric held his breath.

'I just wondered whether you'd seen them.' Harry continued, and to Cedric's nervous condition, the younger boy appeared almost relaxed. Cedric mentally gulped as he felt the heat rush to his face. Surely Harry would find him out tonight!

'Oh, yeah, that was from me. I got that for you at the World Cup because it reminded me of you, but I was too much of a coward to give it to you myself, so I had a house-elf deliver it to your room,' his mind betrayed.

He met Harry's eyes, and a long moment passed between them. Cedric could feel something inside him shift, something almost elemental, but he couldn't pinpoint its nature. Unsettled by Harry's proximity as they stood barely two feet apart, Cedric's mind tried to be rational. With difficulty, he remembered that Cho was probably still at the foot of the stairs waiting for him. He wrenched his eyes from Harry's face and felt the elemental twist again.

'Well ... um... gotta go, want to say goodnight'

His heart fluttered nervously as he saw Harry's gaze follow his own down the staircase to where Cho was standing before it returned to rest upon him. Harry's expression was inscrutable as he raised one eyebrow.

Cedric turned reluctantly, and hastened down the stairs to where Cho stood. She linked her arm in his and, as they walked off, Cedric chanced a look up the staircase. He was surprised to see Harry standing in the same spot, and not for the last time, he wondered just what the young Gryffindor was thinking.

~*~

Cedric bade Cho goodnight at the door to her common room and they embraced.

'Thank you for a wonderful evening, Cedric,' she said in her lilting voice. 'It was wonderful, and I really enjoyed the dancing.'

'It was a great time, wasn't it,' he agreed, hugging her again.

'Listen, Cedric, the next Hogsmeade trip is coming up soon. Do you suppose we could go together, and maybe have lunch or tea at Madam Puddifoot's? It's so lovely in there.'

Cedric shuddered mentally. Madame Puddifoot's was a place for couples in love. He sighed and agreed, mainly to keep her happy, but also for the sake of peace. He kissed her hand gallantly and left.

TBC

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A/N2: Reading's nice, reviewing's nicer!

Outtake. In written fiction? Yes, beloved readers, even here. I wrote a scene that falls somewhere within this chapter but which, for many reasons, couldn't make it into this posting. I've posted it on my LiveJournal for anyone interested in the twisting of my mind. Enjoy.

<http://hogwartshoney.livejournal.com/30215.html>

**Seeds of change**

Disclaimer: Jo Rowling owns them. I just make them do naughty things!

A/N: This is where I begin to blur the lines of canon a bit, mainly for my own gratification and because I can! Mwaaa haa haa! It's also the chapter that my Nishles (Charmed3) INSISTED that I write, and because of her, it earned the NC-17 rating.

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For Cedric, January went by in a blur of classes and assignments. Thankfully, his project with Jamie and the Mandrakes was over, so that was one less aggravation, but Transfiguration and DADA were becoming more stressful with each passing week.

Professor McGonagall had set them a task as part of preparation for next year's NEWTs. Their project was to research and conjure an item of furniture. Whereas Cedric was more than up to task regarding Transfiguration, he first had to research the type of furniture he would conjure. Contrary to the beliefs of the younger students, conjuring an object wasn't as simple as *Accio*. Conjuring an object required a proper mental image of the item as well as a better-than-average knowledge of the incantation. McGonagall's project included a foot of parchment on the proper description of the item to be conjured as well as the spell used.

Cedric finally decided that he would conjure a bed. His other classmates were thinking along the lines of chairs or ottomans, and even Jamie had expressed an interest in barstools. Cedric merely smiled; his reasoning was perfectly clear to him, and he already had a clear mental image of the bed in question.

Cedric had dreamed of this particular bed since his infatuation with Harry had begun. A stately bed with strong horizontal lines and heavy, square based legs made of oak. The posters would be bevelled, rising from the solid square legs into a solid oak canopy. The headboard would be solid oak panelling also bevelled in simple but elegant square and rectangular shapes. The curtains would run along tracks hidden along the sides of the canopy and, when pulled would transform the bed into a private retreat.

He had perused several books in the library as he researched both spells for his Transfiguration work and spells for the task in the Black Lake. He was very proficient in warming charms and he knew that he wouldn't have any trouble there, but after many weeks of searching, he finally found a spell that he thought could solve the problem of breathing underwater.

The weekend before the Second Task, Cedric returned to the Prefects' bathroom on the fifth floor for another bath. He considered it to be his private sanctuary, a place where he could relax totally with his thoughts and not be disturbed. It was pretty much the only place to get some peace. Tonight he had different motives though, because he wanted to practice the Bubblehead charm he had found in the library. He ran the water until the tub was filled with very warm water and a thick head of bubbles, then he removed his clothes and entered gingerly. The water was slightly too hot and his naked flesh tingled in mild protest, but he soon acclimated and began to move around. After a couple minutes of enjoying the water and allowing the heat from the water to pervade his body, he muttered the incantation and plunged below the surface.

He had researched the spell and its expected results, but never thought that the effect would be so complete. Suddenly, he found that he couldn't feel the water against his face, and he opened his eyes to realize that his entire head and neck were encapsulated in a diaphanous membrane. Moreover, he was able to breathe, and the air was always clean and fresh. He wondered how the charm was able to refresh the air without an obvious intake and exhaust mechanism, but magic was just that: magic.

He remained under the water, swimming up and down the large bath for several minutes, before returning to the surface and removing the spell. He felt reasonably comfortable in his ability to perform the charm and could only hope that it would be enough for whatever awaited them in the murky depths of the Black Lake. Satisfied, he returned to the side of the tub and stretched out, bobbing slightly as he floated around and gazed at the ceiling.

His thoughts floated through his head like the thousands of bubbles in the bathtub, ebbing and flowing in and out of his consciousness. He recalled his date with Cho in Hogsmeade the previous weekend when she had dragged him into Madame Puddifoot's for tea. He secretly believed that she had put him on display by walking hand in hand with him through the brightly decorated and slightly confining tea shop, almost as though she was announcing their relationship to the world. Between that event and the Yule Ball, Cho Chang had subtly, but effectively, marked her territory. He had been preoccupied that day with thoughts of the upcoming second Task and had not been as attentive as he should have, but their time together was pleasant enough.

He was moderately troubled though, mainly because of Cho's obvious delight at their being a couple, but also by his nonchalance. He had struggled with his feelings since that Christmas night and his conversation with Harry following the Yule Ball, but he knew to himself that his longing and heart's desire lay firmly in the hands of the other Champion. His heart fluttered slightly at the memory and scattered images of Harry floated into his consciousness. He recalled his own condition the night he discovered the egg's secret in this very bath, and the memory caused his member to twitch slightly. He rolled the memory around in his mind and leaned his head back against the hard tile at the edge of the bath as he let the images overtake his thoughts.

Flashes of Harry and snippets of conversations bounded through his mind like a herd of gazelles that leaped and frolicked around him, drawing him in. He was immersed in the sensation of the water swirling around his body and his hand as he grasped his hardening cock, revelling in the simple touch and imagining it to be Harry's hand. Harry's hot hands on him; oh yes, the thought alone was enough to make him stiffen even more. He pictured Harry's face after the First Task, dirty, sweaty, triumphant, excited, and pumped high on adrenaline. The image only served to excite him further, and as he wrapped his hand more firmly around himself and squeezed, he felt the unmistakable jolts of ecstasy begin to surge through him. Cedric could almost see Harry in the tub with him, could almost feel him leaning against his body as he stroked Cedric's side, his thighs, the insides and outsides of his legs, his hand grazing lightly over his stomach. Cedric's lips parted slightly, as did Harry's, and they breathed together, at first deeply, inhaling each other, then a little more raggedly as the pace of his stroking increased. Cedric's groans mirrored the sensations that swirled into his body and into his mind. The anticipation was agonizing yet delicious at the same time, and Cedric didn't know whether he wanted his release, or more of this indescribably wonderful torture. As Harry licked his neck and breathed into his ear, stroking harder, Cedric decided that the torture was just fine, thank you.

He began to feel more pressure on his swollen member as Harry proceeded with his ministrations and rolled his thumb around the head of Cedric's penis, rubbing it along the tender ridge. Cedric shuddered as Harry's other hand cupped his balls, and he unconsciously spread his legs wider while his mind screamed with desire. His body was on fire in spite of the water surrounding them, and he wanted this boy, all of him, inside him at every moment in every cell of his thirsting, hungering, starving, *lusting* body. The motion of Harry's hand on his cock and the effect of the water as it sloshed dangerously between them increased the waves of sensation throughout Cedric's body. Jolts of electricity seemed to arc up and down his spine, the skin of his back and his nerves shivered and screamed with agonized pleasure. His mind gasped at the sensations, each one fuelling the others, until Cedric's body and mind were in an almost continuous loop of pleasure and desire and want and need, and his body quivered with pre-orgasmic rapture.

Harry's hand quickened its pace and he felt his own body's change in response. He breathed in gasps as his mind focused on the points of his pleasure, the sure grasp of his hand as the friction created its own wavelengths of excitement that travelled directly to all the pleasure centres of his mind and body. Suddenly, as though in concert with his own mind, Harry's hand started to pump even faster and he felt his own girth increase again; the quickening of his heartbeat foretold the funnelling of his stimulation into one swirling vortex in his groin. He felt the tremors as his abdomen tightened and the waves of lust, need, and want coursed through his body and down through Harry's hand. Suddenly, his entire body gave way to the crashing, thundering, shuddering climax and the mind blowing sensations as the rush of energy flowed out of him.

'Oh, yes! Harry!'

A ragged groan of pure pleasure dragged the words from his lips, coloured by every desire, every wish, and every dream he'd ever had of the young Gryffindor. Cedric rode the crest of that exquisite wave as it twisted and turned his body, surfing the pulses of pleasure until they subsided, slowly returning him to awareness. He lay there for a moment and breathed heavily as the shuddering spasms and electric shivers subsided. He was startled out of his reverie by a clattering sound behind him, a situation made worse by the sound of a cheerful female voice.

'Oh, hello, Harry,' the voice said airily, and Cedric's post-orgasmic glow rapidly dissipated as his eyes flew open and he looked around wildly.

*Harry? What in the name of ... ?*

Time seemed to stand still as his horrified eyes took in the scene. The female voice belonged to a ghost who he could only assume was Moaning Myrtle. She lived in the plumbing system of Hogwarts, but he had never seen her before. His eyes also took in the white face of Harry Potter who looked as ghostlike as Myrtle, and certainly more horrified. Indescribably horrified. Cedric noticed Harry's Golden Egg lying some distance from the boy's feet, where it had apparently fallen and made the clattering sound. There was also a shimmering cloak that pooled around Harry's bare feet, and the only item of clothing he wore was a thin pair of pyjama bottoms that did nothing to hide his... erection! Cedric blinked, but his eyes were locked on Harry's groin.

With difficulty, he wrenched his gaze away and met Harry's eyes, whose green depths reflected shock and disbelief. Yes, but there was something else. Something unreachable, indefinable, and Cedric wondered, maybe even hoped... Could it be *desire*? He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but Harry appeared to snap out of his shocked state and turned quickly, scooping up his cloak, before he disappeared through the door.

*Blast!*

Cedric dressed hurriedly, and returned to his dorm carrying Harry's egg, rather worked up about what the boy might have seen or heard. Not for the first time, he hated his duplicitous life and his inability to pluck up the courage to do anything about it. He also mentally berated himself for his lack of courage when, time after time, he backed away from trying to advance their interaction to another level. He was no Gryffindor, that was certain, and he laughed bitterly, for Triwizard Champions were supposed to be among the bravest and most worthy of the students. When he'd placed his name in the Goblet of Fire all those months ago, he could never have dreamed that the journey would have led him here.

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The following day Cedric was doing his rounds as Prefect when he decided to walk up to Gryffindor tower. He had concealed Harry's egg in his robes, and he sought to quieten his own nerves as he knocked on the portrait of the Fat Lady.

'Hello there! What brings such a handsome young Hufflepuff to the Gryffindor area, hmm?' the Fat Lady enquired playfully. She loved to flirt with him, and occasionally he had noticed that she was 'visiting' some of the other portraits closer to his own common room. Cedric smiled and walked past her portrait without answering her. He stopped just further down the corridor and turned, nervously pacing back and forth in front of an enormous tapestry of dancing trolls. His only thought was that he needed to give Harry his egg in a secret place. He heard a quiet *click* and noticed that a door swung open under the tapestry. When he opened it fully, he found a small room with a candle burning comfortably. The room was large enough to fit into, but was barely larger than a broom cupboard.

At that moment, Harry walked out of the Gryffindor portrait hole and turned in Cedric's direction. Cedric's heart leapt as they came face to face, although Harry's expression of surprise and shock was clearly evident. Cedric cleared his throat, not knowing exactly how to begin.

'Hi, Harry. Can I see you for just a moment, in here?' he began, gesturing towards the open door of the small room.

Harry hesitated, and glanced in the direction of Cedric's outstretched hand. Cedric could see Harry's doubt and, considering what he'd seen the night before, Cedric could understand his hesitancy.

'Come on, Harry, it's nothing like that.'

Harry still looked sceptical.

'Look, I've got your egg, see, I came by to give it back...'

Cedric's ears heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps coming down the corridor. Without thinking, he pushed Harry through the door into the room and closed the door behind them.

He turned to look at Harry, who stood against the far wall of the room. Slightly breathless from his quick spurt, Cedric apologised for the roughness of his actions and explained to a shaken Harry that they certainly couldn't be seen together in the darkened halls of the Castle. Rumours of collusion between the rivals would surely run rampant amongst the student body.

'Just imagine if anyone had seen me handing you your egg, Harry. Can you imagine the questions?' Cedric was beginning to feel exasperated, but then Harry seemed to relax and accept Cedric's reasoning.

'Yeah, I see your point.'

A silence fell between them, heavy and oppressive. They both glanced furtively around and Cedric felt the closeness of the walls as they seemed to lean in, almost eavesdropping on their conversation. He also felt the unusually strong aura that Harry gave off but, as usual, he wasn't able to make any clear sense of it. His heart thundered and he felt that he should at least try to explain his actions of the previous night, but didn't really know how to begin.

'Harry, look, about last night...'

'Um, Cedric, about yesterday...'

They both laughed, embarrassed, and Cedric began again.

'I'm sorry that you saw... well, what you saw.'

'Well, I didn't expect to see anyone there at that hour, and certainly not you.'

Harry's voice was low and quiet as he averted his eyes and blushed. Even in the dim light of the room, Cedric could see the heightened colour on the boy's face, and the sound of Harry's voice made him shiver, a delicious ripple of desire that melted his self-control.

'Neither did I, Harry. Really, I had no idea you even used that bathroom.'

They looked at each other for a long while as everything seemed to fade around them. Their breathing was noticeably louder, and Harry took a slow, cautious step towards Cedric. The taller boy swallowed nervously, but stood his ground as Harry's aura fluttered against him. Cedric was almost sure that the combination produced a faint and harmonious humming sound, or was that just in his mind? He casually wondered whether he was actually going insane, and why every brain cell, every nerve ending and every pulse point was acutely focused on the magic of the boy in front of him.

Harry moved closer and Cedric still made no attempt to move away. He and Harry stood in the midst of the aura and Cedric felt an unbelievable vibration in the very air surrounding them, as though they stood within a force field of their own making. The frantic swirling of colours that was Harry Potter's aura began to decrease in their fervour, and the Gryffindor appeared to be as profoundly affected as he was. Cedric could almost discern patterns in the waves now, nearly distinct colours, and he gazed into the younger boy's eyes. *Windows to the soul* a silly Muggle saying, but boy, was that true tonight. *Those eyes..* thought Cedric, and he was lost again as waves of joy and desire pushed him to surrender, and surrender he did, helpless against the tide.

'Cedric...'

Harry's voice was no more than a whisper, and Cedric shivered as he felt the light touch of Harry's hand on his arm. He seemed as unsteady in his speech as Cedric felt on his own legs, and they were standing mere inches apart, encircled in waves of light and magic. After what seemed like an eternity, the spinning aura stopped, and Cedric could clearly see vibrant hues of blue and green, red and gold in the space around them. Cedric felt an unbelievable sense of happiness, of *rightness*, and he gasped as he felt Harry's grip tighten. Suddenly the moment was lost. Cedric shook his head slightly to ground his thoughts, but it had not escaped his notice that his skin tingled where Harry's hand still remained on his upper arm. The silence stretched between them again, and Harry moved his hand away as though it was an afterthought. Cedric's skin lamented the loss, and as Harry ran his hand through his hair nervously, Cedric covered his disquiet by fumbling in his robes as he wondered just how much their moment had affected the younger boy.

'Here's your egg, Harry.'

'Oh, right. Thanks.'

He handed Harry the egg and their hands touched...

Cedric had a blinding image of him kissing Harry. Harry's neck, throat, chin, lips, leaning into his body and breathing in his scent, kissing him so thoroughly that there could be no question of his intent.

'Cedric.'

Harry groaned, the sound deep in his throat as his hands clawed through Cedric's hair, and the raw sexuality of his voice made Cedric almost explode with his own desire...

Cedric turned, sweating profusely beneath his robes. His hands shook as he cautiously opened the door and rapidly scanned the corridors, but heard no footsteps or other signs of movement. He turned and nodded briefly to Harry whose eyes gleamed even in the dim lights of the room, then stepped out of the door and hastened down the stairs. He was both exhilarated by the encounter and mortified by his own thoughts, as he tried to hide the evidence of their manifestation on his body.

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The Second Task ? The Black Lake

Chapter 10 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Jo Rowling owns them. I merely manipulate them for my own amusement.

A/N: I've changed a few things since this chapter was beta'd, so all mistakes are mine. Thank you, Sunshine, for everything!

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Cedric paced back and forth along the shore of the Black Lake and shivered under a grey sky. The cold February air bit through his clothes despite his constant movements and he glanced occasionally at the crowd, searching the compound. His mind was in turmoil, and his unease seemed to be reflected in the rolling grey clouds. His steady footsteps on the pebbled beach echoed the beating of his own heart, and he paused only when Professor Dumbledore began speaking.

After the briefing, Cedric stood on the banks of the Black Lake with Dumbledore's words still echoing in his mind.

'... *taken what you'll miss the most*'.

His mind raced as he considered the options. '*...what you'll miss the most*'. He still had his wand, so that couldn't be it. Besides, he'd need his wand for the task. '*... taken what you'll miss the most*'. Cedric wondered who decided just what that something was. He shuddered at the thought of someone delving into his deepest heart and mind where they would surely see Harry Potter shining like a beacon... but, no, Harry was a Champion also, so it couldn't be him.

Uncomfortably, Cedric realized that Cho was not at breakfast that morning and was still nowhere to be found. Jamie and Markus accompanied him on his walk down to the lake, joking with each other and lending him support. He remembered that Harry also wasn't at breakfast, nor had he shown up for the recently completed briefing. Cedric paused as the green head of jealousy took repeated stabs at his heart. Harry and Cho? Was it possible? Whereas Cedric had surmised that Harry was more than just a little interested in Cho, but, no, Cho wasn't like that. And Harry? Cedric shook his head as he paced back and forth.

Where was he?

Suddenly Cedric noticed a body rapidly running across the opposite side of the lake and heading their way. He didn't need Omniculars to know that it was Harry; he knew every movement of the young Gryffindor's body. He felt a flicker of relief that he was safe, but there was still no sign of Cho.

Again, Cedric's mind jumped to the possibilities. Harry was late, Cho wasn't anywhere in sight. Usually she was around him constantly. He looked around once more as Harry skidded up to the crowd and stood, breathing heavily and clutching his side. Cedric paused for a moment in his own pacing as he admired Harry's flushed face and careless hair, but was brought back to the present by the announcements and countdown.

The bell rang and Cedric walked into the frigid water. Shivering, he performed the Warming Charm and felt his body temperature rise once more. He sank beneath the grey water and muttered another charm, breathing deeply as the membrane encircled his head. He pushed off from the bottom and swam deeper into the Lake, trying to get his bearings, but the lack of anything familiar in the depths only served to disorient him. He began to feel lost and panic crept into his heart as he realized he was nowhere closer to his target.

Unbidden, an impression of Harry's aura flashed across his mind, although it was not so much an image as a sensation. Cedric cleared his mind and 'felt' for Harry, searched for his aura's unique imprint. Suddenly it was there, swirling, calling to him, and illuminating the way. Without thinking, Cedric pushed off in that direction. He felt Harry's aura like a lifeline and was able to find the source after a fairly lengthy swim. He was truly alarmed that he had been so far away from where the four captives were tied. As he approached, he saw Harry trying to release both Ron and Hermione's ties, but the creatures of the deep refused to let him. Cedric swam down and released Cho, still wanting to help Harry but knowing that he had to get Cho to the surface. He reluctantly turned as he ascended, pulling Cho's body behind him while his thoughts stayed with the young Gryffindor.

His head broke the surface and Cho's did a moment later. The crowd roared and cheered as they made their way to the shore where they were hauled out, blankets draped around them and Pepper Up potion forced down their throats. Cedric was once again thankful that he'd remembered the Warming Charm, or he would have been in significant trouble with hypothermia. He looked around at the others around him and noticed that Fleur was already dried and appeared to be very worried. Cedric remembered that her sister was one of the captives, and he idly wondered what would become of the girl. Surely Dumbledore wouldn't let any actual harm come to any of the captives?

More screams erupted from the crowd, and Cedric turned to see Krum's dark head surface with Hermione immediately afterwards. There was still no sight of Harry, and Cedric was becoming anxious. He had felt the auras of certain creatures in the depths of the lake and wasn't eager to think that Harry had been taken by them, but it was still a competition. He sent his best vibes into the cold dark water and hoped to see the dark headed boy emerge as Madame Pomfrey continued to fuss over them.

Cedric started pacing back and forth, purportedly to keep warm but also to keep occupied. He knew that his own time had been dangerously close to the hour time limit and was therefore sure that Harry had exceeded the allotted time. Wrapped in thick blanket, he nevertheless continued. Pace, pace, pace... and everything will work out. Pace, pace, pace. He saw Cho's look of concern, but he could not think about her now.

Suddenly, there was a roar from the crowd as the heads of Harry, Ron and Fleur's sister appeared at the surface of the lake. Cedric felt as though his heart would explode with relief as the adrenaline coursed through his body and his knees threatened to buckle under his weight. He could see the merpeople in the water as well, and as Harry and Ron helped the girl swim to the bank, he thought he would never get the screeching sound of the merfolk out of his head. Fleur appeared to be almost beside herself as she fought to reach her sister. Cedric tried to catch Harry's eyes as he stumbled towards their group with Ron and Fleur's sister, but Madame Pomfrey intercepted the trio with blankets and the same hot potion she'd given Cedric. Harry and Ron tried to talk, but their teeth were chattering so hard that speech was impossible. Cedric resumed his pacing, but kept close to the soaked pair so that he could hear any news.

Dumbledore's results Cedric's stomach twisted as he realized that he and Harry were now tied for first place. Oh, the irony of this day couldn't be more pronounced.

Cedric felt eyes boring into his back and turned to see Cho approaching, her face as stormy as the wintry clouds overhead. He knew that she wasn't pleased with his actions, and he didn't have to be an empathic to realize that she was seriously pissed off. He sighed as she drew near and steeled himself for the inevitable.

'Cedric?' Cho's voice was clipped and full of restraint, but Cedric could still feel the tempest of her emotions.

'Cho,' he said mildly as he walked to meet her. They stood for a moment face to face, still shivering slightly despite the warm blankets that surrounded them.

'Cedric, what's going on? What's happening to you?' she asked, looking into his face as though desperately searching for the answer.

He had known that she would eventually ask him, and he knew that his answer could either placate her or set him free. Again, he hated the duplicity of his life but truly didn't know of any way to satisfactorily solve his dilemma. He was never one for avoidance but he knew that this problem could not be rectified today.

He shook his head and met her eyes.

'Look, Cho, I'm sorry, okay? This task, you not being around this morning... I just didn't know what was going on, that's all.' He felt that he was being evasive, but at least it was a reasonable explanation.

Cho narrowed her eyes; she wasn't so easily dissuaded.

'No, Cedric, I don't mean that. I mean you ignoring me once we were out of the lake. You were pacing like a madman, and I've never seen you that agitated, not even at the first task against the *dragon!*

Again, Cedric had to admit that she was a sharp one, Cho.

'I was concerned about the others okay? You don't know what it was like down there, Cho, really, it was like another world. Very eerie.'

'All the other champions were out of the water already, Cedric. We were only waiting for Harry and the others,' she pointed out petulantly as she folded her arms across her chest.

Cedric recognised her defensive pose and wondered how was it that women could perfect that particular stance from such a young age.

'I know, but I was worried, alright? Damn, Cho, what's WITH all these questions?' Cedric felt his anger boil in his stomach; he didn't like the direction that her questions were taking. She was too close to hitting upon the truth, and he wasn't prepared to handle that just yet.

'Well, I just didn't think that love would be like this, that's all.'

The accusatory tone of her words spoke volumes to Cedric, and he felt a jolt of realization as she turned around quickly and hastened back towards the castle, leaving him speechless and extremely unsettled.

Cedric glanced around quickly and noticed Jamie in the distance chatting with Professor Dumbledore. He caught Jamie's eye and his friend smiled and nodded before returning to his conversation. Cedric barely had time to process that image when he noticed that the rest of the champions were approaching. Harry was walking slightly behind the group, and he appeared to be in conversation with Ron and Hermione, but as they grew nearer, he broke away from the group and nodded for them to go on ahead. Cedric was easily as cold and bedraggled as Harry, yet he felt sudden warmth at the younger boy's approach. Harry held out his hand as he took the final steps to Cedric's position, and they shook hands warmly. Cedric cursed his betraying skin that shivered at Harry's touch, and he tried to find some way to turn his mind from the direction it so obviously wanted to go.

'Well, Cedric, that was a challenge!'

Cedric smiled ruefully; challenge was a bit of an understatement.

'Yeah, I couldn't find my way in that water though; everything seemed to be turned upside down. I think Fleur and Krum had much the same problem.' *But not you, though, Harry Potter always lands on his feet.* He shook his head to clear his mind of the thought while trying to make it look as though he was getting lake water out of his ears. He doubted he pulled it off.

'So, is Cho alright then? After the Task I mean?'

The whirls of colour that were Harry's aura spun with more energy than ever.

Cedric truthfully didn't know how to answer that. Of course Cho wasn't alright, but then again, he doubted that being submerged in the Black Lake for over an hour had done much to lighten her mood anyway.

'Um, not really sure, Harry,' Cedric said evasively and tried not to look as guilty as he felt. Somehow he felt that he failed miserably in that too.

Harry's expression became contemplative and Cedric wished that, just this once, he could read minds. His heartbeat was becoming uncomfortably loud in his own ears, and he wondered how the boy couldn't hear it standing so close to him. Why did his proximity to Harry bloody Potter have to create such a maelstrom within his mind?

Harry was speaking and Cedric hauled himself back.

'...noticed that yeah. Girls can be a bit of an odd lot.' Harry's guarded amusement led Cedric to wonder how many girls Harry had fended off in his lifetime. He breathed deeply as the thought of girls touching Harry, being near him, *kissing* him brought an uninvited rage that threatened to burst in Cedric's heart. He *had* to stop thinking like that!

'Look, Harry, it's not what you think, alright?' Cedric cautioned hastily lest the young Gryffindor get the wrong idea. Then again, *everybody* had the wrong idea, didn't they, even Cho.

'Well, I don't think anything really, Cedric. It's just that... well... she's really nice and... Never mind.' Suddenly, Cedric realized that Harry was embarrassed, and he began speaking without thinking.

'Do you know how I found you, Harry? How I managed to get there at all?' Cedric blurted out, unable to stop the flow of words. It felt like a catharsis, and he was being carried along, helpless against the tide.

Harry cocked his head to the side as he shook his head wordlessly, but the whirling of his colours was almost enough to make Cedric giddy.

'I was lost, completely lost, and I began to panic. Weak, I know, but the lake, the darkness, there were things...' Cedric broke off, shaking his head.

He was surprised to feel Harry's hand on his shoulder as the younger boy spoke gently.

'Hey, listen, I know what you mean. I was there too, remember?'

Cedric sighed ruefully, knowing fully well that Harry had *noidea* how it really was. He was sure that if Harry had any inkling as to what Cedric *really* felt, that he wouldn't be standing there alone with his hand on Cedric's shoulder.

He was shaken out of his own thoughts as Harry spoke.

'So, how did you find us then?'

Cedric chanced a look into the green eyes and saw a reflection of his own face in the emerald background. Oddly unsettled by the image, he continued, almost against his own will.

'I ... sensed you, alright? I *felt* you, in the water, in the middle of the Black Lake, I sensed you, broadcasting to me like a beacon.' Cedric ran his hand through his hair as though trying to slow his thoughts and his *bloody words!* *He had no right to be saying this to Harry!*

'... but I thought... well, you and Cho...?' Harry's voice trailed off, but he held Cedric's eyes with his own. Again, the colours whirled.

Cedric's heart pounded against his chest and a wave of shame rushed over him, colder than the waters of the Black Lake. He knew what Harry was asking, and what answering him truthfully would mean, but he was no longer willing or able to lie. He dropped his eyes to the ground as he felt something inside him break, something that he'd been keeping inside far too long, and it flowed out of him in a rush.

Cedric simply shook his head.

'No, Harry.'

Not taking his eyes from the ground, Cedric turned and walked swiftly away. He was certain that the jagged pieces of his shattered heart fell like breadcrumbs in his wake. He could only hope that Harry would be happier with Cho than he had been and that he could love her the way she deserved. As for him, he thought darkly, love wouldn't come at all.

~*~

A week after the Second Task, Cedric entered the Hufflepuff common room to find Jamie sitting close to the fire. They smiled at each other, and Cedric joined his friend near the blazing warmth.

'Hey there, mate, how've you been?' Although he, Jamie and Markus were virtually inseparable, Cedric felt as though he hadn't connected with his friends since the second task.

'All is well, my friend, all is well.'

Jamie smirked in a way that led Cedric to believe that the boy was up to something. *Always keeping me guessing, these lads*, he mused. He recalled that Jamie had expressed more than a passing interest in a certain member of the Gryffindor Quidditch team since the Yule Ball, and he wondered whether any further progress had been made on that front.

'Really? Well, it's such a shame that there's no Quidditch this year. I hear that the Gryffindor side might have been unstoppable, especially that Katie Bell...' Cedric let his words hang in the air and waited for Jamie's reaction.

As predicted, Jamie grinned sheepishly.

'Ah, yes, the lovely Miss Bell. After my moderate success last term and then at the Yule Ball, I was going to ask her to the next Hogsmeade weekend.'

'Going to?' Cedric's question dripped with amusement.

'Well, yes, but I haven't actually been able to get her alone to ask.'

'Oh, come now, Bryers, surely that won't stop a man like you. Look, if you want it to happen, you have to *make* it happen, mate.' Cedric was surprised at the forcefulness of his own words.

'Don't you think you should be taking that advice yourself, instead of doling it out?' Jamie asked gently, and the air in Cedric's lungs stubbornly refused to move.

Cedric's stomach lurched. *Had Cho said anything to his friends?* He tried desperately to remain nonchalant as he tried to answer his friend.

'What do you mean, Jamie?' was the best that he could manage.

'Well, you know, you and Boy Wonder.' Jamie's eyes twinkled as he teased his friend.

'Uh,' was Cedric's unintelligible reply.

'What?' Jamie was clearly confused, and Cedric could only stumble around as he tried to find the right words to explain. He inhaled deeply and began.

'Look, Jamie, about that. There's... I don't know... there's *something* about him.' Cedric faltered and shook his head in frustration as the words stubbornly refused to coalesce in his mind.

'Well, there's clearly more than just 'something', mate, so out with it.' Jamie's eyes twinkled as he spoke and Cedric had the unnerving impression that Jamie knew more about this subject than he was letting on.

'Yes, um, true. Okay, I think that there might be... something... between Harry and...'

Cedric paused, more to steady himself than for the effect.

'Between Harry and you?' Jamie finished gently.

Cedric again felt the familiar sensation of the ground falling away from him, as the truth of the spoken words hit him fully. He looked at the ground, at the fire, at anything else to avoid having to look into Jamie's eyes and see his feelings of horror and disgust, or to realize that he was taking the mickey out of him. Cedric's own mind was in such turmoil that even Jamie's normal aura wasn't clear to him. He didn't know what to expect, but when he finally did meet Jamie's eyes, he wasn't prepared for what he saw.

Jamie's brown eyes crinkled as a smile broke across his face, and Cedric tried in vain to return his heart rate to normal. He felt at once relieved and embarrassed, first that he had not trusted his friend enough to tell him earlier and also that Jamie cared enough about him to not say anything until he was ready. He felt a lump in his throat and once again gave silent thanks to Merlin for his friends.

TBC

Hogsmeade

Chapter 11 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

For disclaimer see Chapter 1.

A/N: I know it's been forever, but I've moved countries since last I posted. Now that life is *almost* normal, may I present the latest installment of Wizards and Champions. Sorry for the delay, and I hope it's worth it.

Thanks to my betas, Allyness29 and JaneAverage -- you ladies are wonderful.

Chapter 11 ~*~ Hogsmeade ~*~

Cedric felt oddly lighter since his talk with Jamie, and even though the pressures of both school and the Tournament were still exceptionally high, the following few days were some of the best he'd had since becoming champion.

Professor Moody had begun teaching them the Patronus Charm. Everyone was expected to conjure their Patronus and use it both for sending messages and in a mock battle. Markus was particularly amused at the sight of Jamie's silver fox chasing Fred's rabbit (or was it George's?) around, and his big, booming laugh echoed through the classroom as he leaned on Lee Jordan for support.

Professor Moody seemed particularly agitated at what he called the class' 'tomfoolery,' and he had them practicing until they neared exhaustion.

'Again, Mister Diggory! I need something strong from you, something tangible, something REAL!'

Cedric slumped against the wall and groaned at the sheer volume of Moody's voice as he looked at Jamie, who clapped him on the shoulder in a show of encouragement. Cedric had initially used images from his childhood, the day that he got his Hogwarts letter and the joy on his parents' faces, but the joy he had felt that day had been more of a reflected excitement from his mother and father. His Patronus barely held its shape, and he began to realize that the feelings weren't strong enough because they weren't *his* feelings. No, what truly made Cedric happy was Harry, and he straightened once again to conjure up a memory of his own.

He thought of the younger champion and felt a warmth flow over his body. He recalled an image of Harry after their first task and he felt a surge through his magic. Another image flashed through Cedric's consciousness, an image so clear and so *powerful* that he almost staggered backwards. He and Harry, surrounded by their auras in the small room, and his feeling of peace, of belonging... Suddenly he felt the power build in his own body as his magic took hold, and he uttered the words almost without thought.

'Expecto Patronum!'

The effect was profound. He felt his magic swirl through him and funnel itself down through his arm and into his wand. The tip of his wand flared with an incredibly bright light, out of which galloped a large African Oryx. Cedric looked in amazement at the fully formed animal, its horns standing up proudly from its head. The shimmering, silvery Oryx ran around the room, causing the other Patronuses in its path to scatter, and as it rounded again on the grouping of Cedric, Professor Moody and Jamie, both Cedric and Jamie held their ground while the Professor leapt out of the way. The Oryx skidded to a halt in front of Cedric and lowered its head, placing its forehead against his chest with its long horns lying on each of Cedric's shoulders for a moment before the beast disappeared.

Markus was the first to speak.

'Well, Diggs, that was something.'

That was something indeed, thought Cedric.

~*~

The end of that week brought with it another trip to Hogsmeade. Cedric couldn't bring himself to ask Cho for fear of rejection. He had been quite reserved and almost unkind to her after the second task, and he felt an uncomfortable distance between them. He deeply regretted his inability to be who she wanted, to live up to everyone's expectations, but in rational moments he knew that he could only truly be himself. He felt that he could no longer be everything to everyone and he would not live his life for others any longer. After the Tournament was over he would explain things to his parents; explain himself and his feelings. He felt that he owed them at least that much.

The sun was at its zenith, and it shimmered like a Patronus as Cedric's group left Hogwarts and headed down towards Hogsmeade. Cedric glanced at his friends as they

walked alongside him and he felt oddly disconnected. Jamie and Katie soon pulled ahead of the group, excitedly discussing Quidditch, and Cedric was amused to note that they walked extremely close to each other. He had felt waves of nervousness from Jamie earlier, but now Cedric felt a sense of acceptance emanating from Katie, and he knew that the two of them would be all right.

He glanced sideways at Hannah who was laughing at something Markus had said. Cedric was truly happy for his friends and the corners of his mouth turned up in a private smile. Hannah had proved herself to be more than up to the task of handling Markus, and that was no mean feat.

Cedric's feet made their way down the well-worn path towards Hogsmeade, and he allowed his mind to wander. Predictably, they centred on Cho's face at the lake and later that same week at breakfast. Cedric had tried to talk with her on a couple of occasions, but he realized that nothing he said would make a difference. She had finally realized that her feelings for him weren't being returned ... *couldn't be returned* ... and that realization had stood between them like a wall. She had still been friendly, but she was distant, and he could see the hurt in her eyes; could feel her loss without even trying to sense it.

His melancholy turned his thoughts to the other problem: Harry Potter. After their performances in the second task, both he and Harry were tied for first place in the competition, and Cedric couldn't deny the fact that their standings further complicated things. He now felt the pressure increase twofold; on the one hand he was champion and would fight to win to the very best of his ability, but on the other hand, he felt an instinctual and very strong loyalty to the young Gryffindor that went against all logic. Cedric believed and trusted in his instincts, and in that regard he realized that he was truly at an impasse.

He was jolted out of his musings by Hannah's hand wrapping around his arm as she pulled him to join the two of them.

'Come on now, Cedric, it's a Hogsmeade weekend! Let's go into Honeydukes first and then we can head to Dervish and Banges.'

Cedric couldn't help but be caught up in her enthusiasm, and he shook off the darkness of his thoughts as the trio marched as one down High Street and swept into Honeydukes.

~*~

They emerged thirty minutes later, each clutching a bag of treats. Markus had purchased a block of Honeydukes' finest milk chocolate for himself and a small box of flower-shaped fudge for Hannah. Cedric had also purchased a large block of milk chocolate for himself, as well as a variety of several smaller chocolates, each wrapped in shimmering foil. Munching their treats, the trio caught up with Jamie and Katie as the pair came out of Zonko's Joke Shop.

'Hey, Katie needs to stop at Scrivenshaft's so we're heading over that way. Where shall we meet you?'

Katie and Hannah chorused, 'Madame Puddifoot's for a late lunch?'

The men groaned in unison.

'Why does this feel like a setup, lads?' Jamie asked wryly, and ducked as Katie reached out quickly and tapped him on the back of his head. Everyone laughed easily and agreed to meet at the claustrophobic tea shop.

Cedric accompanied Markus and Hannah as they entered the shop and made for a large booth along the side wall. They all ordered Butterbeer from the waitress while they waited for Jamie and Katie to join them. Cedric looked at the patrons, mainly couples, clustered around the small round tables dotted throughout the shop, and he was forcibly reminded of his visit with Cho. He began to feel as though he should be anywhere else but there and shifted in his seat as he prepared to leave, but his departure was forestalled by Jamie and Katie's arrival. Cedric moved aside to let them into the booth and sat down at the end of the bench seat. He engaged them all in animated conversation for a while as he drank his Butterbeer, but the atmosphere was decidedly skewed towards couples, and he became uncomfortable, feeling that he was a fifth wheel.

Finishing his Butterbeer with a flourish, he rose.

'Right, you lot, I've got to make a move. See you back at Hogwarts, yeah?'

The chorus of protests was predictable.

'Cedric, come on, stay with us.'

'C'mon, Diggs, have another Butterbeer.'

'Cedders, mate, don't go.'

Only Hannah was silent, and as her eyes met Cedric's, a silent understanding passed between them. He was surprised that she understood, but he also had to admit that Hannah Abbott was a most unusual character and a truly good person.

'Nah, I have to take care of something, alright? So, later?'

Barely waiting for an answer, Cedric turned and hurried out of the tea shop, dodging fluffy decorations and large enchanted flowers that shed their petals upon the patrons.

With a sigh of relief, Cedric walked out into the street. It was a beautiful day in Hogsmeade and quite warm for March. He started walking along the road towards High Street when he noticed an unmistakable sight. Harry, accompanied by Ron and Hermione, walked past his field of view on their way towards Dervish and Banges. They appeared to be carrying two bags with them, one a lurid green with yellow writing on it that was clearly from Gladrags and another that was slung over Harry's shoulder. Cedric had the distinct impression that they were up to something, and certainly fourth-years weren't allowed out of Hogsmeade unless they were going back to Hogwarts. The trio were clearly walking out of town, and Cedric hurried down his street with an anxious feeling in his gut that he could not explain. He turned the corner and looked to his left, hoping to catch a glimpse of the trio, but he couldn't see anything beyond the bend in the road that led out into the countryside. The mountain commanded the view, and he scowled, disquieted by their obvious disregard for the rules.

Cedric weighed his options. As a prefect, he was obliged to monitor the younger students, and he could easily have followed them and prevented them from leaving, but on the other hand, he didn't want to force too heavy a hand on Harry and his friends. His gut instinct told him that they were reasonably safe, and although he couldn't exactly say *why*, he resolved to let the matter go for now.

He knew that he should return to Hogwarts, but something in him refused to let him leave without making sure that Harry and his friends returned. He didn't know how long he'd have to wait, so he visited Dervish and Banges, browsing through the supplies and various items while keeping an eye on the street outside. After nearly forty minutes with no sign of the fourth years, Cedric left Dervish and Banges and walked towards Scrivenshaft's. He stood outside the shop for several minutes, smiling at various groups of schoolmates who walked by, laden with purchases. Finally, to avoid questions and prying eyes, Cedric entered the shop and stood next to the window, peering out through the mottled glass while pretending to examine the selection of quills and bottles of magical ink on the shelves. Luckily, the shop was filled with many different types of quills, and as the shopkeeper was busy attending to the four or five customers already in the shop, Cedric felt reasonably certain that he could avoid any confrontation for many minutes.

Many minutes came and went with still no sign of Cedric's quarry. Exasperated and feeling not a little foolish, he left Scrivenshaft's and proceeded to walk slowly up High Street towards Hogwarts. He met the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan coming out of Zonko's Joke Shop, clutching bags and boxes filled with various items. The looks on their faces gave new meaning to the word mischievous, but they all smiled easily as Cedric approached.

'Hey, Cedric, fancy a bit of excitement?' one of the twins started.

'Not that he hasn't had his fair share lately, has he?' The other twin was quick on the uptake.

'Yeah, Cedric, how's about it?' Lee's face was virtually split in two by his wide grin.

'Come on now, guys, can't you see that Cedric's not particularly keen on anything you lot have to offer?'

'Harry!' the group chorused, and Cedric's stomach and heart leapt as he turned and took in the sight before him. Harry and his friends approached Cedric's group, his cheeks pink from the cold and his hair even more unkempt than usual. He was punched playfully by the twins, and Lee grabbed Ron in a headlock. Hermione simply stood a little apart from the brawling men, looking exasperated, but Cedric could feel her eyes on him. He looked up and smiled, meeting her gaze steadily before she blushed and looked away. He ruefully admitted that he had that effect on most girls and wished that his powers extended to the likes of Harry Potter.

'Well, you scoundrels, much as we'd love to stay and play,' began a twin.

'We've got some serious business to attend to,' the other continued.

'And you know how we get when we're serious!' Lee's voice almost cracked from holding back his laughter as the three Gryffindors turned and hastened towards Hogwarts. Cedric chuckled to himself those three reminded him of his own band of brothers.

Cedric turned his attention back to the younger Gryffindors and noted that Harry stood next to Ron, who was trying not to look uncomfortable. Hermione grabbed Ron's arms and started propelling him towards Hogwarts with a 'Bye, Cedric.' He and Harry watched as the pair walked quickly through Hogsmeade, their heads bent in conversation.

Puzzled, Cedric met Harry's eyes as the younger boy turned back to face him, dragging his hand through his unruly black hair in a way that always sent goose bumps across Cedric's flesh; goose bumps that had nothing to do with the cold. No matter how often he watched Harry do that, he still thought, *Oh, do that again!* Cedric longed to run his own hand through that wildly tangled hair, to bury his face in Harry's neck and inhale the scent of him.

Cedric pulled himself back with great effort and started walking after Ron and Hermione.

'So, did you enjoy the outing today?' Cedric asked pointedly.

Harry fell in step beside him and his flickering emerald gaze told Cedric everything he needed to know. The trio had indeed left Hogsmeade unaccompanied by an adult or teacher, and if Cedric were ever in a position to get Harry in trouble, this was it. One mention of Harry's infraction of school rules to someone like Professor Snape and Harry would be spending the next month in detention, Triwizard champion or not. That, combined with his already disadvantaged position of being the youngest and most inexperienced champion would virtually seal his defeat.

However, Cedric didn't operate like that and was genuinely surprised that the thought should have entered his mind at all. His main concern was that Harry was safe, that they all were, and since none of them seemed worse for wear he decided to let it pass.

'We're fine, Cedric. It was a very enjoyable trip.'

Cedric stopped walking and looked at Harry intently as the younger boy turned to face him. His heart still fluttered during every moment spent with this boy, and his stomach still turned in delighted turmoil every time he so much as thought of him. Cedric was sure that Harry could feel his nervousness and his conflicted thoughts, because they shouted in his own mind louder than anything he'd experienced before. Harry's face and eyes glowed with intensity as he stared up at Cedric who realized that the younger boy didn't want him to press the point. Cedric could sense Harry's reluctance to explain as clearly as he felt the whirls of colour that signified Harry's aura. No explanation was necessary.

'Okay.'

'Cedric...'

'Harry, really, it's fine.'

'Okay, then.'

Silence.

Cedric fought to remain impassive, to project a calm exterior to shield the world from the maelstrom inside him. Harry broke the gaze first and shuffled his feet nervously, dragging his hand through his hair again. Cedric shivered. *Do that again!*

'Do you believe me?'

The words were softly spoken, but the weight of the question hung between them. Cedric considered his answer and knew that Harry deserved nothing but honesty.

'Not entirely, but you're safe. That's all that matters.'

Harry paused, seemingly taken aback by Cedric's words, and the prefect saw the young Gryffindor considering his response.

'Oh. Well, I... guess I'll see you later? I have to catch up with Ron and Hermione.'

'Sure, see you.'

The Hufflepuff prefect felt an odd pang at their strained conversation, and a feeling of loss swept through him as Harry turned and hurried after his friends. His shivering body and pounding heart mourned the loss for much longer.

TBC

Covet

Chapter 12 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Jo Rowling owns everything you recognise. The story line, Markus and Jamie are all mine!

A/N: Thanks to my Nishles for her continuing support, to laurel_tx and snapeophile for their first read-throughs, and to my beta, JaneAverage, who does wonders with words and ideas!

+++++

Defence Against the Dark Arts took on an entirely literal flavour on Monday. On the previous Friday, Professor Moody had announced that the class would engage in a mock-battle using their Patronuses for both defence and relaying of information. The Weasley twins had worn matching expressions of excitement and mischief all weekend long and Cedric admitted to himself that, whereas Moody was certainly not altogether mentally stable, his teaching methods were unusual and highly effective.

On Monday afternoon Cedric and Jamie walked along the path towards the Forbidden Forest. In all his six years at Hogwarts, neither of them had ever had a reason to go into the dense collection of foliage, and as Jamie walked closer to him, Cedric smiled at his bemused expression.

'Alright there, Jamie?'

'Not sure, Cedders. There's something about Moody...'

'You mean apart from his obvious insanity?'

Jamie grinned. 'Yeah, but there's something more than that. Does he seem "normal" to you?'

'Well, I don't know. Define "normal."'

'He's always drinking from that hip flask, he has a maniacal expression most of the time, especially when he's talking about the Dark Arts, and there's something, I don't know, *sinister* about him. You've felt it, haven't you, Cedders? I wonder if Dumbledore made the right choice having him here.'

Cedric fell silent as he thought about Jamie's words. Although they hadn't really discussed it, both he and Jamie felt the same way about Moody. There was something 'off,' and Cedric had to agree with his friend.

'Well, yes, I have felt... something from him. It's not malevolence exactly, but it's disquieting. I'd owed my Dad and asked him for background on Moody, but all he said was that he's a highly gifted ex-Auror who's a bit of a madman. Apparently he was the Ministry's best operative, but he gave them quite a lot of trouble towards the end of his career.'

Jamie looked thoughtful as his feet continued their cadence towards the forest.

'Oi, you lot! Thanks for waiting for me.'

Cedric turned to see Markus running the final steps to catch up with him and Jamie.

'Well, Mister Hughes, if you're going to spend all your free time carousing around with a certain female...' Jamie began.

'Yes, well then, we shall have no choice but to carry on without you!' Cedric finished their spiel.

'Rotters, the both of you!' Markus was grinning as he fell in step with his two mates. Professor Moody stood just short of the tree line and turned dramatically as Cedric's group approached. Fred, George and Lee were already there, standing in a group no far from the forest's edge. Moody's magical eye spun in its socket searching the trees, Cedric presumed while the regular one looked at them individually. Cedric often wondered what Moody saw with that eye and how the information was presented in his mind. Cedric's only comparison was the way he saw auras or felt vibes from the people around him, but he just got impressions and feelings, not actual pictures.

'Now, gentlemen, the rest of the class has already been split into groups and has begun their task. You lot will be breaking up into two teams. The object of the exercise is to both cast and deflect spells while using your Patronuses as messengers. Make no mistake; both functions of a person's Patronus can be equally important in a battle.

'Well then, how's about a little inter-house competition? Diggory, let's have you, Hughes and Bryers against the Weasleys and Jordan. We're using non-violent hexes only I don't want there to be any trouble today. You may use any combination of the Full-Body Bind, the Disarming Charm, the Impediment Jinx and any of the trip jinxes.'

The rush of adrenaline through Cedric mirrored the waves of excitement that emanated from his classmates at the prospect of actually doing battle against each other. He glanced across at his opponents, and he noticed their closed-off expressions. They were preparing for full-out combat, Gryffindor style.

Moody barked his orders.

'Hufflepuff team. Take up your positions just inside the forest. Feel free to use whatever protective spells you deem fit to defend yourselves. You will each need to send information to me via your Patronus at least once during the five minute battle. I'll send a signal when we're ready to begin. Get going!'

Markus grinned at Jamie and Cedric as they moved into the forest and crouched down behind a tree. The bright sunlight seemed to be captured by the leaves of the trees as though the forest itself was protecting its innermost regions. The light filtered down in a mottled haze that added to the surreal feeling of their task.

'Right, lads, it's time to get tribal.'

Markus' eyes glittered with barely contained excitement, and both Cedric and Jamie knew that look. Competition was something that Markus truly enjoyed, pitting his strength, knowledge and talent against others. They all knew that the twins and Lee were a cohesive unit and very skilled with jinxes and Markus quickly outlined his strategy.

'Right, Diggs, I want you in a tree overlooking the battleground. You'll cover us and we'll do battle with the Gryffindors.'

'Forget it, there's just no way!'

'Come on, Diggs, you can do nonverbal spells from up there. Disillusion yourself so they won't even see you it'll be brilliant!'

'Oi! I'm not hiding in the tree like a bloody coward, Markus.'

'Diggs, it's nothing to do with cowardice...'

'Precisely. If I'm so brave and worthy, let me fight!'

'We can't afford to have you injured, Diggs. Be reasonable.'

'I'm always bloody reasonable, Markus. I just don't think it's fair pitting two against three on the ground.'

'You'll be our eyes in the sky, Diggs. You're our secret weapon. Jamie and I will draw their fire close to your position, and you can use your skills to our advantage. It's good teamwork for battle, so lets just do it, okay?'

On the face of things, Markus' plan sounded good, and intellectually Cedric understood his friend's reasoning. A small part of him suspected that Markus was trying to protect him, and he felt a sudden and unwelcome wave of annoyance.

'Damn it, Markus, don't pamper me, all right?'

'Listen, Diggs, I don't want you in danger, mate. You're Hogwarts' champion, and we can't have you damaged.'

'Cedric doesn't exactly need our protection, and he's not our only champion, Markus,' Jamie said softly.

Suddenly the argument stopped and Cedric and Markus looked at Jamie. He had been quiet during their entire altercation, observing their interactions as he so often did, and as usual, when he interjected he hit right to the core of the matter.

Cedric felt as though he'd been hit in the stomach and the wind had been knocked out of him. Jamie had both defended Cedric's point of view and indirectly stood up for Harry. He was so stunned that he almost missed Jamie's next remark.

'However, I have to agree with Markus. I do like the idea of you as a sniper, Cedders, and I think that, initially, it's a very good plan. We'll send a signal to let you know when we need you, and you'll be able to see everything from your vantage point anyway. Let's start the battle that way and see how we fare. Agreed?'

Cedric was a little mollified at Jamie's intervention and grudgingly realized that his friends weren't treating him any more carefully than they would normally have done. Truth be told, he was the best at nonverbal spells, and he had to admit that Markus' plan was a very good one. Embarrassed, he met Markus' eyes with a heartfelt apology.

'Sorry, mate. I don't know what I was thinking. I didn't mean...'

Markus grabbed Cedric in a big bear hug, cutting short his apology and almost knocking the wind out of him.

'Fear not, Diggs, I knew you'd see reason!' Markus' jovial spirit and impish wink were enough to have them all laughing, the argument all but forgotten. Cedric silently vowed that if they needed his help, he would forego his safe hiding place in favour of helping the brotherhood. Besides, they were only using non-violent spells in this exercise. How dangerous could it *really* get?

With their strategy finalized, they parted and Cedric climbed into the lower branches of a sturdy tree. Following their plan, he cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, and from his vantage point he could see Markus and Jamie walking along a path, their heads bent together. Cedric smiled this was going to be a highly enjoyable lesson.

Cedric hadn't spent more than a couple of minutes in the tree before he heard Moody's magically-amplified voice reverberating through the forest.

'Your five minutes begin NOW!'

There was a flash of red light that must have come from his wand and Cedric heard the sounds of the Gryffindor team moving through the forest. He tightened his grip on his own wand as his heartbeat quickened and he peered through the dim light.

Fred and George were the first to appear, and Cedric saw them crouch down behind a tree. He surmised that they must have spotted Markus or Jamie, and quick as a flash one of them cast a Jelly-Legs Jinx. From his vantage point Cedric countered with a trip jinx which felled one of the twins Fred, he thought. He could hear their shouts clearly as Lee ran up to assist them, and Cedric silently cast a Full-Body Bind on him.

'Dammit! George, get him out of that thing.' Fred's voice was tinged with nervousness as he climbed to his feet.

Cedric realized that it was easier to do nonverbal spells when he was relaxed, but his position in the tree gave him a certain measure of protection and in his Disillusioned state he wasn't in any immediate danger of being fired upon. Although his heart pounded in his ears as he concentrated to steady his breathing, he searched inside himself to find the magic at his core. He focused on it for a moment and harnessed the power within him before he mentally enunciated the spells.

The battle was really quite spectacular. Flashes of light and the shouts of the combatants pierced the dim light and the scene took on an almost surreal quality. The Weasleys and Lee were fighting against Markus and Jamie, completely unaware of Cedric's location. Cedric fought against his natural instinct to launch himself into the fray and protect his friends as the battle intensified. Markus' plan had been specific Cedric was to remain out of sight.

He watched as Markus cast a Shield Charm against a Bat-Bogey Hex launched at him by Lee. Suddenly the Gryffindor tactics had changed, and Cedric felt a frisson of excitement down his spine as the battle moved to a new level. These were more than mere jinxes.

A sudden movement in the bushes behind Jamie caught Cedric's eye.

'Jamie! Behind you!'

Jamie ducked and rolled away from another of George's Jelly-Legs Jinxes. Cedric reacted purely by instinct and countered George's spell with a Stunner. Red light flashed as the Gryffindor fell to the ground, motionless, and Cedric gasped at George's inert body, almost surprised at himself. Moody hadn't really mentioned Stunners, but this was now a battle zone. He watched as Fred conjured his Patronus, presumably sending the shimmering gazelle to find Professor Moody with the news that a Weasley had fallen. Fred then cast a hasty *Rennervate* at his sibling who staggered to his feet. The twins looked up and both brought their wands to bear on Cedric as they cast simultaneous Tickling Charms at him. Cedric fell out of his tree, overcome by giggles and rendered temporarily useless, his cover blown.

Unable to catch enough breath to articulate a single sound, Cedric looked around helplessly for one of his teammates and saw Jamie's wand aimed at him as his friend cast *Finite Incantatem*. The effect was instantaneous, but Cedric was still breathless as Jamie pulled him to his feet.

'Thanks. Where's Markus?'

'Just look for the carnage, Cedders, and he'll be there!'

They both laughed as they ducked behind a tree and scanned the area for the third member of their team. Cedric noted another shimmering creature running through the trees someone else had sent their Patronus off as well.

They pushed their way through a small thicket and came upon the heat of the battle. Markus was doing the fighting of two men. Completely in his glory, he fired off an Impediment Jinx at one of the twins, but it was deftly dodged and answered with yet another Jelly-Legs Jinx. Cedric cast his Patronus, intending to send a message to Moody but aiming it towards Fred, hoping to adversely affect his aim. He grimly vowed never to be too complacent about the so-called 'minor' jinxes, because they were certainly factoring heavily in this skirmish. Markus fell to ground and Fred dived out of the way as the shimmering Oryx galloped past him and then veered off towards Professor Moody. Cedric and Jamie ran into the clearing, and Cedric's heartbeat thundered in his ears as the adrenaline coursed through his bloodstream.

'Get them, Bryers. Don't let those lads escape!' Markus' voice was commanding and slightly angry as he tried his best to stand.

Jamie lunged off into the forest, and Cedric could only see dim shadows through the trees even in the bright afternoon sun. A shadow moved in front of him and he heard an incantation it sounded like a Blinding Hex. He ducked out of the way and cast a Stunner into the running shadow, and he heard someone go down with a groan. He couldn't be sure who it was and he ran forward just as he heard the incantation for a Jelly-Legs Jinx by one of the twins. He shouted in dismay as his legs gave out on him, and he saw Markus succumb to another Full-Body Bind.

Cedric hit the ground hard, the force of his fall jarring his body and he lay on the leaf-covered ground for a moment as he tried to catch his breath and clear his head.

Jamie returned and cast *Finite Incantatem* on them both and they stood, breathing heavily. Sounds of approaching footsteps and rustling in the trees galvanised them into action and they stood, their backs together, as the Gryffindors closed in on them.

'*Impedimenta!*' Markus shouted, his voice booming through the foliage, and they heard someone's slow thrashing through the trees.

'Right, you lot. Separate. Another circuit clockwise and regroup. Two minutes. GO!'

Jamie grinned at Markus' barked orders. 'Yessuh!' he replied, and they separated. Cedric pushed away from them both, his legs tired from all the running and climbing. He moved into the forest only slightly before turning right and jogging for roughly a minute. He turned right again and cautiously made his way back to the clearing.

Wand at the ready, he tensed as the leaves to his left moved, but seconds later Jamie's face and twinkling eyes appeared.

'Rather quiet, isn't it?'

Cedric had been thinking the same thing, but then they heard one of the twins shout and hastened to the source of the sound.

They ran into another small clearing where Markus lay flat on the ground, his hands half-raised in surrender. Lee was standing over him, breathing heavily, with his wand pointed directly at their friend's chest. The Gryffindor seemed to have developed an odd sort of twitch, and Cedric met Markus' eyes, motioning for him not to move. The rest of their classmates slowly made their way into the clearing and stood wide eyed as Fred and George began speaking to Lee in soothing tones.

'Thanks, Lee. We've got him now.'

'Yes, well done, mate. I reckon that's won us the battle, that has.'

Lee appeared to not have heard them, and he gripped his wand tighter as he leaned down and pressed the tip of it hard into Markus' chest. He growled in a low, dangerous voice.

'Thought you could escape me, did you? Thought you could win this way? That's not how the game is played, Mister Hughes.'

What the hell?

Nobody needed to be an empath to understand that Markus was extremely concerned. Cedric could almost see the tension crackling in the air around them, and he felt waves of confusion from Lee. He briefly wondered whether the Gryffindor had been hit with some sort of Confundus Charm as he sensed Lee's mind wavering between two different consciousnesses, and that concerned him more than anything else. He vaguely remembered having sensed something like that before but he couldn't place exactly where.

Suddenly Professor Moody strode into view.

'Er, Professor, I believe we have a problem.' Cedric tried to keep his voice calm, but the heavily-scarred man was fixated on Lee Jordan's back and didn't respond to the comment.

'Lee, it's all right. The game's over.' Fred's voice shook slightly.

Still no reaction and Cedric realized that Markus was in danger of physical bodily harm. Jamie was shaking with rage and surprised them all as he barked an order in an almost military way.

'Jordan! Stand down. NOW!'

Everyone jumped as Jamie's words boomed through the silence of the forest and seemed to break through Lee's trance. He dropped his wand, and stepped backwards, shaking his head as though trying to rid himself of unwanted thoughts. Moody looked around, his magical eye whirling crazily as he fumbled for his hip flask and took a deep drink. He grimaced as he swallowed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before turning to his sixth year students. He ignored their stunned faces and continued as though nothing was amiss.

'Remember, Mister Jordan, *that* is what the Imperius Curse feels like. Not so easy to throw it off in the heat of battle, is it?'

There was not a sound in the forest save the heavy breathing of the class.

Moody's magical eye whirled like a demented thing before he turned and strode out of the clearing and back towards the castle.

'Right then, so that was a victory to Gryffindor, I believe?' he shouted over his shoulder.

~~

By mutual and unspoken consent, nothing further was said about the incident in the forest. Cedric desperately wanted to speak with his father, but knew that any mention of Moody's infraction of school rules and his dubious behaviour would put his father in an untenable position. Amos would both fear for his son's safety and be duty-bound to report Moody to the Ministry. That, in turn, would put Dumbledore in a bad light and might force Moody to resign from Hogwarts, leaving the DADA position unfilled once again.

~~

Several weeks later, Professor Sprout asked Cedric to stay behind after class. The normally cheerful and diminutive teacher was a favourite of Cedric's, and he suspected that she felt the same about him.

'Mister Diggory, the Headmaster would like you to report to the Quidditch pitch tonight at nine o'clock. It concerns the final task of the Tournament.'

Cedric's heartbeat increased and he felt the all-too-familiar shivers up and down his spine at the mention of the competition.

'Thanks, Professor. Nine o'clock tonight, I'll be there.'

'Good luck, lad. Please feel free to let me know if there's anything I can do for you.'

Impulsively, he lifted her into the air and hugged her.

'Thanks, Professor. You're wonderful.'

He put her back on the ground and hastened away; not wanting to see his teacher blush. Nevertheless, her pleased aura permeated the greenhouse behind him.

~~

Quite by accident, Cedric and Harry met at the front doors of the castle. Cedric had been rushing up the stairs from his common room, certain that he would be late, but when he saw the perpetually untidy dark hair of the Boy Who Lived crossing the Entrance Hall, he slowed. He didn't relax, exactly, because he still found it difficult to maintain his equilibrium around Harry, but at least they could have a little time together, all under the auspices of the Tournament.

Harry smiled at him, a full smile that flickered in his oh-so-green eyes, and Cedric wondered if his stomach would ever get over the way Harry affected him.

'Hi, Cedric, are we to meet them at the Quidditch Pitch?'

'Yes, that's what I was told.'

'I really do miss it, you know, Quidditch. I haven't been on a broom in so long.'

'Oh, yeah, except for that whole dragon chase in the first task.'

Harry laughed and Cedric's stomach did a back flip. 'Well, yes, except for that!'

They both laughed easily and continued their walk, chatting amiably about Quidditch and past matches and their hopes for their teams the following year. They eventually lapsed into a comfortable silence and Cedric found himself wishing that he could play the game *with* Harry, instead of against him.

Harry's voice pulled Cedric out of his reverie.

'What...'

His voice trailed off as they both rounded the path and came upon the Quidditch pitch, but there appeared to be raised lines criss-crossing its entire surface.

'What've they done to it?' Cedric was surprised that his words and voice sounded so angry, but one look at Harry confirmed that he had echoed the Gryffindor's exact feelings.

Wait, those aren't lines...

'They're hedges!' said Harry.

'Hedges? Why in the hell are there hedges on our Quidditch pitch?'

They joined Ludo Bagman in the middle of the pitch where he stood with Krum and Fleur. Cedric narrowed his eyes as the Veela gave Harry a radiant smile and fought back a pang of... something. He was somewhat gratified that Harry only smiled back nervously at her, and Cedric was sure that his anger showed on his face but he didn't try to hide it. Let them all think that it had everything to do with the state of their Quidditch pitch.

Everyone looked on in amazement as Ludo Bagman explained. The pitch would become a maze for the third task. Cedric wasn't sure quite what to make of that, but Mr. Bagman's assurances that everything would be put to rights afterwards took away some of the sting of his indignation. He looked at the other Champions Krum and Fleur surveyed the young maze with mild interest. Cedric was sure that although they maintained passive and almost uninterested outward appearances, they were taking mental notes and already working out possibilities, as was he.

At Mr. Bagman's invitation, the group broke up and headed back to the castle. Cedric and Harry shared a quizzical look that spoke volumes about their doubts.

'I don't know, Cedric,' Harry murmured, and the sound of his hesitant voice tickled Cedric's mind with delicious thoughts. 'If Hagrid's in charge of putting obstacles and creatures in the maze, we may be in for some very unwelcome surprises.'

He understood completely, and was a bit relieved that he wasn't the only one to feel that way. He was also gratified to see that Harry didn't wear blinkers when it came to their Gamekeeper and he realized that, even though Harry and his friends were inordinately close to Hagrid, the young champion wasn't blinded to the truth about the large man's propensity for dangerous creatures.

Cedric noticed Mr Bagman hurrying along on Harry's far side and simultaneously felt a presence behind them. He reached into his robes as he half-turned, his grip tightening on his wand at the sight of Viktor Krum with his hand on Harry's shoulder. Even though Cedric now stood a little away from Harry and Krum, he raised himself to his full height as he strove to find a better vantage point.

When it appeared that Krum wanted to speak with Harry alone, Cedric felt a stab of what could only be called jealousy. Harry glanced at him and Mr. Bagman momentarily before heading out of the stadium with Viktor. Cedric's mind ate away at him like a pack of rats as he wondered what Krum had to talk to Harry about and why it was such a secret. His stomach still burned at the memory of Harry's face, his half-smile at Mr. Bagman and his obvious surprise at Krum's invitation.

Cedric was less than amused as he pondered Krum's motives. He had felt something like jealousy or maybe anxiety from the Bulgarian, but the Durmstrang champion was so closed emotionally that it was hard to pinpoint exactly. Cedric comforted himself that at least it wasn't malice. There was always the possibility of sabotage, and although the two Hogwarts champions were tied for first place after the second task, Harry was still at a significant disadvantage in the tournament. Clearly that wasn't what was on Krum's mind tonight.

Without a second thought as to the repercussions of his actions, Cedric cast a Disillusionment spell on himself and followed Harry and Krum. He was careful to tread lightly and, sending a silent thanks to his father's Ministry friends, used a Feather-Foot Charm to ensure that his footsteps wouldn't be heard.

He circled around the pair, and noted their considerable distance from Hagrid's cabin. He saw Krum's body tense and felt a change in his aura as he turned to face Harry, and Cedric's body prepared to defend Harry. He couldn't say exactly why, but he felt that he needed to be there, that he had to know whether Harry was safe, whether Krum had any designs on the youngest champion, and where he, Cedric, stood in the scheme of things.

When he realized that they were only talking about Hermione and Quidditch, he almost laughed out loud. Cedric mentally berated himself for reacting the way he had and promptly left the two champions to their conversation, grinning all the way back to the castle.

Yes, he could admit it to himself he was jealous. He was also surprised at the force of the emotion, and chuckled at the irony. He knew that he was envied by many, the "Perfect Prefect," the total package, a winner all around. Most people thought he had everything.

Most people were wrong.

TBC

A/N: Reviews are love.

Dissemination

Chapter 13 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

A/N: So sorry for the lengthy delay. Thanks to Nikki, Kerry and Jane, my beta team, for their hard work and great suggestions.

Cedric headed back to the common room, still brooding. Markus was lounging on the couch next to Cedric's favourite armchair and beckoned him over. After half a moment's hesitation, Cedric flopped into the armchair and grinned at his friend.

'Well, Diggs, what was tonight's clandestine meeting about then?'

Cedric's heart leapt, and he wondered whether Markus knew what he had done, but then reason won out as he realized that his friend was talking about the Triwizard Tournament. Exhaling dramatically, he explained what little he knew of the third task to Markus, whose eyes widened at the prospect of a hedge-riddled Quidditch pitch.

'That sounds like something, all right, but what else is up? You seem out of sorts, and it's not normal for you to be so worked up over something like this.'

Cedric was surprised at the unusual question from Markus and smiled.

'Careful, Markus, any more questions like that and people will start accusing you of having feelings!'

Markus let out a large, booming laugh that startled the common room and earned them disapproving looks from nearly everyone in the room, particularly the fifth-years who seemed to be up to their eyeballs in books and parchment.

'Well, I blame it all on Hannah. She's rubbing off on me.'

'I think it's a great thing, mate. She's a good person.'

Markus grew thoughtful. 'Yes, she is, she really is,' he said quietly.

Cedric pondered just how much of a positive effect Hannah was having on his friend and made a mental note to thank her after the tournament. They continued their discussion, hypothesizing about the possibilities of the maze and the creatures within. Markus suggested making a list of all the animals and creatures that Hagrid had introduced them to over the two years that he'd been the Care of Magical Creatures teacher. He was sure that with Jamie's help the three of them could figure out which would be the hardest to defeat and then figure out how to do it.

'Hey, where is Jamie anyway? I haven't seen him since Herbology.' Cedric looked around the common room for their friend.

Markus grinned hugely, his white teeth flashing in his tanned face as he waggled his eyebrows dramatically. 'Ah, our young James is in the library with Miss Bell. I suspect that they're canoodling in the stacks!'

Cedric laughed out loud, earning them both more glowering looks from the fifth years. 'Oh, come on, Markus, do you believe that *everyone* is hormonally driven?'

Markus' only response was to wink broadly at him, and Cedric had to admit, if only to himself, that the same was true when it came to his thoughts of Harry.

~~

Cedric pictured the dusty Hogwarts library and the stacks of books in the very back. It was notoriously a place where students went to snog and sometimes a little more, and although Madame Pince must have known about the goings on, he hadn't heard of any of the students who had ever gone far enough to warrant her intervention.

Cedric had only been there once, with Cho, early in their relationship, and although they *had* groped each other largely experimentally, he had never thought to take her back there. Somehow, the stacks were reserved for fantasies, and his fantasies had never included her, only Harry.

He pictured the wooden shelves that held the old, large and very dusty tomes. Research books, mainly, and the occasional book on family histories or magic through the ages. Cedric loved books and felt a strong connection to their history. He liked to run his hands along the spines of the publications, feeling their magic even through his fingertips.

He often imagined that Harry would find him there, or maybe he would stumble upon the young Gryffindor as he searched for a hard-to-find title.

'Let me help you, Harry', he'd say, and Harry would be grateful for his kind offer of assistance. Cedric would find the book in no time, of course, but would delay, just to feel Harry's body against his as they stretched their necks to read the titles on the highest shelves. Cedric would reach up for the book, bringing it down for Harry and caressing the spine of the volume before handing it to the young champion.

Harry would thank him sincerely and his eyes would glitter, even in the dim light, and that would make Cedric's heart beat faster and faster with every pulse. Their hands would brush against each other's as Cedric would surrender his find, and their eyes would meet and hold. Time would stand still and the only sound would be their ragged breathing. Their bodies would be close, so close, and Harry would move closer still and tilt his head backwards, moving his lips closer to Cedric's ear.

'Thank you again, Cedric,' Harry would whisper, and Cedric's body would respond to the heat of Harry's breath on his neck and the hoarseness of his voice. His skin would erupt in goose bumps, and he would suck his breath in through his clenched teeth, and then Harry would cover Cedric's mouth with questioning kisses, tentative yet yearning, just like the boy himself, and Cedric would answer every time.

The book forgotten, their bodies would entwine as their kisses grew more intense and more demanding. Cedric would press Harry's body against the hard wooden shelves and groan as he felt the heat of the flesh beneath his hands. Harry would moan, a delicious, sinful, needful, *desperate* sound that would fuel Cedric's desire further, and he would make quick work of the buttons of Harry's clothes, exposing his pale skin in the dusty air of the library.

Ever mindful, Cedric would cast a Silencing Charm wordlessly as he ran his tongue along Harry's chest and up the side of his neck, relishing the sweet-salt tang of his

flesh, a taste that was so uniquely *Harry*. Their breath would come in ragged pants as the need for skin-on-skin contact would drive Harry to fumblingly remove Cedric's robes before he would slide his hand down the front of Cedric's trousers. His fingers would close around Cedric's cock, already impossibly hard, and Cedric's every pore, every nerve ending, would be tuned to that delicious feeling of lightly calloused fingers on his sensitive flesh.

Cedric's legs would threaten to give out, and he would push his body against Harry's, driving him harder into the shelves and grinding his pelvis against the hard young body. They would moan into each others mouths as they kissed, deep, erotic kisses that would intensify with every movement against each other, and he would feel the delicious friction of Harry's erection through his trousers, the rub of sweat-slicked skin so very delicious to the touch that it was almost enough to have them coming from barely held desire. Cedric would always feel Harry's aura surround them, and the power would surge through them, first stripping them bare and then binding them to each other.

Harry would whisper Cedric's name, over and over, a moaning, groaning, begging *pleading* mantra that would accompany their simultaneous orgasms, and the magic surrounding them would throb with every thrust, every heart beat and every pulse of their bodies.

They would stand, gasping, leaning against each other as the dust settled around them. Harry's back would be bruised and marked by the shelves as a result of their tryst, but he would never complain. Cedric would run his hands over the injured flesh, gently caressing the skin and murmuring a healing spell, and the damage would be repaired.

Until the next time...

~~

'Oi, Cedric, mate, are you okay? You seem a little... flushed. You feeling all right?'

Cedric realized that he was shaking and swallowed nervously. 'Yes, I'm all right. Just a little light headed... skipped dinner, you know.'

'Oh. Right.'

Cedric knew that Markus' doubting tone spoke volumes, and he hated the lie but felt awkward for the first time around his friend. Although he and Jamie shared an empathetic bond that made their interactions easier, ever since their first weekend at Hogwarts, Markus' approval was always what Cedric strove for, and he pondered how his boisterous friend would take the news of his being gay and of his attraction to Harry.

Markus was the strong-willed one, a natural leader and hugely charismatic. Like the star sign he was born under, he was often bullish, opinionated and stubborn, but to Cedric, Markus represented stability. Whereas Cedric was perhaps the most popular of the three in the school, Markus held the real power. Jamie was the soothing, equalizing force, and although Cedric felt fairly certain that Jamie would support him no matter what, Markus usually required proof, certainty and logic. Cedric realized that there was no logic in this situation, but what he felt for Harry was incontrovertible, and he knew one thing their mutual attraction couldn't be ignored any longer. He wanted to square things away with his friends, and he vowed to do so later that night when Jamie returned to the dorm.

~~

Later that night, however, Cedric was called into the Headmaster's office on a matter of great urgency. He arrived just as Fleur was being questioned by Dumbledore with Madame Maxime in attendance as to what she saw, who she saw, who was there and what happened. Cedric was bombarded by impressions of fear, dismay, discomfort, anger and mistrust. His heartbeat was unsteady as Fleur and Maxime brushed past him, and his eyes met Fleur's for a brief moment. He realized that something very grave had happened and shuddered as he wondered what could have prompted the Headmaster to call the champions to his study at this hour of the night.

His mind sent out feelers for Harry's aura but the magic within Hogwarts was entirely too strong for him to be able to pick out the signature of the young Gryffindor.

Dumbledore met Cedric at the door to his office.

'Ah, Cedric, come in, dear boy. Quite a business tonight.'

'What's happened, Headmaster?' Cedric was concerned to see the tiredness in Dumbledore's face.

'I was hoping that you could tell me.'

Cedric had a fleeting memory of Harry and Krum on the grounds and felt a wash of shame for his actions. He struggled to meet the Headmaster's eyes and was surprised to see that they lacked their usual twinkle, yet he wondered whether Dumbledore really saw and knew all. He quailed slightly in the wake of this unprecedented development but found comfort from an unexpected source.

A gentle crooning emanated from the corner of Dumbledore's office and Cedric turned to see a large, blood-red bird gazing at him with dark, glittering eyes. A phoenix! He was suddenly awash with awe and a gentle soothing comfort he had heard tell of the power of phoenix song, but didn't imagine that the bird's crooning would have such a powerful effect.

'Ah, yes, I see you've met Fawkes. He approves of you, dear boy, and a phoenix's approval is never given lightly.'

Cedric briefly wondered whether the bird knew what he'd done tonight and whether all his impurities, both of mind and body, were somehow laid bare for Fawkes to see. He chanced one last look at Fawkes' magnificent vermilion plumage and was surprised to see the bird nod its regal head at him. Cedric arched an eyebrow and considered that the phoenix might just be the one who knew and saw all.

'Thank you, sir.'

'Not at all,' Dumbledore said, dismissing Cedric's formality with a wave of his hand. 'Now then, tell me what happened tonight down at the Quidditch pitch, and leave nothing out.'

Cedric had been conflicted; on the one hand he had wanted to be completely upfront with Dumbledore, but on the other hand he didn't know quite how to verbalize his feelings. A gentle crooning from the corner had boosted his nerve, and he chanced the truth with the older man.

Dumbledore's eyes had twinkled slightly as he regarded Cedric, and for a moment he had looked to be the man as Cedric had always known him to be, old, yes, but wise, gentle and fair. Cedric had gathered his courage...

Twenty minutes later, Dumbledore sighed heavily and walked around his desk to sit on its edge facing Cedric, who in turn sat back wearily in the armchair. They had been over most of the events of the night in minute detail, and Cedric hadn't been able to offer the Headmaster any insight into what had happened prior to the attack on Viktor.

Now, as he slumped back in his chair, he knew that he could no longer keep anything from Dumbledore.

'Headmaster, there is something more.'

He almost stopped when he saw Dumbledore's frown, his greying eyebrows nearly meeting in the middle of his forehead, but the words were out of his mouth before he'd even given due consideration to their impact.

'I think there's something you should know about Professor Moody.'

What the hell? Where did THAT come from?

Cedric hadn't meant to bring up that subject at all, yet he knew that, despite his classmates' agreement to keep the matter a secret, Dumbledore had a right to know, especially in light of the night's events.

'What should I know, Cedric?'

'Earlier this month, Professor Moody conducted a mock battle with our class in the Forbidden Forest. We were firing hexes at each other and protecting ourselves, but L... a student began behaving strangely and threatened another student at wand point. Professor Moody appeared and was acting in a decidedly odd manner, then informed us that the first student had been under the Imperius Curse. He used an Unforgivable on a student, sir, and it was certainly different than in his Defence class. It... *felt* different.'

As the sound of Cedric's voice died away, the room was filled with a deafening silence. It was as though the many shiny instruments and whirring gadgets had ceased their frantic existence at the enormity of Cedric's news.

Professor Dumbledore's eyes were troubled, their depths mirroring the angst and disquiet that Cedric felt. He knew that Dumbledore was capable of shielding himself from Legilimency, but Cedric could still feel the barest echo of the Headmaster's intense emotions, and he had to admit that it frightened him.

'Thank you for telling me this, Cedric. I know that you have done the right thing, and I do not believe that you have betrayed any confidences.'

Dumbledore placed his hand on Cedric's shoulder and stood. Cedric realized that their meeting was over and accompanied his Headmaster to the door where the older man turned to face him once more.

'Good night, sir.'

'Good night to you, Cedric. Tell no-one of this, my boy, for secrecy is of the utmost importance now. You would do well, I feel, to follow your instincts, no matter how questionable, as they seem to have led you down the right path thus far.'

Cedric couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw the faintest hint of a wink from the Headmaster's eyes as they peeped out over his glasses. He cocked his head to the side and considered Dumbledore's words as the door closed gently between them.

~~

Cedric awoke early the following morning and decided that he would speak with Jamie and Markus before breakfast. He heard Jamie stirring in the bed next to his and steeled himself for the ordeal.

'Hey, guys, are you awake?'

Jamie stretched extravagantly in his bed and opened his eyes experimentally. 'What time is it, Cedders?'

'Don't know, but we need to talk. Seriously.'

'Okay, I'm awake, I guess.'

Cedric nodded and peered into the corner of the room where Markus' bed nestled against two walls. He knew that Markus loved his sleep and wasn't surprised to hear the groan from behind the curtains.

'Oh, Merlin, a serious talk this early in the morning, Diggs? Can't we wait for breakfast or even lunch?'

Cedric understood completely, and if he'd had his druthers he would have waited for the right moment to tell his friends everything. Unfortunately, he felt as though time was rapidly running out, and he needed to let his friends in on this very important part of his life now, especially if he wanted Harry in his life in the future. 'Not really, Markus, the sooner the better.'

Jamie sat on the side of his bed and ran his hand through his short hair. Markus opened the curtains and sat up, groaning as he threw off his coverings and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. 'Okay, Champion, what's up?' he yawned.

'Well, you know about the thing with me and Cho?'

'Yes, Diggs, bad show there, but not to worry. There are many more birds around.'

'Well, it's not really about her.'

'Of course it isn't. Don't worry, mate, you'll find the one,' he mumbled, his voice still husky from sleep.

'Markus...!' Jamie's tone held a warning, but typically, Markus didn't notice.

'What, James? I'm just saying, that's all.'

Cedric was quick to intervene. 'It's not about her, Markus. It's about me.'

'What about you?'

Cedric looked at Jamie who nodded encouragingly.

'What he means is ...' Jamie began.

'What I mean to say, Markus thanks Jamie is that I'm not interested in what the girls have to offer me.'

Silence.

Markus looked at Jamie, then back at Cedric, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion. 'Okay... so I'm waiting for other shoe to drop, Diggs.'

'I find myself attracted to someone else.'

'Someone who's not a girl?'

'Right.'

'Anyone we know?'

'Yes, actually, someone we all know ... well, knowof.'

Markus looked at Jamie again, then back to Cedric, who felt the sweat trickling down his back as his stomach twisted and tied itself in knots. He couldn't seem to catch his breath.

'It's Potter, isn't it?' Markus' voice seemed to boom in the quiet dormitory. Cedric froze and everything stopped. The entire universe felt as though it had stopped revolving.

'What do you mean?' he said cautiously.

'You know perfectly well what I mean, Cedric. He's put you off your game!'

'Harry *is* the game, Markus,' Jamie spoke softly, but his words were precise.

'What? What the fuck do you mean, he's "the game"?'

Cedric easily felt Markus' growing impatience and knew that he had to do something, say something definitive so that his friend could wrap his mind around the idea.

'There's something going on between Harry and me, Markus. I can't exactly explain it, but there's a very strong connection that I can't ignore.'

Realization dawned, and Markus took a deep breath as he sat on the bed beside Cedric. Cedric's insides twisted violently, and his pulse pounded in his ears as he glanced at Jamie, all the while feeling dangerously close to screaming.

'Diggs.' Markus said slowly. 'Cedric. Do you mean to tell me that you're not shagging girls because you've got it bad for Harry Potter?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes, Markus, that about sums it up.'

Much to Cedric's surprise, Markus dissolved in laughter. 'Well, he *is* a pretty little boy, isn't he?'

'Markus!' exclaimed Jamie, 'you're not making this any easier.'

Cedric blushed right down to his feet. He was sure that Markus was making fun of him, and his heart sank as he realized that the one thing he wanted from his friend was the one thing he wasn't going to get. Acceptance.

Markus finally stopped laughing and wiped the tears from his eyes. 'Oh, I'm sorry, Diggs, but damn. The number of females who will want to Avada themselves just because you're off the market... it's just staggering!'

Jamie and Cedric gaped at Markus in complete surprise as their friend rolled around on the wooden floors, clutching his sides in mirth.

'But if you're into diminutive Gryffindors-Who-Lived, then Potter's your boy! Oh, Diggs, you're killing me here!'

That one hurt. Cedric felt a rush of anguish and shame, but Jamie stepped in. 'Markers, can't you find a shred of decency somewhere in that shallow heart of yours? Don't you realize how hard it was for Cedders to tell us and all you can do is laugh at him? Make fun of him? What the hell's the matter with you?'

Markus seemed surprised at Jamie's speech, and he sat up, his expression changing from amusement to disbelief as he fixed his dark brown eyes on Jamie.

'Get serious, Jamie, our mate here's just having us on! He's just told us that he likes Harry Potter, the Boy Who Somehow Managed to Put His Name in the Goblet of Fire! How do you want me to take it? Because it pisses me off that not only has Potter the Rotter taken Hufflepuff's glory but he's trying to undermine our champion's chances in the tournament by becoming a diversion for Diggs. Unless,' Markus' eyes narrowed for a moment, and he spoke slowly, as though working ideas out step by step. 'Unless you're trying to undermine *his* chances in the tournament by creating a diversion of sorts? Very devious, Diggs; I didn't think you had it in you!'

Jamie gasped in exasperation, and Cedric could only stare at his friend as he felt Markus' anger, disbelief and concern coming off him in waves. He had been shocked at Markus' initial reaction, but he was completely gobsmacked that anyone would think that he would willingly compromise himself and his personal beliefs just to win the tournament. He understood that Markus was a master strategist, but this was a shade too Slytherin, even for him.

'It has nothing to do with the tournament, Markus. It started long before that.'

'HOW long before? Christ, don't tell me this thing has been going on for years or anything, Cedric, he's a child!'

'No, not that long. It started when we went to the World Cup. There was... a connection of some sort... but I didn't know what to make of it. And he's not a child.'

'What kind of connection, Diggs? Come on, give me something I can understand.' Markus' brow was furrowed in confusion and frustration.

'I can't make you understand it, Markus. It's a very strong feeling, an almost magical connection. It's something that I can't explain, but I know in my gut that it's real.'

'And we're only hearing about this now.'

'Well, considering your reaction, it's just as well I only told you now!'

'Cedric, you *do* realize that this is wrong on so many levels. I mean, you're a prefect and he's what, a fourth year? He's been somewhat of a problem ever since he got here, and his history with Dark Magic and You-Know-Who are legendary. You're both competing in a tournament that he somehow managed to enter despite being underage, a tournament which will bring eternal glory to the winner, and you're in the lead with a very real shot at taking home the Cup.'

'We're tied for first place, Markus. You know that.'

'Worse again! He's somehow managed to wriggle his way through the two tasks and rise in the standings so that he's now neck and neck with the true Hogwarts champion. Why can't you see that? Why are you risking everything you've worked so hard for just so that you can do... whatever... with Potter? Come on, Diggory, you're better than that!'

Cedric felt backed into a corner and he struggled to remain rational and calm. Markus was hitting him with argument after argument, all very logical and entirely reasonable, but that was the way Markus thought. Cedric, like Jamie, was much more of an emotional being, and how could he explain to his friend that logic didn't play a role in this situation or that he was no better than anyone else?

'Markus, I didn't ask for any of this to happen, all right?'

'So what, Diggs, are you trying to tell me that you and Potter shared a "moment" at the World Cup and suddenly you're a ponce? What about Cho? What about Anna in our fourth year? Christ, Diggs, you've had women following you around even before this bloody Champion business, and now you're beating them off with a stick! Don't let something like that go to waste!'

Cedric's mouth was dry and his heartbeat fluttered in his ears. Markus' words made sense, it all made sense, but yet Cedric knew that Markus didn't have all the facts. How could he trust Markus enough to share everything with him and make him understand? How could anyone understand when they didn't feel what he felt? His skin felt hot and the magic within him swirled as he fought to keep it in check. Jamie placed a soothing hand on Cedric's shoulder and turned to where Markus sat on the floor.

'Markers, you're such an idiot sometimes. Whether Cedders likes Cho or Anna or Harry or Hagrid, for Merlin's sake, he's our best mate. With him out of the picture, there

are more than enough girls for you to handle. So what's really bothering you, that he's somehow involved with Harry, or that he's only now telling us?'

Cedric felt Jamie's calming aura around him and was thankful for the buffering that it afforded him. He was better able to centre his power now and berated himself for not being strong enough to maintain better control of his emotions.

'I... well, I don't know, Jamie. Perhaps a bit of both, but I thought that we were closer than that, you know?'

Markus shook his head in disbelief, and Jamie shared a significant look with Cedric, who realized that he had let his friends down in the trust department.

'I don't think I'm a ponce, Markus, because I'm not attracted to all men, or even any other man. It's just about him, and I don't know what to call it, and I'm sorry.'

Jamie's grip on his shoulder tightened as he shook Cedric.

'What are you sorry for, mate?'

'For not being more upfront with both of you. And as for all those girls who follow me constantly, Markus, especially Cho... well, it can make a guy get a bit crazy, especially when... you know.'

'No, I don't know. All the girls only ever wanted you, Diggs.' Markus' tone was almost bitter. 'Look, not that it'll change anything, but for years most of the girls who'd go out with me only wanted to be in our group. Well, in *your* group.'

Cedric gaped he'd never imagined that Markus could have felt in any way inferior to anyone, but the closer he examined that simple statement, the more he realized that much of Markus' bluster and bravado was a shield against possible rejection. He was surprised by Markus' methods of coping with his problem. His friend was generally seen as the leader of their group, and it always seemed to be a role he willingly played. Cedric was still blinking when Jamie quirked an eyebrow and snorted in disbelief.

'C'mon, Markers, you're the leader of this crack bunch. I can't imagine that girls would be THAT shallow.'

'You'd be surprised, Jamie. Not all of them, of course, but quite a few, and... you know, before Hannah, well I just sort of let them come and go. I didn't build any kind of attachment because it wasn't worth it.'

'And now?'

Markus blushed and grinned sheepishly. 'And now... well, let's just say that she doesn't have any designs on our Champion, here. Just as well, eh?'

'Markus, I had no idea,' Cedric began lamely, but both Jamie and Markus raised their hands and stopped him from going any further. Jamie spoke first.

'Cedders, let's not stray too far from the real problem. This is a big chance to take, especially with both of you in the Tournament. I mean, the boy's only twelve.'

'Fourteen, actually.'

'Still, fourteen is so young! I'm not saying you're wrong or anything, and you know that I'll support you in whatever you want to do, it's just that I wonder whether you've thought this whole thing through.'

Cedric understood exactly what his friend was saying, and for the most part, he agreed with him. Harry *was* only fourteen and still very impressionable, and Cedric hated to think that he was pushing the young Gryffindor in any direction against his will. That, above everything else, concerned him the most.

'I know, Jamie, believe me, I know, and I've asked myself those questions a hundred times. It's just that... well... something inside me knows that I *have* to try, and I can't rationalize it, but I know it to be the truth.'

'Well, Cedders, I think that I have some inkling as to how you feel. Perhaps you could wait until after the third task is over before doing anything definitive?'

Cedric smiled at his friend and nodded empathis rarely needed to explain feelings to each other and he did understand Jamie's point about waiting until after the tournament. He certainly didn't want any more scandal or suspicions with regard to Harry's eligibility.

'I know, and I agree, but here's the thing. I *do* want something definitive afterwards, that is, if he's willing. We haven't... I haven't really even approached him about it or anything, but I wanted to let you both know of my intentions where Harry's concerned.'

'Intentions? So you mean there's nothing concrete yet?' Markus sounded surprised.

'No, not really.'

'Then what leads you to believe that there *will* be something concrete, Diggs?'

Cedric looked at Markus and considered that most pointed question. *What if he was just imagining things? What if Harry didn't want what he wanted? Could it be all in his mind?*

'Listen, guys, I know it sounds insane, but there IS something there; I've felt it and it's strong. *You* know what I mean, Jamie.'

Jamie nodded and sighed as he sat on the bed next to Cedric and cleared his throat as he looked first at Markus, then at Cedric.

'Listen, here's the deal. We're all different and for that we **MUST** be grateful. I love you two guys like my own brothers, and I wouldn't let anything come between us. Not females, not tournaments, not Harry Potter, not anything. If he's good for you, Cedric, and being with him is what you want, then I'm behind you one hundred percent.

Jamie paused and looked pointedly at Markus.

'Markus, we're his mates, and mates look out for each other. I know you think he's making a mistake, but it's his mistake to make, so maybe you could ease off a bit and let's just see what happens? How's that?'

'Okay.' Markus' voice was little more than a rasp, and Cedric swallowed hard against the lump at the back of his throat. He thought he saw Markus blinking back tears as the impact of Jamie's words hit home. He had been so concerned about their reaction to his news, fearing that they would react badly, and although things hadn't gone exactly as he would have liked, still, he and Markus had at least reached an understanding of sorts.

Markus cleared his throat. 'So, what do we do about him?'

'What do you mean?' Jamie voiced Cedric's question.

'Well, we know that Diggs is interested in the lad, but do we continue to treat him as we have been or does he now rank a little higher than the rest of the Gryffindors?'

They all laughed at Markus' seemingly casual remark, but Cedric had to wonder. Since the dynamic had changed among his friends, how did Harry fit into the new equation?

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TBC

Disturbances

Chapter 14 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

A/N: SO sorry for the lengthy delay in getting this chapter up. RL and gift exchanges have kept me very busy this past month, but the rest of this story should move along at a reasonable pace. Thanks to my beta team of charmed310, snapeophile and JaneAverage who help my words make sense.

Chap 14 Disturbances

As May gave way to June and the pressure began to increase as the third task approached, Cedric was busier than he'd ever been. In addition to his class work, which seemed to grow daily, every evening he, Markus and Jamie compiled a list of creatures and debated which ones were likely to come up in the maze. They also concentrated on honing Cedric's defensive spells and Shielding Charms. With all of his extra work as well as helping his friends revise for their exams, Cedric barely had time to breathe.

He received regular correspondence from his parents, and although he was happy to get news, every letter made him both guilty for not replying more often and anxious about the choices he'd made in his life. His father's letters were always upbeat, full of encouraging words and grand plans for Cedric's life once he became the Triwizard Champion. It occurred to Cedric that his father truly didn't anticipate that he'd NOT win the cup, and Cedric didn't know which one troubled him more, his father's insistence regarding the surety of his victory or his blindness to the possibility that any one of the other three champions could be successful instead.

His mother's letters, on the other hand, were filled with loving thoughts and cheerful anecdotes of life at home. He knew that she missed her only child during the school term, but they always enjoyed the Christmas and summer holidays, often sitting in the kitchen or their garden and chatting about everything and nothing. She always asked whether he was eating enough and enquired after her 'other' boys, Jamie and Markus, yet under it all she still expressed concern about his break up with Cho. His father's reaction had been much like Markus' shrugging it off as just the result of another bout of fickle teenaged hormones, but his mother had repeatedly asked him why they broke up and, even now, didn't seem to be completely satisfied with any of his evasive answers.

He couldn't tell them the truth not yet. He needed to sort things out with Harry and get the Tournament behind him before he could really think about his future. The school year had started out very promisingly; his path had been wide open with many options open to him, and yet the more he really thought about what he wanted in his future, the more narrow his wants and desires had become.

A steady undercurrent to his daily life was Harry. His nights were often filled with dreams of him, sometimes idyllic scenes with he and Harry together, flying brooms together in the moonlight as they tossed a Snitch between them, or the two of them having meals with family and friends, but most often his dreams were disjointed scenes of Harry in danger, a concept that made Cedric extremely nervous. He knew that the tournament was inherently dangerous, but he still felt that the danger which Harry faced did not necessarily stem from any of the tasks. He regularly got the impression that there were greater forces at work in the school, and although he couldn't be certain, and definitely didn't have anything concrete to base his theories on, he felt it necessary to keep an extra eye on the Boy Who Mattered Most.

Jamie had been very supportive of Cedric in the days following their talk in the dorm and had served as a buffer between him and Markus. Although they hadn't really spoken about the Harry situation in detail, Jamie seemed content to let Cedric find his own way through the difficult time, and Markus had calmed down significantly once he'd had enough time to wrap his mind around the idea of Cedric and Harry. True, they weren't an actual 'pairing', but Markus had made less derogatory remarks lately and seemed mainly occupied with quiet observation.

Cedric only realized just how much his friend *had* changed one afternoon after class when they were standing just beside the great oak doors in the foyer off the Great Hall. The fourth-years were making their way up from the dungeons, and Cedric's height made it easy to spot Ron and, by extension, Harry, almost immediately. He could feel his own tension and anticipation and he glanced furtively at Jamie and Markus, who followed his gaze to the approaching Gryffindors. As Harry and Ron neared them, Cedric's felt his face heat up as a rush of something intense passed through him and his breath caught in his throat.

'Hi, guys. Last class?' Cedric spoke to them both, but his eyes were only for Harry's tousled hair and shining eyes. *Merlin, he's a living, breathing wet dream!*

'Yeah. Potions,' Ron murmured, and neither boy bothered to hide their disgust, although the redhead seemed a bit surprised that sixth-year Hufflepuffs were even talking to them. Harry shuffled his feet nervously.

'Ah, yes,' Cedric smiled, remembering his own years of stress, 'and how is dear Professor Snape?'

Ron snorted with derision and looked at the ground while Harry tugged at his hair and screwed up his face in a manner that sent delicious shivers through Cedric. He longed to get the boy alone somewhere, just for five minutes, but at the same time he was almost vibrating with anxiety at having Markus right next to him.

'Same as always, I imagine. I can't wait for sixth year so I can be rid of him.' Harry's annoyance was quite evident despite his half-hearted attempt to hide it.

Cedric and Jamie exchanged knowing looks although Professor Snape had never been a pleasant person, they both felt that there was much more to his antagonism of Harry than merely correcting any wrongdoings. Markus grinned and clapped Harry on the shoulder.

'Fear not, young champion, you're probably strong enough to get along without him already. Just keep your head down and play by the rules, if you can.'

Cedric was shocked to hear Markus utter those words in such a jovial tone, and he turned to his friend who was smiling at the surprised expressions on the Gryffindors' faces. Markus regarded Harry with a measured look, and Cedric was pleased to note that his young Gryffindor didn't back down or look away, even though he blushed furiously under Markus' gaze.

Mrkus looked at Cedric and nodded, then turned to the group.

'Alas, gentlemen, would love to chat, but I have a fair damsel who needs my undivided attention! Farewell!'

Apparently, Markus had been satisfied with what he found.

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Several hours later, as Cedric patrolled the corridors not far from Gryffindor tower, he felt an unmistakable presence in a nearby alcove. He slowed his steps and reached out with his senses to detect whether there was anything to fear, but the signature returned something truly interesting. The strong aura of Harry Potter was there, but it was somehow distorted, almost garbled. Curious, Cedric continued along his path until he was alongside the alcove, then he stopped, unsure of what to do. At first, he pretended to look around suspiciously, almost scenting the air around him, and then he made up his mind.

'Out rather late tonight, aren't you, Harry?' he spoke into the darkness.

Cedric felt rather than heard the intake of breath from the darkened corner as the air around him came alive and he recognised it as Harry's reaction to his presence. For the thousandth time, he wondered whether that was good or bad and stood for a few moments, waiting for Harry's response as he questioned his own judgement. By all rights, he knew that he should just leave, should simply complete his rounds and then go back to his common room where his friends were probably waiting for him. He knew all of that and more, yet he stood.

And waited.

And hoped for... something.

Finally, after what seemed like an excruciating lifetime, Cedric felt a slight change in the whirling colours of Harry's aura, and he heard the gentle swish of fabric as Harry's face came into view. His heart yammered away in his chest and he fought to maintain his calm, but the knowledge that he stood this close to Harry in a darkened corner of a deserted hallway threatened to rip away all logic from his mind. The boy's powerful magic was all around him as Harry stepped closer and there was another gentle rustling of fabric as something pooled at his feet. In the dim light, Cedric could barely make out what it was, but it had completely obscured the Gryffindor's body before.

'What's that?' He stared at the shimmering fabric while striving to make intelligent conversation despite the uproar inside him.

'Invisibility Cloak. It was my dad's.'

'I see.'

Cedric stooped to pick up the cloak and draped the shimmering cloak over one arm as he slid the fabric through his fingers, feeling the texture of the cloth. He'd heard about Invisibility Cloaks but had never seen one, and he was impressed that Harry would own such a powerful piece of magic. Then again, given who he was, it shouldn't be a surprise.

'So tell me, is there any reason why you were lurking about in the corridors wearing this?'

Harry's silence and averted gaze were telling, and Cedric felt that the boy was hiding something from him. The whirls of colour only served to reinforce that suspicion.

'Well, Harry?'

'I was waiting for someone.' Harry's voice was surprisingly calm as he stared at the ground between them, and Cedric felt an all-too-familiar stab of jealousy as he wondered who Harry was waiting for at this hour. He narrowed his eyes and gave the youngster a measured look, trying to ignore the riot of dark hair that blatantly refused to submit to any form of taming.

'Were you now? Fair enough, I suppose; shall I leave you to continue?'

Cedric's voice was slightly unsteady and he knew it, but he felt the air around them as it virtually shimmered with magical power and realized that Harry was the source.

'No, I... I think I've found him.'

Harry's hesitant words sent a jolt through his body, and he stifled a groan, knowing that it was foolish to pursue this; yet here they stood, face to face, and Cedric realized that the moment had come. He had to make some sort of move, do something that would change their relationship from one of furtive glances and questioning touches to something more concrete. Harry finally looked up at him, and Cedric could only see the green of his eyes and feel the pull of desire as their magic swirled and joined. He tried desperately to control the electric tendrils of excitement that flashed along his spine as he cast Silencing Charms up around them, sweeping toward Harry and backing him into the alcove until his back was flat against the stone wall.

'Really, and who have you found, Harry?' Cedric's voice sounded dangerous to his own ears as he leaned forward, close enough that he felt the *thrum* as their magic met, clashed and, finally, harmonised. Harry's eyes flickered briefly over his body before returning to his face, and Cedric could almost imagine that the young boy was gathering his courage, certainly something Gryffindors had in spades.

'You're here, aren't you?'

Harry's voice had a slight edge to it, and Cedric couldn't tell whether it was bravado hiding his nervousness, or nervousness hiding something else.

'Were you waiting for me?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Um... I don't know exactly... I just want...' he started to explain, but Cedric needed more than that; needed to know that it wasn't just his own insanity that had him in this position. Harry was so *there* and Cedric's hands moved of their own volition as his fingers brushed a stray lock of hair away from Harry's forehead, and the younger boy leaned into the touch and his eyes fluttered closed.

'I wanted to see you.'

The words were little more than a whisper, and the tremulous voice drove desire deep into Cedric's groin. The Silencing Charms would only last for a short while longer, but he yearned to touch more, to explore the feel of Harry's skin and hair, to feel the weight and the warmth of him. Cedric leaned just a little closer to Harry, only a fraction, involuntarily pulled in by everything about the boy, but then slowly came back to his senses, both thrilled and alarmed by what he had done. *That would be rape*, his highly irrational mind screamed, or molestation at the very least, and certainly grounds for expulsion. Champion or not, his name would be bandied about the common rooms and the Quidditch pitch, fodder for the vermin and vultures like Rita Skeeter who no doubt would relish any dirt on him. So much for the "Perfect Prefect", and he didn't even want to *think* what his parents would say...

Cedric pulled away, reluctantly distancing himself from the warm body against him and holding the Gryffindor at arm's length as he ran his hand through his own hair in a move reminiscent of Harry's. He could see the boy's confusion; it was written on every surface of him and etched into his face and his eyes.

'Cedric? W-what's wrong?'

Cedric's body still shook from the intensity of the physical reaction that he still had. His body craved the young Gryffindor's touch as though it were a drug, but as Harry tried to move closer, Cedric forced himself to step backwards.

'Harry...'

'What are you playing at?' Harry's voice was laced with hurt and anger, a combination that Cedric had never heard before, and it tore at his heart.

'Look, I'm sorry... this is wrong.'

'What the hell do you mean, "It's wrong"?' Harry's voice rose with each word. 'You didn't think it was so bloody wrong two minutes ago when you slammed me against the wall, did you?'

'I...'

'*DID YOU?*' Harry shouted, and the sound echoed in the alcove as it bounced off Cedric's Silencing Charms, although thin cracks appeared on their shimmering surface that crackled and flashed dangerously. Cedric felt ashamed that he had initiated things, encouraged him and practically coerced Harry into these reactions, and his heart fluttered nervously as his face burned with embarrassment.

'Harry, please... don't.'

'No, Cedric, YOU don't. Don't pretend that there hasn't been something going on ever since summer. You can't deny that.'

'Harry...'

But Harry was walking closer, frustration and anger clouding his features, confusion and desire at war on the very face that haunted Cedric's dreams, and how could he stop him when he couldn't even *think* any more because Harry was there, touching him with trembling fingers, hesitantly asking for what Cedric wanted so badly to give and offering what he yearned to take. Cedric tried to stop himself from giving in to the harmony of their magic as Harry reached up and wrapped warm arms around his chest, but as he was enveloped by not only Harry's body but his aura as well, the combination was so powerful that nothing was strong enough to deny it. He closed his eyes and groaned softly, revelling in delicious anguish as he encircled Harry's shoulders and held the trembling young body against his. For a long moment, time stood still, and Cedric simply breathed in the smell of him as the frantic workings of his mind slowed until all that existed was the two of them.

Finally, reluctantly, Cedric gently untangled them both and set Harry away from him once more, forcing himself to accept the hurt in the Gryffindor's eyes.

'We have to be careful, Harry. The Tournament makes us opponents.'

'Sod the Tournament,' Harry groused irritably as his body language communicated more eloquently than words, and Cedric sighed, understanding him but not wanting to push the boy away.

'Look, let's just wait until after the Tournament is over, okay? Let's get through this final task and then see what happens. Can we do that?'

Pale skin and darkened eyes looked up at him in a moment of reluctant and resigned acquiescence, and Cedric fought the urge to hold him once again. After a brief hesitation, Harry nodded and, without another word, turned slowly and walked away while Cedric was left hoping that he'd done the right thing for both of them.

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Two days later, Cedric received another letter from his mother at breakfast. The post owls swooped through the Great Hall and he heard the distinctly plaintive "*kiew, kiew*" call of their family's owl. He smiled as he looked up to see her approach, her bounding, almost woodpecker-like flight pattern a familiar and pleasing sight. She alighted deftly on the table and nibbled gently on his finger as he untied the letter from her leg and he stroked her grey-brown feathers with flecks of white. Certainly not as striking as Harry's owl, she was nonetheless pleasing, and Cedric always felt that her most impressive feature was the markings on her face; the dark areas giving her a stern and almost cross expression in her yellow eyes. Oh, she looked fierce, but Misty was a gentle creature and completely devoted to his family.

'Hey, it's Dumpty. Diggs got himself another letter from home.'

Misty swiveled her head to glare at Markus, almost as though she understood his words and in a move almost too quick to see, she pounced on him, wings fully outstretched in an impressively threatening display. Her sharp beak came within inches of his fingers as she froze for a moment, as though making a point. A few second year students seated nearby gasped, certain that Markus' fingers would soon be little more than bleeding, shredded stumps, but he merely smiled gently as the bird deftly removed the piece of bacon from his grip.

Cedric grinned despite himself. Markus and Misty had a love/hate relationship that defied description. Every time she arrived with a delivery for Cedric, his friend would insult her, she would threaten him and steal his breakfast; then, as always, he would scratch the back of her neck and she would let him.

'Shut it, Markus. She's not dumpty, she's just small, and jealousy is an ugly colour on you.'

Jamie nearly choked on his pumpkin juice as the rest of the table around them laughed. The banter went on every time one of them got a letter, and usually somebody would be caught taking a sip of their drink just as a joke was told.

'I can't be jealous of a *bird*, Cedric.'

'You're jealous of *me*, you rotter. Who's getting the letters?'

'That'd be you, Champion.'

'That's right. Now make nice with Misty or she'll have your fingers for real this time.'

Smiling, Cedric opened the letter and scanned through it quickly. His mother's careful script...

My darling Cedric,

Your father and I miss you tremendously, and we're looking forward to the summer when you'll be home. Your cousins Anne-Marie and Joan are planning to visit and they've asked to stay with us for a few weeks. We were hoping that you might all spend some time together, like you did when you were much younger.

I know that you don't want to talk about what happened between you and Cho, and I understand that, but my darling son, I feel that there's something else you're not telling me about. Of course I don't want to pry, but I know you, Cedric, and I know that you need your time. Remember, you can tell me anything and that I love you.

Mum

The conversations at the table faded into the background as Cedric became absorbed in his own thoughts and doubts. How badly he wanted to be able to just blurt it out to just tell his mother about Harry, but even though he hoped that his parents would understand and support him, the pessimistic part of his brain doubted that his father could ever understand him or support him. The secret gnawed inside him, and having to keep it from them only intensified every time he thought of holding back, hiding, denying himself the right to choose, but didn't he have that right? Of course he wanted to please his parents and live a happy life, as anyone did, but he also wanted happiness on his own terms, and he found that more and more his desires differed from his father's ideas. Wasn't part of becoming an adult having to make your own decisions and then living with the consequences?

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Friday afternoon classes consisted of Defence Against the Dark Arts. Markus and Jamie had settled in the back row and were discussing their list of dangerous creatures, debating which of them rated 4Xs and which rated 5 on the danger scale. Cedric was half-listening to them bicker while he thought about Harry and was also keeping an eye on Moody. He was startled out of his reverie by Professor Moody, who had obviously heard the chatter in the back row.

'IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD LIKE TO TEACH THE CLASS, MISTER HUGHES?' he shouted, his magical eye fixed on the two young men seated behind Cedric.

There was dead silence in the classroom for several seconds until Markus cleared his throat.

'Well, Professor, we were contemplating the different categories of dangerous creatures. Jamie here thinks that a Centaur should be a 3 but it's listed as a 4.'

'Hmm,' Cedric mused, '*nicely pulled outta your ass there, 'Kus*.'

'If you'd read the footnotes, you'd see that they're not rated for their aggressive tendencies, but because there are those in the Ministry who think that they should be treated with great respect.' Professor Moody spoke in his usual growl, but for once he wasn't terrifying.

'All of the creatures in the 4 and 5X categories are dangerous in some way, but the Centaurs, well, they don't *do* anything. They just avoid wizards and keep to themselves. I hardly see how the Ministry thinks they deserve the rating. What about you, Professor? What do you think?'

All eyes were on Professor Moody, whose face twisted into something that perversely resembled a grin.

'Well, I've never had much time for the Ministry or their rules, Mister Hughes, but I will have to agree on this matter. Centaurs are not to be scoffed at, and there have been occasions in the past when they disagreed with the Ministry in their classification, rather emphatically, I might add.'

Cedric wondered why the Professor was giving them so much information on dangerous creatures, especially in light of the upcoming third task, and he resolved to mention it to Harry when next they spoke. He glanced across at Jamie who grinned as Professor Moody continued to explain.

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It was Saturday afternoon on a Hogsmeade weekend, and Cedric reclined in his favourite chair in the common room, double-checking his list of dangerous creatures. The large oak doors slammed open, and Markus strode angrily into the room, followed seconds later by an equally furious Jamie. A few first- and second-years quickly gathered their books and scattered it was widely known that an angry Markus was never a good thing and Cedric realized that something was significantly wrong by the way his friends' faces were twisted with rage. He met Jamie's eyes and *felt* his wrath as a palpable thing, and one look at Markus pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace assured Cedric that something was seriously amiss.

'What's gotten into you two?'

'That woman from the *Prophet* has been at it again, Diggs. She cornered us in Hogsmeade and backed us into a bloody corner. She kept pressing us for answers and wanted insight into your life now that you're tied with Potter for first place.'

'You mean, now that he's tied with me.'

'Exactly. But you know *her*, it's all about Potter, Potter and more Potter.'

Cedric chose to let that remark pass, knowing that Markus didn't mean it the way it sounded. Jamie looked exasperated as well, and Cedric surmised that his friends must have been put through the wringer for them both to come back early and in such foul moods. He met Jamie's normally gentle blue eyes which were sharp with anger.

'What else did she want?'

'She wanted to know about the *real* Cedric Diggory and how we felt being best friends with the "other Hogwarts champion."'

Cedric cringed as he imagined Markus' reaction to that particular question, and his heart sank as he looked at his friends. Jamie's voice was carefully measured, but Cedric sensed a significant upheaval in his friend's psyche, and his body language was definitely different. Markus at least had ceased his rapid pacing and was now sitting on an ottoman, and Cedric was both infuriated that they had been subjected to that woman's terror tactics and a bit nervous that she now appeared to be pursuing him as avidly as she did Harry.

'Well, what did you tell her?'

'Not a bloody thing, of course,' Markus spat. 'What's there to tell, when all she wants is dirt? That bitch never wanted to print the truth before and I'm pretty damn sure she doesn't now.'

Cedric blinked in surprise at Markus' use of language, but understood that his friend was angered beyond the norm, and looked at Jamie, who still shook with the effort of restraining his ire. That was always the way Markus would explode, vent his frustrations loudly, and then he would calm down, whereas Jamie tended to reserve his reactions until he'd had time to process them properly. Of the two, he was calmer and more rational, but when he did explode, it was usually significant.

'I'm really sorry, mates. I had no idea that she was even *in* Hogsmeade.' Cedric rubbed his eyes roughly, never having expected that anything like this would happen when he had put his name in that cursed Goblet.

'Probably living with the rats,' Markus snarked.

'Listen, I need to know what she wanted. What did she say, how did she act?'

'I believe her first words were something like, "Hello boys, how's life with Harry's competition?'"

Oh bloody hell.

'Seriously, Diggs, the bloody photographer tried to get pictures of us, but I figure all he got was our backs. Skeeter followed us around for at least an hour before Jamie finally lost it and faced her head-on.'

Jamie appeared uncomfortable and gave Markus a significant look which didn't escape Cedric's notice, and as he shifted his attention between the two, he realized that they were obviously hiding something. Turning sharply towards Markus, he asked suspiciously, 'And why would Jamie do that?'

Silence.

Again, Markus and Jamie exchanged looks, and Cedric grew more frustrated as a ball of dread settled heavily in his gut.

'What? Just tell me *what*,' he snapped.

'Dammit, Cedders, she wanted to know if there was any inter-house collaboration between you and Harry, all right? She as much as suggested that the two of you were acting as a team in order to assure a Hogwarts victory and wondered aloud whether you had been the one to put his name in the Cup.'

Cedric was momentarily surprised at the force of Jamie's answer.

'Why the hell would I put his name in the cup? Why would I want that kind of competition, and from somebody so much younger?'

Again, the silence.

'Well?'

Jamie was obviously struggling with himself, and Cedric knew that his friend wanted to spare him any hurt, but the situation involved more than just Cedric, and ~~had~~ to know.

'She... alluded to the possibility of a "relationship" between the two of you and found it "very interesting" that you are now both tied for first place, especially since you're the older and more experienced one.'

'WHAT?'

'She also inferred that Harry is some sort of attention seeking kid with a hero complex and that you...'

'That I what?'

'That you... well, that you're only facilitating his wishes of being in the competition so that you can ride on the coat tails of his fame, ensuring you better opportunities after you finish school, which would put you in a better position than your father could.'

Oh, Merlin!

'...And that's when Jamie lost it,' Markus interjected. Jamie's eyes were downcast, and Cedric felt the shame and anger that his friend broadcast hitting him in waves, commingling with his own sense of horror and disbelief. Surely Rita Skeeter couldn't seriously think that way, but even though none of it was true, the mere suggestion of such a thing in the newspapers could ruin his reputation, possibly even his life and his parents' lives!

'So what happened then?'

'Well, then he hit them with Memory Charms and destroyed the camera. Oh, and that freakish quill she uses. Incinerated them both. Bloody marvellous work, really, you'd have been proud of him, Diggs.'

Cedric stared at his friend, who blushed Gryffindor red, but when Jamie finally met Cedric's gaze his eyes were resolute, for in questioning Jamie's honour and sense of fairness, Skeeter had struck a blow to his very core, at things which his friend treasured above all else.

TBC

Food for Thought

Chapter 15 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: I own nothing famous.

A/N: Beaucoup thanks to my betas, charmed3 and JaneAverage for all your help with this chapter.

Chap 15 - Food for Thought

Cedric was mentally exhausted after his talk with his friends and went into the Prefect's bathroom to unwind and take a bath. Every time he sat in the large tub, immersed himself in the warm water and stared up at the mermaid, he was reminded of the night when Harry walked in on him. Predictably, his face would burn with embarrassment, but he would still get hard at the memory of Harry's bare chest, his tented pyjama bottoms, and the perfect O made by his mouth. The expression of surprise was what always got to Cedric; it wasn't that Harry was shocked or even disgusted, but rather that he was *aroused*, and the knowledge of that arousal fuelled Cedric's desire every time he thought about it. Tonight was no different, but tonight he took things slowly, gradually stroking himself into full hardness and then rocking his hips forwards and backwards as the water swirled around him until eventually he crested joyfully and powerfully into his hand, hissing his pleasure through clenched teeth.

They had all missed dinner, but Cedric wasn't hungry yet; he was still contemplating the motive behind Rita Skeeter's article. He had repeatedly ignored her owls requesting an interview, thinking that the other champions had been treated in the same manner. Perhaps he had been wrong, but now that he thought about it, he knew that Harry had always been hounded by that woman. He remembered the incident at the weighing of the wands and how rattled Harry had been. His stomach twisted at the memory of Harry's face then too, how nervous he had appeared and with good reason. It seemed as though Rita Skeeter's sole ambition was to print half-truths and innuendoes about any public figure in an effort to further her own career. Cedric would be damned if he would let that happen to him or to Harry.

On his way back to the common room, Cedric met up with many of his housemates, who were making their way down from dinner. He caught sight of Jamie with his arm around Katie and smiled contentedly to himself as he sank wearily into his favourite armchair, letting his head fall back against the backrest. Even closing his eyes didn't help, as the thoughts inside his mind proved too much to block out. He wondered whether he should broach the subject of Rita with Harry, reasoning that the boy had a right to know, but he was concerned that it might simply add to the stress they both already felt. He decided to keep the information to himself, at least for the time being.

He must have fallen asleep on the chair because he awoke to the sound of his stomach growling. The common room was virtually deserted, but Markus was stretched out on the chair, reading a magazine. As Cedric stirred, his friend's eyes crinkled in amusement.

'Hey, mate, we wondered whether you'd sleep all night.'

'What time is it?'

'Just past eleven. You sound hungry.'

Cedric laughed as his stomach chose that moment to growl loudly once more, and he remembered that he hadn't eaten anything since lunch.

'Sure am. Where's Jamie?'

'He just left to walk Katie back to her dorm. He should be back any time now. Want to get something from the kitchens?'

Cedric's mouth began to water at the thought of food, and he nodded quickly as he rose, stretching and bending his long limbs into some semblance of order. Clad only in jeans and a T-shirt, he followed Markus through the door and walked carefully out into the hall where they saw Jamie making his way back. Markus tickled the pear in the painting, and the door to the kitchens swung open. Flickering torches dimly lit the short corridor that opened out onto the large kitchen, and the friends made their way over to the food preparation area. There were tables and benches arranged in a long row that roughly mirrored the dining arrangements in the great hall on the floor above.

'Ahh, it's been a while, hasn't it, lads.' Markus' jovial mood and huge grin was infectious as he walked over to the large cupboards in the pantry.

'I doubt that anything's changed, 'Kus.' Jamie was right behind him, closely followed by Cedric.

A few minutes later, the three friends sat at the end of a long wooden table with a veritable bounty of food between them. Cedric's plate was piled high with lamb chops and thick slices of roast beef with gravy, mashed potatoes still piping hot with pats of butter melting in the middle, sprouts and roasted tomatoes. Jamie had a large helping of steak and kidney pudding while Markus concentrated on roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, together with some tomatoes and slices of steamed pumpkin. They tucked into the delicious food with the reckless abandon of their youth, only pausing occasionally to wash everything down with some pumpkin juice.

Once the urgent bite of his hunger had been relieved, Cedric sat back and ate at a more moderate pace, noticing that his friends had done the same.

'Y'know, you're damn lucky not to have exams this year, Diggs. History of Magic alone is a real pill.' Markus gestured offhandedly with his fork, something that always annoyed Jamie, and Cedric chuckled quietly at the irritated look that flashed across Jamie's face.

'Oh, and the possibility of grievous bodily harm compensates for that, does it?' Cedric replied with amusement in his voice.

'Nah, mate, but the possibility of being Triwizard Champion sure does!'

'Katie says that the Gryffs are torn between supporting you and Harry,' Jamie added.

Markus swallowed a forkful of steamed pumpkin and looked at Cedric cautiously.

'Y'know, that Skeeter woman may have some insight that we don't know about. I mean, how else could she know about you and Harry?'

Startled by the abrupt and meaningful change in topic and mood, Cedric tried to quieten the increasing nervousness in his gut the ominous fluttering of fate. Jamie abruptly stopped chewing, and they both regarded their dark-haired friend's serious expression.

'What's there to know, Markus? We're not colluding in the Tournament, and I sure as hell didn't put his name in the bloody cup. I think she's grasping at straws.'

'Maybe, but some of those straws come mighty close to home, mate,' Markus said sagely as he sipped his juice.

Cedric pondered that as he took another bite of a lamb chop, closing his eyes and savouring the delicious taste with pure pleasure.

'Speaking of straws...' Jamie remarked under his breath, and Cedric eyes snapped open, following his friend's gaze to the open door where Harry and Ron stood, their eyes darting nervously at the three older boys. The sight of the young Gryffindor in his pyjamas brought back the memory of Cedric's episode in the bath earlier that night, and he swallowed heavily, almost choking on his half-chewed piece of meat. He quickly masked his discomfort by taking a long draught of juice and hoped that he didn't look as nervous as he now felt. He felt the weight of Harry's eyes on him even before he placed his cup back on the table, and he had the sudden urge to *touch* him, but thankfully Jamie broke the silence.

'Hi. You here for some food?'

Ron and Harry smiled and chuckled nervously, obviously concerned about getting caught by a prefect, but Cedric quickly recovered and threw them both a broad smile as he gestured to the table.

'Come on, then, lads, get in here and help yourselves to some nosh. There's plenty, believe me, and that's saying something, the way Markus eats.'

'Oi,' Markus threw back indignantly. 'You'd eat like that too if you had siblings to contend with all your life.'

Ron laughed out loud at that remark as he piled roast beef and pork chops onto a plate, accompanied by Yorkshire pudding. 'He's not joking. There are seven of us, and you've got to get in quick before all the good stuff's gone, 'specially with Fred and George. It must be brilliant being an only child.'

Cedric observed the immediate good-natured bantering that was taking place between Ron and Markus, and then he allowed his craving gaze to rest on Harry, who grinned as he sat at the table and put a few slices of roast beef into his plate, together with a small serving of mashed potatoes. Cedric waited until the younger boy was settled, and then he stretched his legs discreetly, smiling privately at Harry's surprised reaction across the table from him as their feet touched. He crossed his ankles, capturing one of Harry's between his own, and the faint blush that feathered up the Gryffindor's neck and onto his cheeks only made him look that much more vibrant and alive. A silent growl of pleasure rumbled deep within Cedric, and he sighed gently in contentment.

'Well, I don't know,' Jamie was saying. 'Children without siblings miss out on a lot of things, don't we? There's the fighting naturally but also the companionship, the growing up with someone, holidays and vacations, sharing a bedroom, having someone else with the same parents, you know, things like that.'

They were all laughing at the end of Jamie's speech, and Cedric couldn't help feel that his friend was right. He'd never had someone close to his own age with whom he felt comfortable enough to consider a good friend until he came to Hogwarts. After their first weekend as roommates and classmates, he, Markus and Jamie had bonded closer than he'd ever thought possible, and he knew the value of friends and of family.

He stole a glance at Harry, who seemed to be enjoying the banter as well, yet Cedric sensed an underlying wistfulness, almost as though the boy felt a loss that he couldn't recover from, and in a blaze of dizzying clarity, Cedric knew. Harry never *had* his parents around him. He rubbed his ankle against Harry's lower leg, hoping that the simple gesture of comfort would be understood. A flickering gaze and subtle nod told him that it was.

Ron put down his fork and took a long gulp of pumpkin juice.

'Take our friend, Hermione. She's an only child, but she has the idea that she must save the world from itself.'

'How very Gryffindor,' laughed Jamie. 'I'm not like that.'

'But Harry is!' Ron's face was bright red from holding back a laugh as Harry punched him on the arm indignantly, but his friend was grinning too, and Cedric's stomach fluttered at another gentle blush on Harry's face.

'Not brave, then, Jamie?' Harry teased.

'I'm Hufflepuff brave. Not foolishly brave!'

'Hey!' Both Harry and Ron chorused in mock indignation, and Cedric smiled as he looked around the table at their impromptu dining companions.

Harry's here, we're all here, just hanging out together, being friends, although I don't think Ron knows anything. Perhaps it's better this way; fewer complications right now. Harry probably doesn't want to make things any more awkward than they already have been. This is good, yes, this is better than good.

'Well, I have two older sisters, so I know all about bravery, my friends, and that's also why I know so much about women,' Markus stated confidently, and there was a moment of absolute and incredulous silence before Jamie and Cedric dissolved into laughter.

'You don't know shite about women, 'Kus. You've just got the face and the form to bluff your way through!'

More gales of laughter reverberated off the ancient walls of the kitchen as the young men collapsed against each other in mirth. Cedric's heart bloomed to see the joy on Harry's face and the abandon with which he was able to converse, here, tonight, with him, and among their friends.

'So, what about you, Harry? What was it like growing up famous?'

The words were out of Markus' mouth and hung in the air for a moment as Cedric, Jamie and Ron held their breath. Harry's eyes clouded over for the briefest of moments, and anyone not looking directly into them would have missed it, but Cedric saw, and he *felt* the answer long before Harry even opened his mouth.

'Actually, I didn't know anything about myself. I only found out I was a wizard when Hagrid came to deliver my Hogwarts letter.'

'Your letter was hand-delivered by Hagrid?' Jamie sounded impressed, and Cedric settled back to listen to the answers to questions he'd wanted to ask, but never found the opportunity to.

'Yes,' Harry continued, 'but that's a long story. It was very odd that everyone knew about me and knew who I was, but I had no idea.'

'Seriously, he didn't even know about magic. Strange, really, because, you know, you would have thought that... well, being who he was...' Ron's forehead was creased as he remembered their first-ever ride on the Hogwarts Express.

Markus appeared shocked, and Cedric had to admit that this all sounded very unlikely. All the young children of their generation had grown up giving thanks to the bravery of Harry Potter, the infant who defeated Voldemort, the Boy Who Lived, and he sensed Markus' dismay that their hero appeared to be so much less than he'd imagined. Then again, Cedric had seen first-hand what Harry was capable of, and based on that little inkling of his magical prowess, he theorized that Harry was much more than 'just a kid', especially as he'd made it through two tasks and emerged tied for first place with someone much older and vastly more experienced than him. Besides, Cedric had always been able to glean some measure of the level of magical power in people, and Harry's was strong, *very* strong.

'Didn't anyone tell you *anything*? I mean, considering who you are, what you'd done...' Markus was incredulous.

'What had I done, Markus? I was a baby, barely more than a year old. My parents were the ones who saved me, died... to protect me. I had nothing to do with that; I was just *there*.'

Cedric felt Harry's aura begin to change, becoming more haphazard and less defined, and he glanced at Jamie, whose expression told him that he could feel something too. Harry was becoming slightly agitated with all the questions, and they needed to do something to deflect the attention, at least for a little while.

'You two lads seemed surprised to find us here tonight.' Jamie was quick with the change of topic, and Cedric *felt* Harry's relief as green eyes no longer flashed with fire.

'Yeah, well, we didn't think that prefects broke into the kitchens after hours.'

'Ah, but here's the thing: we've been doing it for years. It's almost a tradition, in many ways.'

Jamie smiled broadly as he raised a glass, nodding his head that they should all do the same. Goblets of pumpkin juice held aloft, he met each of their eyes in turn before proposing his toast.

'Here's to many more traditions.'

'To traditions!' they chorused, and then drained their glasses.

Some time later, after devouring a host of desserts, the friends slumped against the table as they tried to digest their enormous meal. Cedric admitted to having a sweet tooth, and was particularly fond of both chocolate éclairs and treacle tart, but even he was dwarfed by Ron and Markus, who made short work of the apple pies and chocolate gâteaux. As Jamie looked on in amused amazement at the volume of food consumed, Cedric traded heated looks with Harry, who slid his legs further under the table, increasing their contact. Cedric's mouth was dry despite the juice, and he licked his lips reflexively, noting Harry's blush as the boy's gaze flickered over Cedric's face before looking around nervously, but Ron, Jamie and Markus were once more talking about their families.

Conversation slowly tapered off and eventually ceased somewhere around three o'clock when they were roused by the house-elves, who shooed them out so that they could begin breakfast preparations. They all stretched and groaned as their muscles protested, and one by one, they rose and shuffled towards the door. Cedric's bare feet on the cold tile sent shivers through his body, and goose bumps erupted on his skin. He yawned, rubbing his arms briskly to ward off the chill.

Ron was looking a little more awake now, and he eyed the house-elves hopefully.

'Hey, anybody wants some toast to nibble on?' he muttered as he walked towards the kitchens. Shaking his head in disbelief, Cedric watched the redhead's shuffling progress and suppressed a laugh as both Markus and Jamie followed him towards the warm yellow glow of the cooking fires.

'Amazing.'

Harry snickered, a soft, whickering sound that was more endearing than it had any right to be.

'You have no idea, Cedric. Ron is a powerhouse when it comes to food.'

Cedric grinned and turned to finally feast his eyes on the dark-haired boy, whose gentle smile quirked at the corners of his mouth. He lowered his head slightly so that he could speak softly and still be heard.

'About what you said before. You weren't "just there", Harry. The fates conspired for you to be the one, and you *are* the Boy Who Lived. Don't make that a curse about death; choose to make it about living.'

Harry looked into his eyes and nodded with what Cedric hoped was real understanding. He longed to reach out his hand and caress Harry's cheek softly, but he hesitated; the others were returning, and they both blinked, eyes tired and dulled by lack of sleep.

'Well, it's been fun,' Markus said around a mouthful of toast.

'Yeah, highly entertaining, and don't let Hermione know that we were down here, all right? She'll do her nut because of SPEW.' The last few words were garbled by Ron's expansive yawn.

'Because of what?' Markus rubbed his eyes tiredly as he tried to make sense of Ron's statement.

'S.P.E.W.,' Harry explained. 'Hermione's decided that the elves need saving from enslavement and has formed a society.'

'Anybody ever suggest to her that the elves might prefer it this way?'

'We've tried, but it's no use.' Harry yawned widely, only barely remembering to cover his mouth.

'Well, that's what happens when you try to save the world, eh?'

There was more tired laughter, and they bade each other farewell. Markus and Jamie stumbled ahead as they all made their way back to their common room and dorms, and Cedric remembered the way Harry looked, heavy-eyed from lack of sleep and deliciously rumped. Smiling, he took that image to bed.

~~

Cedric awoke with a groan. His eyes felt like sandpaper from lack of sleep, and they burned and stung in the bright sunlight. Foolishly, he'd forgotten to pull the curtains around his bed, so the bright light of early morning infiltrated the skin of his eyelids. He muttered a spell, and the curtains swung closed with a definite 'fwump'.

Cedric awoke again to the loud growling of his stomach. Despite the vast quantity of food they'd eaten the previous night, his metabolism was demanding more fuel, and the light filtering around the outside of his curtains suggested that it was sometime around noon. He stretched his back and shoulders, the faint cracks and pops of his joints heralding yet another day as he stumbled off to the bathroom. After standing under the shower for many minutes, trying to wake up properly, his head was still muzzy from inadequate sleep, and he squinted in the bright light as he walked quietly through the dorm. A quick glance around revealed that Markus and Jamie were still passed out behind their curtains, and he tried not to wake them as he quietly made his way to the Great Hall.

Half an hour later, he felt slightly more human after a sumptuous lunch, chased by a copious amount of strong tea, and he looked up with the rest of the students as an owl arrived, flying high against the ceiling. Misty approached at high speed, wings tucked close to her body and the parchment scroll clearly visible on her leg as she dived, and Cedric smiled their owl flew as though she truly loved it. She came in at an almost impossibly steep angle, then spread her wings at the last moment and flared impressively, alighting on the table mere inches from a large pitcher of pumpkin juice to the gasps and chuckles of surprise from many students in his vicinity.

'Nice one, Mist. Good flare.'

Misty nodded her head in acknowledgement of Cedric's admiration and extended her leg towards him. He untied the scroll gently and scratched the feathers behind her head as she swivelled her head around, tilting it just so to ensure that Cedric found the right spot.

'You must be tired, girl. Go on up to the Owlery. I'll use one of the school's owls to reply.'

Misty hooted gratefully and took the proffered cracker in her beak before she spread her wings once more and flew out of an open window.

Friday, 11th June 1995.

Cedric,

I have spoken with several people here at the Ministry (unofficially, of course), and they have assured me that any application for employment by someone of your capabilities and talents would be a shoo-in for a position. Of course, if the applicant were the winner of the Triwizard Tournament, well, then they would be virtually guaranteed any position they wanted. You see what I told you about eternal glory? It's more than a concept, Cedric, it's a reality! When you finally hold that Cup in your hand and claim your victory, you'll see!

Your mother and I are very proud of you and all the work you've done thus far. Keep focused keep your mind on the prize and work towards it. We believe in you, son.

Dad

Cedric sighed. He was now officially awake.

~~

Sunday, 13th June 1995.

Dad,

Thanks for all your enquiries at the Ministry. I haven't decided what I want to do after this year, but I think I'd like to take some time this summer to explore my options. It's not that the Ministry doesn't offer interesting jobs, because they do, and I think that my ability to sense auras could be put to good use at the Department of International Magical Cooperation, especially in negotiations with the various international bodies. It would be important work, and I believe that I could really make a difference there. In any case, I still have another year at Hogwarts before that decision needs to be made.

Much love to you and Mum,

Cedric

~~

Wednesday, 16th June, 1995

Cedric,

I'm sure you're merely feeling the pressure of the upcoming task and haven't had time to properly think about your future. Your mother and I will be there on the morning of the 24th, and we will discuss this vitally important matter in greater detail then.

Dad

~~

Cedric frowned at the large Ministry owl that had brought this latest missive from his father, his frustration bubbling inside him like an untended cauldron over too high a flame. The bird merely stared back at him balefully, clicking its beak impatiently as it waited for a treat, but Cedric was slow to respond and received a nasty nip on his wrist. Swearing under his breath, he fed the bird a large piece of toast and watched as it held the bread down on the table with its claws while it tore away at the soft part of the inside. For a moment, Cedric imagined himself to be that piece of bread, his insides being ripped apart as the Tournament disembowelled him like a giant bird of prey.

His attention was diverted by peals of laughter from the Gryffindor table, and he turned to see Fred holding Harry in a headlock while the other twin tickled the captive boy. Cedric's eyes narrowed as he focused on the way Harry's arms wrapped around Fred's torso, and how his body undulated as he tried to free his head. Cedric was filled

with a rush of blistering jealousy, and the emotion was stronger than he cared to admit. His vision sharpened, and it seemed as though every point of contact between Harry and the Weasleys was a point of contention. His body tightened, coiled, almost as though he was preparing to do battle, but he could only hold himself in check as he watched the spectacle. Eventually, Harry was able to struggle free, and paused for a moment to catch his breath, laughing the entire time. He then quickly attacked George, who had stood aside, feigning innocence, but while most of the Great Hall looked on in amusement, Cedric only glowered as he tried to control the burning inside him and focused his own frustration at the words on the parchment before him.

"*Incendio*," he thought venomously, and the parchment burst into flames.

TBC

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A/N: Reviews are love.

Enjoyment and Worry

Chapter 16 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Cedric kicked a small rock as he walked around the edge of the Black Lake, pondering the possibility of actually winning the Cup and what might come afterwards. Fame, certainly, and he felt a shiver of excitement at just what that could mean. He would be able to do whatever he wanted eternal glory and he grinned as images of new equipment for the Hufflepuff team and a new broom for himself danced through his mind. Suddenly a cold feeling crashed through his daydream as he realized that with all that attention on him, his life wouldn't be his own any longer. Already he could barely deal with the pressure of Rita Skeeter, and she was only one person he hardly dared to think of her as a professional but if there were more eager reporters, all wanting a piece of him, a quote, a picture... *Please, Cedric, just one photograph... Tell us, Cedric, what do you think of Harry Potter?*

His smile faded and he kicked the rock again, viciously, watching with perverse pleasure as it disappeared beneath the inky depths of the lake. What about Harry? Prior to the start of this year and the competition, Cedric's only worries had been what he would do when he finished school and whether he would work in the Ministry like his father. Now, with the possibility of a Tournament win, his career was virtually assured whatever he wished; he could do anything, could *be* anyone. His father had continued to push him towards a high-powered Ministerial job, something high profile and glamorous with a good paycheque, but Cedric was more concerned with being happy in his job. *I know that we'll never see eye to eye on that particular point* he mused, and their recent correspondence had only served to confirm Cedric's suspicions. He wondered whether his father knew him at all, belatedly realizing that he'd been the one to keep certain truths about himself from his parents and from others. Realistically, he knew that he couldn't really blame them, and he firmly decided to come clean to everyone once the pressure of the Tournament was over. He just wanted *needed* a little time to himself, time to breathe without the dark cloud of the Triwizard Cup dogging his days and haunting his nights.

Cedric was surprised to realize that he had walked around to the far end of the lake, and from this vantage point, the castle stood proudly upon the cliffs in the distance, her turrets reaching into the sky with imperious grace. Cedric felt a shiver flow through his body. The castle represented most of what was good in his life, what was strong, what was fair. He could just make out the forest, its dark and gloomy shape highlighted by the moon's soft glow, and he looked up at the heavenly body above him, half of it illuminated by the light of the sun, half of it clothed in shadow. Almost duplicitous, the moon, he thought, as though it was comprised of two entirely different parts, two conflicting lives that embraced one entity. Much like the way he thought about himself lately.

He had arranged to meet Harry by the lake that night for a bit of flying. The Quidditch pitch was now almost completely obscured by the tall fences of the maze, and there was nowhere else to fly without being seen. He scanned the sky for any sign of movement, but with only the minimal light from the rising moon, shadows and objects took on a very different quality. Finally, a soft blur in the distance became a dark shape, and Cedric's heart soared as Harry touched down softly on the ground near to where he stood.

'Hello.' Harry's voice was soft and he smiled shyly, and Cedric grinned back at him broadly as he wondered whether the Gryffindor was having second thoughts. After all, they were out on the far side of the lake late at night, and although nothing untoward was planned, Cedric hoped that Harry knew that he *had* just meant flying. Somehow, their undeniable attraction always seemed to colour the most innocent of exchanges, and even though he tried to prevent himself, Cedric's eyes inspected every inch of Harry's black shirt and dark jeans with interest.

'It's been so long since I've seen the castle from here.' Harry's voice broke through his thoughts, and the light of the moon highlighted the young Gryffindor's face and look of wonder. Cedric swallowed and took a deep breath as he ran his hand through his hair, trying to calm the butterflies in his stomach.

'I used to come out here last year, but with the Tournament and all, I don't often get a chance to anymore. Well worth the trip, wouldn't you say?' Cedric closed his eyes with a mental groan as he realized that his words were filled with innuendo, and he was once more distracted by Harry's shy smile and the slight pucker of his bottom lip where teeth worried at it on the inside.

Libido, Diggory, he admonished himself silently. *Try to control it.* 'So, Harry, ready for some flying?'

'Absolutely! I can't tell you how much I've missed it.'

The pure excitement on Harry's face was a pleasure to see, and Cedric's grin matched Harry's as they mounted their brooms.

'Okay, but let's keep it on this side of the lake. Even though you're with a prefect, I don't want to get us into any trouble unnecessarily.'

'Trouble? Cedric, have you ever been in trouble a day in your life?'

'Hey! I'm not like you, Harry. You've got enough trouble for the two of us.'

It was jokingly said, but a kernel of truth ran through it, and Harry smiled wryly. Cedric felt a little embarrassed and slightly awkward and quickly tried to make light of his remark. 'Must be all that Potter blood, eh?'

Harry's grin was genuine this time. 'Yeah, must be. Let's go.'

With that, Harry kicked off from the ground, streaking into the sky with effortless grace, and Cedric stood there for a moment, thinking that Harry was almost a stranger to

the ground, so natural were his movements in the air. He mounted his own broom and soared into the air, his blood pounding as he revelled in the sheer *joy* of flight. When he was on a broom, he wasn't a Hogwarts Champion, or a prefect, or Amos Diggory's son, or anything; he was simply a flyer. The indescribable feeling of freedom was something that couldn't be appreciated by anyone who'd never flown a broom, and for those who had, explanations simply weren't necessary. The wind rushed past his ears and tugged at his clothes, the air in his lungs growing cooler as he ascended, his eyes locked on the blur that was Harry many hundreds of feet above him.

Harry slowed and waited for him, flying in lazy circles, and as Cedric caught up to him, he could see the mischievous glint in those green eyes despite the pale moonlight.

'First, let's check your reflexes, Seeker,' Harry shouted, and almost as quickly as thought, he was diving away from Cedric, who followed a moment later, hunched low over the handle of his broom, making himself as small as possible as he strove to accelerate even faster. He virtually plummeted out of the sky, his eyes screwed tight against the relative wind, twisting and turning in Harry's wake.

Damn the boy for wearing black, he growled half-heartedly to himself, knowing only too well that Harry in black was a sight indeed, but now he was at a major disadvantage since he couldn't see his quarry well enough to give proper chase. Hardly wondering whether it was ethical, he cast a hasty Tracking Charm, and suddenly Harry's outline shone before him, down and to the right. Shifting slightly and dipping one shoulder, Cedric veered and gave chase, accelerating and eventually managing to fly close enough to Harry to shout at him before he was detected.

'Your turn now, Seeker,' Cedric yelled back through the rush of wind and dived away to the left, spiralling to get even greater speed before levelling out briefly. He quickly checked behind him, but Harry was nowhere in sight, so he pulled upwards on the handle of his broom and looped up and around, increasing his height while he kept an eagle eye out for his pursuer.

Harry was coming up on him fast, and Cedric banked sharply to the left, then to the right, repeatedly zigzagging at high speed in an attempt to shake his pursuer. He saw that he was approaching the ground with surprising speed, and he hit the brake hard as he hauled the broom to the right, describing a perfect circle around Harry, who had pivoted his broom around to follow Cedric's direction of flight, but he hadn't arrested his momentum or changed his course, which resulted in his flying backwards as Cedric completed his circle, and the two of them ended up facing each other, Harry with a cocky grin on his face.

Smooth, Potter, very smooth, Cedric thought, as he touched down on the lake shore. Face was flushed with exertion, Harry brought his broom to land beside Cedric. 'Was that the Woolongong Shimmy?' he asked, his voice deliciously breathless, and for a moment, Cedric had to force himself to concentrate on what Harry'd said, rather than how he sounded saying it.

'Yeah... or part of it, at least.'

'Not all of it, though. That last bit was bloody brilliant!'

Cedric grinned, both at Harry's face and his words. 'Thanks. Your... uh... backwards flying bit was impressive. Show me sometime?'

'Sure, any time.'

Any time... any time... Harry's words replayed themselves in Cedric's mind, and his heart danced as it suddenly occurred to him that they were talking about the future, *their* future, based for the moment on Quidditch moves, but open to the possibility of so much more.

Harry's eyes glittered with excitement. 'I can't wait to play Quidditch again next year; it feels like forever since I've caught a Snitch.'

'Well then, let's get back in the air and go find one,' Cedric joked. He wrapped his hand more firmly around the object in his pocket and muttered, '*Candeo*,' then tossed the small shiny object into the air, laughing at Harry's gasp as the now-glowing Snitch unfurled its wings and took flight. The young Gryffindor threw Cedric a devilish grin as he mounted his broom and gave chase, with Cedric only a moment or two behind. They both bent low over their brooms in their simultaneous attempts to both out-fly and outmanoeuvre each other for possession of the prize.

Flying felt effortless, as though Cedric's magic surrounded him and enmeshed his thoughts and body with his broom. The exhilaration of flight gripped him once more, and he pushed his broom faster, throwing himself into the turns and flattening himself out so completely on the broom's handle that his chin touched the wood, coaxing every last fragment of speed and virtually willing himself closer to the ever-elusive Snitch. His eyes began to dry out and burn from the rush of wind, but a muttered protective Shielding Charm solved the problem.

In his peripheral vision he could see Harry occasionally, his body similarly stretched out flat on his broom and his shoulders and torso leaning into the turns. He really was breathtaking to watch, and he flew with such courageous abandon that it could be termed recklessness were it not for his considerable ability and skill. Cedric could easily recognise raw talent, and Harry seemed to have it in spades, yet he wasn't the slightest bit pompous about it, nor did he affect any bravado. He was simply Harry, or as simple as The Boy Who Lived could ever hope to be.

A flash of luminescent gold directly below him forced Cedric out of his reverie, and he dropped his right shoulder, rolling around underneath his broom and diving straight towards the ground. He revelled at the familiar feeling in his stomach whenever he performed this manoeuvre and reached out his hand towards the Snitch, which dangled just at the tip of his broom, annoyingly just out of reach, just like so many things in his life. As his vision narrowed in concentration, he never saw the dark shadow coming up at him until it was too late, and the glowing orb was suddenly snatched away by the lightning-quick reflexes of the Gryffindor Seeker.

Frustrated, Cedric pulled out of his dive and touched down hurriedly, belatedly noticing that the ground had been rather closer than he'd realized. He was surprised at the worry on Harry's face as the boy landed beside him. 'Wouldn't do to have the Hogwarts champion auger in during a clandestine flying exercise, now would it?' Harry's words were light, but his tone betrayed his concern.

'No, I imagine it wouldn't,' Cedric reluctantly admitted. 'Still, I'm not the only champion, so Hogwarts will still be well represented.'

'Tosser.'

'Usurper.'

'That's "*Mister Usurper*" to you, Diggory.'

Cedric couldn't contain the laughter that spilled out of him his entire body seemed to relax and respond to Harry's teasing in a way that was both surprising and entirely welcome. Harry flashed him a grin, and Cedric felt as though his heart would explode, both from the pace of its beating and the sheer force of the contractions. He felt slightly unsteady, and instead of re-mounting his broom, he motioned to Harry, who nodded. Cedric moved closer and slung his arm casually around Harry's shoulders as they started walking back towards the castle. They soon fell into a comfortable pace, and the night area was pleasantly cool against his sweaty skin.

'So, Harry, what do you have planned for the summer?'

Harry frowned, and Cedric was both intrigued by the expression and confused as to its reason.

'Um, I'll probably have to stay with my aunt and uncle.'

'And that's bad, is it?'

Harry stopped abruptly, and he glowered at the ground, his face as serious as Cedric had ever seen him. Cedric removed his arm from Harry's shoulder and turned to face the younger boy, his flesh already lamenting the loss of warmth.

'You have no idea. What I wouldn't give for a normal...'

Without thinking, he replied, 'Normal what, Harry? Nothing about you has ever been or will ever be normal.'

Harry's head snapped up, and he looked directly into Cedric's eyes. For a moment, his whirling aura seemed more disquieting and insane than ever, and Cedric wondered whether he'd gone too far, but then Harry sighed, a deep, cavernous sound, and the chaotic colours of his aura became more harmonious.

'You're right, you know. Time I started accepting that, isn't it?'

Cedric breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't insulted his friend. 'It doesn't have to be a curse, Harry. You can't pretend it's easy, but you *can* try to stop fighting who you are.'

'Hmm. Yeah.'

Harry seemed to consider those words, and Cedric paused for a moment, knowing that if he examined them closely, he'd see that the very same words applied to him. That thought disquieted him, and he once more wrapped his arm around Harry's shoulder, eager to change the topic.

'So, how long do you have to be with your family?'

'They're not... really my family. I mean, they *are*, but it's never felt like a home there. I usually have to stay until my birthday.'

'That's at the end of July, right?'

Harry let out a surprised laugh, and Cedric loved the sound of it. 'How did you...?'

Now it was Cedric's turn to laugh at Harry's incredulous expression. 'Your age was quite a bone of contention when you were chosen as champion.'

Harry ducked his head, and Cedric suspected that he was blushing, something he loved even more. Delighted shivers raced up his spine, and he tried to remember what he had been saying, even as his body and mind catalogued every inch of skin and every point of contact between him and Harry.

'Okay, so what happens after your birthday?'

'Then, hopefully, I'll get to spend the rest of the summer with Ron's family at the Burrow.'

Cedric's heart leapt. The Weasleys lived close enough to him that he might be able to see Harry during the summer. His cousins Joan and Anne-Marie would be visiting, and since they both enjoyed a fair amount of mischief, he was sure that they'd leap at the chance to meet boys, and he suspected that the twins would more than keep them occupied, perhaps leaving more time for him and Harry...

He was jolted out of his daydream as Harry stumbled on the uneven ground, but his arm tightened around the younger boy's shoulders to steady him. 'It's okay, I've got you.'

'I can take care of myself,' Harry said, and although he didn't pull away, his tone was almost defiant. Cedric hadn't meant to negate the Gryffindor's abilities, but he felt that somehow he had. He stopped walking, and his arm fell from Harry's shoulders as the Gryffindor turned to face him, his features set and his aura once again distracting and tumultuous.

'I know,' Cedric said softly, and he *did* know. 'I'm sorry.'

Harry was suddenly *very* close to Cedric, who hadn't even seen the movement, and then there were warm arms wrapped around his torso and thick, dark hair pressed against his chest. Unable to help himself, and not really wanting to, he allowed himself the luxury of running his hands through Harry's hair, feeling the silky texture of the strands as they slipped through his fingers, and the body pressed against him sighed. He closed his eyes, knowing that the moment would be fleeting, yet not expecting the emptiness inside him as they parted.

'You okay?' he murmured, watching Harry's face carefully, and the green eyes flickered as he nodded briefly. The whirling colours of his aura subsided somewhat, and Cedric took a deep, relieved breath. They both turned and resumed their walk, not touching but talking companionably as they approached the front gates, and as they started up the path, Cedric felt more at peace with himself than he'd been in a long time.

'You go on up, Harry, I'll put our brooms back. Do you have your Cloak with you?'

Harry nodded, and Cedric was amused to realize that the Gryffindor really didn't think twice about breaking school rules.

'Okay. Well, be careful, and I'll see you around, yeah?'

Harry's mouth quirked a little as he nodded and smiled. 'Thanks, Cedric. Goodnight.'

'Night.'

Cedric smiled to himself as he realized that tonight he had been surrounded by the things he loved, Hogwarts, the freedom of flying and... his stomach fluttered as his heart constricted just a little more... and Harry.

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Monday evening found Cedric, Markus and Jamie gathered in a tight group around the table in the library where, thanks to Markus' powerful Silencing Charm, they had successfully evaded Madame Pince's eagle-eyes for the past hour. They had been through their list of dangerous creatures, and had discussed both avoidance techniques and possible spells and counter-spells for any defensive manoeuvres that might be required.

'We should do a final run-through of these charms and spells, Diggs, just to be on the safe side.'

Cedric didn't have time to reply before Jamie burst in incredulously. 'Come ON, Markers. How many times to we have to cast and re-cast those spells and be disarmed by him? He knows his stuff. He's ready. In fact, he's more than ready, and I don't know about you, but I'm still sore from the last volley of hexes he threw at us.'

Cedric grinned apologetically, and Markus nodded. 'Yes, I suppose you're right. Now we just have to talk about psychological strategy.'

'Are you sure the Hat didn't mean to put you in Slytherin, 'Kus?'

They all laughed cautiously at that, checking for any evidence that the librarian had heard them, but Markus' charm held strong.

'Okay then, Markus, what's the psychological warfare about?' Cedric was interested in his friend's analysis of the situation and they all huddled closer.

'The way I see it, you've got one final hurdle, not counting all the possible creatures you might meet in the maze.'

'What else is there?' Jamie was puzzled and glanced through their notes once more, while Cedric eyed his dark-haired friend with interest.



'Go on.'

'Well, actually, it's Harry.'

'What?' Cedric was genuinely surprised.

'Harry?' Jamie furrowed his eyebrows as he looked up from his list.

Markus nodded carefully. 'Yeah. Consider this: not only do you have to deal with the physical and mental demands of this last task, but now you're emotionally involved with another champion.' He held up his hand to forestall the argument that formed on Cedric's lips. 'No, Diggs, just hear me out, all right? You can either work with Harry, or against him. I suggest that you keep your emotions out of it. This final task is a job, so just do your job, get the Cup, claim your victory, and deal with the emotional aspect after.'

Cedric was stunned. He had privately wondered whether Harry's presence might be a bit unsettling, but to have Markus actually say it... He looked at Jamie who seemed to understand his conflict.

'That's all well and good to say, Markers, and it's great in theory, but you must understand that Cedric's emotions are both strong and very close to home. It's not that easy to distance himself that way.'

Cedric felt thankful that Jamie was able to verbalize what he was feeling, and he smiled as he met his friend's gentle brown eyes, but the smile faded as he realized that Jamie was serious.

'Just be careful, Cedders. You may well be in for the fight of your life.'

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Still slightly breathless, Cedric stood in the Headmaster's office mulling over the goings-on of the past ten minutes. He had been on his way to Herbology with Markus when he was almost blinded by a brilliant flash of fire and was surprised to find a scroll of parchment in his hand. After reading it quickly, and with a hurried word to Markus and Professor Sprout, he had hastened back to the castle with the Headmaster's words running through his mind. *Must speak with you urgently... please do not delay* What could he want? Cedric mulled over the happenings in his house during the past week, but he hadn't heard of any major infraction of school rules. Hufflepuff hadn't lost too many points lately, although Professor Snape had reportedly tried to cleave at least one hundred from the fourth-years, and whereas the late-night rendezvous with Harry was possibly the reason, the urgency of it all seemed rather excessive.

The door behind him swung open and Professor Dumbledore breezed in, his robes flowing behind him in a manner oddly reminiscent of Professor Snape. Cedric bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling at that thought and waited politely. Kind blue eyes regarded him for a moment before he was waved into a chair.

'Exciting times, my boy. Do you find yourself quite prepared for the third task?'

The Tournament? That's what the message was about? Cedric nodded his assent while attempting to understand. Dumbledore cleared his throat and suddenly he looked a little less relaxed.

'I thought I might have a word with you, Mister Diggory, regarding you and young Harry.'

Cedric swallowed hard as his pulse increased and his stress level ratcheted up several notches, but he fought to maintain a calm outward appearance as he nodded politely, waiting for the Headmaster to continue, not trusting himself to speak.

'I find myself slightly concerned that your friendship might jeopardise your chances in this Tournament. You are both young, and I do not wish to insult your intelligence by suggesting that either of you are going down a path which is unwise, but I must stress that you and he are still Hogwarts champions, and as such, I seek your assurances that you will continue to operate as two individuals.'

Cedric was surprised that Dumbledore, of all people, should think otherwise. 'Headmaster, I mean no disrespect, but why would you think that anything would change in that regard?'

Blue eyes twinkled slightly. 'Because, Mister Diggory, things have certainly changed in other regards.'

Cedric felt chilled as a rush of adrenaline coursed through his body, and his understanding of the situation was suddenly crystal clear. 'Professor, neither Harry nor I would compromise our positions in the Tournament.'

'Mister Diggory, allow me to explain. When two powerful forces of magic are swayed by something significantly more than mere friendship, the combined powers are often unstable and irrational unless properly controlled. You are an extremely gifted wizard and, magically speaking, I doubt that there is anyone alive today who can compare with Harry's capabilities. It is very rare to come across someone with such power, and a great deal can be gained... *or lost...*' he raised his eyebrows in emphasis, 'under the right circumstances.'

Cedric cleared his throat nervously and shivered as the full impact of Dumbledore's meaning hit home. Harry was *could* be used as a weapon! Of course he *had* been once, as it turned out, and he'd proved it the day he defeated He Who Shall Not Be Named, but why would Professor Dumbledore think that Harry...

Cedric blinked as a flash of green light and darkness ran through his mind, and he was once more back at the Quidditch World Cup, remembering the Death Eaters marching through the camp and the Dark Mark glowing eerily in the night sky. With a shudder of certainty, he knew. The darkness his parents spoke about was on the rise once more, and Harry was the shining new hope for the future. Why, then, would he willingly enter himself in a competition that could be his undoing, unless he was forced into it as some sort of training exercise? Cedric's mind whirled with possibilities. Harry had always claimed to be innocent, and Cedric wanted to believe him, but the circumstances and the evidence seemed to be pointing in one of two directions. Either Harry was being used as a weapon, and this was part of his training, or he was believed to be dangerous and the Tournament would finish him off. Either way, Harry was being offered up as a sacrificial lamb, and Cedric would have none of it. He stood, drawing himself up to his full height and looked at the Headmaster who had also risen from his chair.

'Professor, I assure you that Harry is in no danger fromme,' he said pointedly.

The blue eyes no longer twinkled. 'Quite so, Mister Diggory. Well, best of luck in the third task, and I look forward to a strong showing from Hogwarts.' His tone was politely dismissive, and Cedric resisted the urge to press the matter further. He would tell Harry, warn him, protect him, *something!*

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TBC

A/N: candeo: to shine, glow, grow brilliant, Source: <http://www.sunsite.ubc.ca/LatinDictionary/>

# Dissension

## Chapter 17 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

A/N: Thanks as always to my Trifecta beta team, charmed310, snapeophile and JaneAverage. Any mistakes are mine.

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Unfortunately, Cedric was only able to see Harry occasionally that morning between classes, but the feeling that he needed to be near to the Gryffindor was something that he couldn't escape. They were still able to share glances in the halls, and although Harry seemed hesitant at times, their mutual attraction felt blatantly obvious to Cedric, even in the presence of Markus and Jamie. He suspected that Harry's nervousness meant that he wasn't as eager to divulge their relationship, even though he hadn't said as much.

At lunch, Cedric stood at the entrance to the Great Hall as the rest of the student body filed in while he searched the crowd for unmistakably messy dark hair. He was as jittery and anxious as he could ever remember being, but was finally able to send a charmed note into Harry's hands as they passed each other through the doorway. Harry's face registered surprise as he looked at Cedric, but after reading the note a brief nod was his only response. Cedric tried not to look over at the Gryffindor table too often during the meal, but it was easier trying to get the sun not to set or the moon not to rise.

Several minutes later as he stood beside the younger boy in the small antechamber just off the Entrance Hall, Cedric wasn't certain how to begin. The air around them hummed with a nervous energy, no doubt predominantly his own, and a thousand questions ran through his mind, all vying for attention. He took a deep, steady breath. 'Have you... Do any of your friends know? About what's going on with you and me?' Cedric cringed inwardly at how asinine he sounded and how positively juvenile his question was, but his mind had picked that question for his opening salvo and it was already out there, hanging in the air between them. Cedric had prepared for evasiveness or even embarrassment, but Harry's expression was almost hostile, and Cedric felt a change in the vibrations surrounding them.

'No, actually, they don't.' Harry's clipped answer and brusque tone surprised him, and Cedric took an involuntary step backwards.

'Don't they even suspect?' Cedric sounded almost desperate to his own ears, but he plunged on nevertheless.

Harry scrubbed his hand through his hair in the usual, familiar way that tugged at every part of Cedric, and his eyes were dark in the light of the lamps. 'Hermione might, I guess, but Ron is clueless about that sort of thing, and quite frankly, right now I prefer it that way.'

'Er...' That was quite a shock, but even though Cedric didn't imagine that everything would be flowers and happiness, he didn't expect the blatant refusal either.

'Look, Cedric,' Harry shifted his weight, shuffling his feet in a way he did when agitated. 'Ron and I didn't have much of a friendship at the start of this whole Tournament business, back when nobody believed me. Even *he* didn't, and that betrayal hurt more than I ever thought it could.' His aura crackled and changed, morphing from its customary confusion into sheer chaos, the colours whirling so rapidly that Cedric began to feel a little dizzy. Harry's voice dropped low, the hurt and anger barely masked. 'Things were really tense back then... You can't know what it felt like...'

Cedric didn't know what to say, but judging from Harry's body language, it was better not to say anything just yet, and when the flickering green eyes met his a second later, he knew that he had been right.

'Everybody wanted you to enter and be chosen, but nobody wanted...' Harry's voice was uncharacteristically harsh, and he stopped suddenly, almost as if he had said too much.

'Nobody wanted what?' Cedric couldn't help himself. He wanted to understand Harry's point of view and put himself in the younger boy's place, but really, he couldn't.

'Me.'

The word was almost a whisper but bitter with disappointment. 'Everyone only wanted to believe the worst about me and was happy to think that it was a publicity stunt, or a way of getting attention; that I'd cheated when I bloody well didn't, and Hermione was the only one who believed me, the **ONLY ONE!** Not even Ron, and he's one of my best friends. You don't know the loneliness that I felt being set aside once again as someone different.'

Cedric knew that he'd often felt much the same way inside, although he'd never been vilified in public, and he wondered whether he'd have the strength to cope with it the way that Harry had. Even this brief glimpse into Harry's psyche made Cedric consider that Harry had more strength of character than any fourteen-year-old he'd ever met, and he needed the younger boy to realize that.

'But you *are* someone different, Harry, in all the good ways. You can't control your past or the things that happened to make you who you are, but the future is yours to take, yours to mould and shape the way you want it. Don't give up on things because they might be difficult or you're a bit afraid of the fallout. You're a Gryffindor, aren't you? Bravery is your middle name,' he said jokingly, but with serious undertones.

Cedric nudged him with his shoulder, half-playfully, but Harry was perhaps still a bit annoyed and he retaliated. Soon they were trading shoves and mock-punches in rapid succession. Cedric observed Harry as he fought; the way his hair glistened, slightly damp with perspiration and the way his fringe stuck down over his forehead, obliterating the scar and making him seem just like any other young wizard. Harry's eyes were fierce, though, and as his punches got harder, Cedric saw some of the annoyance still bubbling beneath the green irises. He pushed the Gryffindor off him, still semi-playfully, but to his surprise, Harry pushed right back, startling Cedric so much that his back was against the wall before he realized what had happened. Harry was breathing quickly, through his nose, Cedric noted distractedly, which would indicate arousal as opposed to true breathlessness. Oh, God, and then Cedric's senses were filled with Harry, and he was drowning in the sheer desperation of the younger boy's vibrations. Cedric knew that Harry needed to be understood, wanted to be believed and yearned to be accepted for who he was, not what he was supposed to be.

Harry's forearms were against Cedric's chest holding him valiantly against the wall, and although Cedric knew that he could remove Harry with little effort, he didn't because, damn him to hell, he wanted this. He let his head fall back against the wooden walls for a moment and closed his eyes as he relished the sounds of Harry's breathing, the smell of him and the feel of the young body against his, inexperienced and yet completely beguiling, but as he started to feel the sinking of his body into acceptance and the hardening in his pants, he pushed against Harry's chest, perhaps a little more forcefully than was strictly necessary. The Gryffindor's look of confusion and hurt was intensified by his open mouth, describing yet another perfect O, this time not of desire, but of disbelief. 'Cedric, I need...'

'Harry, we can't. Not now and not here.' Reluctantly, Cedric pried Harry's hands away from him, even though tendrils of his own magic strove to keep the contact between their bodies; he could feel them, almost like tethers, tugging gently yet insistently at his skin.

'For Christ's sake, Cedric, what are you doing? You're bloody well driving me crazy, you know that? Everything is going to hell, and there's the final task in two bloody days, and I can't get... clear... of anything.' The Gryffindor's anger had resurfaced quickly, and Cedric wasn't prepared for it. Harry held his head in his hands, and all that Cedric wanted to do was hold him, comfort him, feed on his warmth and return it tenfold, but he was cautious, still considering Dumbledore's words and wondering yet again how much Harry should know.

'Harry, I had a word with the Headmaster earlier today about you.'

'Is that so? Getting last-minute tips, were you?' Harry snarked, his eyes narrowed in frustration.

'That's not fair. He wanted my assurances that we had no plans of collusion.'

'Why would we?' Annoyance still bled through Harry's tone, and Cedric hesitated.

'Well...' Cedric couldn't really put the words out there, but instead spread his arms to indicate the two of them, and his pause seemed clear enough for Harry.

'But, why would he think that?'

'It's not completely outside the realm of possibility, you know. Collusion between participants has been part of the Tournament's history.'

Harry snorted impolitely, and Cedric couldn't help but smile as the younger boy shifted his pose defensively.

'Well, what did you tell him?'

'I told him that we intended to complete the final task as we'd started the first one, as opponents.'

Harry frowned at that, and Cedric realized that the boy hadn't thought quite along those lines. Even *he* had difficulty separating his Harry from "Harry Potter, Triwizard Champion", and hadn't fully appreciated how difficult that must be for a fourteen year old.

'I can't wait for this Tournament to be over.' Harry's voice was numb, bleak, expressionless, and Cedric agreed with him completely, but Dumbledore's words kept replaying themselves over and over in his head "... a great deal can be won or lost..." He felt nervous and needed something to do with his hands, so he shoved them into his pockets as he steadied himself for Harry's reaction. 'Harry, I think there's something you should know. Something that Dumbledore said.'

'What did he say?' Harry's face was suddenly open and questioning, and for a split second, Cedric regretted initiating this conversation and wished he could take his words back. After this, things would be different, one way or the other.

'He suggested that someone with a great deal of power someone like you might be influenced by another force to such an extent that they... that is, you... could be used as a weapon, and I wonder whether your being entered in the Tournament mightn't be some sort of preparation or some way of honing your abilities.'

The silence was unbearable, and Cedric could hardly bring himself to look at Harry, but the boy's hurt and disbelief was all encompassing.

'You... *wonder*.' Harry's voice was unsteady. 'You think that I'm being used as a weapon?'

'I didn't say you *were*; I said you *could* be.' Cedric felt as though he was sinking deeper into a desperation that he couldn't alleviate.

'And you think that I've been entered in the Tournament...'

'By others, others with less than honourable intentions to see whether you're strong enough to be...'

'To be what, Cedric?' Harry's voice was suspiciously low, and that made Cedric decidedly nervous. He didn't want to answer, didn't want to verbalise it, but the blood pounded in his ears and the word refused to stay.

'Dangerous.'

More silence, but this time it seemed indeterminably longer, stretching forever as his heartbeat sounded out the seconds. He still hadn't been able to look at Harry but he could feel the betrayal and hurt around them in waves, flooding his senses and threatening to drown him in their intensity. Harry gave a shuddering sigh and Cedric's chest constricted so tightly that he fought for breath.

'I can't believe that you of all people would think that I'd allow myself to be used. I just...' Harry shook his head angrily as he paced back and forth, stomping on the floor as though trying to drive the thoughts from his head.

'Harry, I don't think that you're a willing *anything* in this, but you must admit that the circumstances surrounding your inclusion in this Tournament are suspicious at least and downright unethical at worst. I'm just telling you what I suspect after that talk with the Headmaster.'

Anger. Cedric felt it vibrating in the air between them, unsettling and destructive, and his eyes fixated on every movement of Harry's fists as they clenched and unclenched. Harry's breathing was once more rapid and uneven, through his mouth this time; definitely anger, not arousal.

'So we're back there, are we? Back to accusing me of cheating, of being a liar.'

'That's not... Harry, no, I never accused you.' Cedric was both horrified that Harry would think that Cedric meant it that way and frustrated because no matter what he said, Harry took it to mean something else.

'Look, I'm not playing any game, Cedric, and I thought you of all people would know that by now. I'm just trying to get through this without getting myself killed, and I'm scared shitless most of the time, and I feel like nobody cares enough to support me, and everything's wrong, and I can't fix any of it.' Harry was almost shouting, his hands clenched so tightly into fists that the skin on his knuckles was white and bloodless. The bitterness of those words and that voice tore into Cedric, knowing that he'd been the one to put it there. If only he hadn't said anything... but could he have protected Harry without the boy suspecting something?

A heavy silence shouldered its way between them, obstinate and unyielding, as Harry battled with himself while Cedric stood by, hating the walls that surrounded them and hating the sudden chasm that had appeared between them that seemed to stretch for miles. Harry was shaking, his entire body tensed by his anger, and Cedric realized that things had gotten way out of control. He had never seen Harry this way, and whereas the aura that normally surrounded the young Gryffindor had often been chaotic, now it was almost undecipherable, virtually invisible.

'This is just like at the beginning of the bloody Tournament, Cedric. Thanks.' His tone was unbearably harsh, but before Cedric could do anything more than swallow, Harry turned quickly and left the room in a huff, but the force of his energy remained.

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Later that afternoon, Cedric, Jamie and Markus joined many other students on the lawn outside the Great Hall. Markus stretched out on the grass, throwing his long limbs about carelessly and taking up room. He propped himself up on his elbows briefly before he conjured a large pillow, which he placed behind his back. Thusly supported, he grabbed half of a sandwich and began eating, his eyes never leaving Cedric's. 'So, Cedders, dish. What's eating you?'

'Poor choice of words, Markers,' Jamie interjected, as they had just completed another debate on whether Muggle folklore was true about Manticores: whether they were actually carnivorous, and if so, whether wizards would be a likely target.

Markus quirked an eyebrow in amusement. 'Cedric has this task in the bag. That Cup is as good as his,' he proclaimed carelessly. Cedric saw movement out of the corner of his eye and noticed a flick of Markus' wrist, then something flew towards his head, and he silently deflected a bit of bread crust.

Markus grinned and Jamie laughed, but Cedric was irritable after not eating anything much breakfast or at lunch, and he was still too preoccupied with his Harry Problem. Images of the boy's angered face swam in his consciousness, and he had the sucking, empty feeling that their argument wasn't something that could be fixed simply. Another piece of bread whizzed towards his head, and he deflected it away irritably.

'His reflexes are good, aren't they, James?'

'Very good I'd say, Markers. He *is* a Champion, after all.'

'Come on, Diggs...' (another piece of crust) '...don't get all antsy on us now...' (another piece) '...especially with the end so near...' (large piece with some butter on it).

Cedric's anger ignited, and his magic exploded as he rounded on Markus, flicking his wand so sharply that the remnants of the sandwich were smashed into the front of his friend's robes. 'For Merlin's sake, Markus, stop THROWING the damn food at me. Eat it or banish it, but just back off!'

Anger poured out of Cedric in concert with his outburst, but shame burned through him as he noticed the stony expressions on both his friends' faces. Frustration still bubbled turbulently inside him, and he just couldn't find the words to make them understand. Markus stood in a rush of cloth and crumbs, his anger evident on every angle of his body. 'What the hell ever, *Cedric*,' he snapped as he threw the remaining bits of the sandwich at Cedric, his emphasis on the word doing nothing to hide the fury in his voice. Without another word to either of them, he whirled around and left, Cedric's gaze following his friend as he stalked across the grounds, his robes whipping out beside him. Jamie only stared silently at Cedric, whose shame burned all the hotter for having alienated his friend, and he dropped his head into his hands, shaking in disbelief at how rapidly his relationships had taken their downward spirals.

'That was a bit uncalled for, Ceddars.' Jamie's tone was careful and soothing, but the disappointment seeped through regardless. Cedric sighed heavily.

'I know, I *know*,' he growled in frustration, wondering when his insides had turned to the seething mass of tension and anxiety. 'Merlin's mother! If only I could get past this task! It's like a mountain; an enormously high mountain and its right in my path.'

Jamie nodded, and his eyes were kind. 'You will, Ceddars. Two days and that's it. After Thursday night, win or lose, it'll all be over, and in spite what your father thinks, simply being *chosen* as champion is enough of an honour for a lifetime. Don't let him ruin it for you, not now with the end so close.'

Cedric knew that Jamie was right, of course. The third task seemed passable, but with such difficulty that it required a huge effort just to attempt it. There was no way around this mountain, nor through it, so over it would have to be, and not for the first time, Cedric wished for a Time-Turner so that he could move past Thursday night and onto the rest of his life. 'I know that it's my mind's way of trying to cope with the pressure; it's a mental block against succeeding. Sometimes I wonder whether I want to win or lose, and sometimes I can't decide,' he said darkly, but he shook those thoughts out of his head and tried to smile at Jamie who sat patiently with him, not saying anything.

'Perhaps we've pushed you too hard? After all, there's only so much practice and preparation that a person can take, y'know?' Jamie looked worried as he searched Cedric's face for answers.

'No, no,' Cedric was quick to disagree. 'I mean, yes, we've done all that we can, and, no, I don't think you've pushed too hard, or at least, no harder than I'd have pushed myself.'

'Well, what then?'

Cedric groaned and closed his eyes, holding onto the last image of Harry, angry and shaking as he'd turned to leave Cedric after their argument. He heard Jamie's quiet huff of breath.

'Is it Harry?'

'When is it ever not?' Cedric asked, ruefully, and then steeled himself for an uncomfortable conversation as Jamie cleared his throat.

'Are you still sure about him? I mean, really sure? I know you don't want to hear how young he is or who he is, but, Cedric, this is a lot to put on a fourteen-year-old.'

'I haven't pressured him into anything, Jamie. I've been driving myself crazy holding back this way, but I can't force him into anything that he doesn't want.'

'Harry's not quite so sure about you, is he?' Jamie asked softly.

Surprised, Cedric opened his eyes and took a good look at his friend. Jamie's expression was carefully neutral, but Cedric could feel his apprehension that perhaps he'd overstepped the bounds of their friendship, as if their friendship *had* bounds.

'I-I... I don't know, Jame, maybe not. Maybe I haven't been clear enough.' Cedric's heart sank at the realization.

'Perhaps you're sending him mixed signals, and if you think you're confused, imagine what it's doing to him.' Jamie's half-smile played at the corners of his mouth, and Cedric smiled in spite of his worry.

'But how can I send him a clear signal when I don't even know what I want?'

'You have to decide, my friend. If you want him, when the Tournament is over, go after him, completely and without reservation. It's hard to open up to someone that way, but you can feel him, can't you?'

Cedric took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'Not always,' he admitted softly.

Jamie nodded. 'Well, the confusion in his aura seems to be part of him, Cedric. You have to get past that know and understand the real Harry, find a way to soothe him and allay his fears. It's a lot being so young and so globally important, and then having all this attention placed on him, both by the Tournament and by you.'

'I'm running out of time, and I think I may have blown things with him yesterday.'

Jamie's face was suddenly serious. 'What happened?'

Cedric told him and Jamie winced. Cedric tried not to notice his reaction but knew that his friend wasn't about to lie to him just to make him feel better. He'd have to take it like a man and own up to the shite that he'd done.

'Bad move, Ceddars.'

'Yeah, no kidding,' he groaned. 'How do I fix it?'

'Not sure, really. Harry's been jerked around by enough people in his life, and I'm sure he didn't expect you to be added to the long list.'

Cedric gently banged his head against the tree, again cursing himself for his stupidity. He'd managed to bollocks things up really brilliantly today, on all sides and with all his mates. It was time he started fixing things, and pronto. 'Look, Jamie, I'm sorry for before, with you and Markus and the food.'

'I know you are, mate, but I'm not the one to apologise to.'

Cedric sighed and nodded. He knew Markus well enough to realize that he'd have to wait until his friend calmed down before he attempted to apologise.

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Cedric had a restless night with very little sleep, and he awoke the following day feeling as though his head was filled with sawdust. He blinked blearily as Jamie moved around the dorm bareback, searching for something. A glance at the bed to Cedric's left revealed that Markus had already gone down for breakfast, but Jamie was making enough noise to raise the dead.

'Oi, what are you looking for?' Cedric groused sleepily.

Jamie's dishevelled head emerged from beneath his bed where he'd been rummaging, and he flashed Cedric a somewhat embarrassed grin. 'Just looking for my vest, have you seen it? The black one.'

Cedric pondered that for just a moment longer than he wanted to since when had Jamie been so specific about an article of clothing? 'Um, no, haven't noticed it, Jame.'

A few minutes later, Cedric laughed as Jamie's victorious yell came from the direction of his cupboard, and his friend emerged with the object in question and a broad grin on his face. 'Ha! Found it,' he effused, turning the vest around and inspecting it closely.

'Yes, so I see. Mind telling me what's so important about that vest?'

Jamie blushed extravagantly, and Cedric watched in detached amusement as the rosy colour descended from Jamie's cheeks to his neck and across his muscular chest, but it was quickly covered up as his friend tugged on the garment and tucked it into the waistband of his trousers. He checked himself in the mirror before he ran a comb through his hair. 'Oh, no,' Cedric thought, 'I can't possibly let this go!'

'So you're going to wear that to classes today, are you? It's hardly the uniform, now, is it?' Cedric's tone was nothing less than amused, and Jamie grinned wolfishly.

'Well, if you must know, Katie likes knowing that I'm wearing just this, y'know, under the robes.' Jamie glanced at the ground demurely, but the wide grin completely ruined his attempt at playing coy.

'Ah.' Cedric tried desperately to contain his laughter, but he failed spectacularly. Jamie threw a pillow at him in mock-indignation as he pulled on his robes, winking cheekily. 'Come on, champion, it's time for breakfast, and we'd better hurry if we want to get any before class.'

Cedric groaned, but he knew that his friend was right. No matter how fuzzy his head felt, a good breakfast and some strong tea always helped things to seem better.

Less than five minutes later they entered the Great Hall, where breakfast was in full swing. Cedric noticed that Markus was sitting in his usual spot, and even though they'd not said more than a few words to each other since the sandwich episode, the atmosphere wasn't antagonistic, merely strained. Against his better judgement, Cedric glanced across at the Gryffindor table, and his heart tightened at the sight of Harry, who was studiously ignoring him, but Cedric could barely eat anything because the sight of Harry's pale face and pinched features just made his stomach turn over. He felt the tension thick around him, and he took deep, steadying breaths as he sipped his tea and toyed with a slice of toast that tasted not unlike an owl treat.

Jamie provided a good buffer between him and Markus, but kept shooting him significant glances, and Cedric knew that the sooner he and Markus had their discussion, the better things would be. He gave up on his toast as a bad job and stood behind Markus, grasping his shoulder firmly as he bent down and spoke softly into his ear. 'Let's talk in the Entrance Hall before class.' It wasn't so much a request as a statement, but he'd kept his tone purposely neutral, and Markus responded with a nod. Cedric straightened and walked out of the Great Hall to await his friend. He knew it wouldn't be long.

Markus strolled through the large doors of the Great Hall a few minutes later and crossed to where Cedric leaned against the doorway to the kitchens and their common room. Their eyes met with the barest hint of a challenge, and Cedric knew that although his friend didn't hold grudges for long, his anger usually needed time to dissipate before he would become reasonable. The uncomfortable squirming in his stomach receded somewhat as the barest hint of a smile on Markus' face suggested that he might be reasonable enough.

'Sorry, mate, you know...' Cedric began.

'Good, so you're all over your snit then?' Markus interrupted and clapped him hard on his shoulder as he roared with laughter. Cedric felt his face heat up even as his body felt slightly weak with the wave of relief that coursed through him. *He never could stay angry for long.* He hadn't realized just how wound up he'd been over his disagreement with Markus, and he shook slightly as he tried to apologise. 'Still, Markus, I shouldn't have taken it out on you.'

'True,' Markus agreed, nodding sagely, the corners of his mouth twitching as he fought with himself to keep a straight face. 'Still, it's better than turning on the Slytherins. You'd have gotten yourself killed for sure!'

Cedric laughed outright, and Markus pulled him into a fierce hug, and Cedric knew that, just like that, all things were forgiven.

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TBC

## Disquiet

*Chapter 18 of 21*

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

A/N: See Chapter 1 for disclaimer.

Thanks to my beta team of charmed310, snapeophile and JaneAverage, who help to tame the (many) errant commas! One hundred points to Ravenclaw, Jane!

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Cedric was both distracted and nervous during the Transfiguration exam, even though, as Champion, he was exempt from actually taking the test. That fact rankled slightly too, because he knew that he could have passed with his eyes closed and his wand in the next room, but instead he spent the first hour in the back of their classroom,

surrounded by a Silencing Charm, drilling Markus and Jamie on some of the more difficult incantations before their turn in front of Professor McGonagall. Their sixth-year examinations were structured so that they closely resembled the N.E.W.T. format; that way, her students would get an idea of what next year's examinations would be like. His friends were very well prepared and didn't really need his help, and he suspected that they were just being polite and kind, when they should have been concentrating on their upcoming test. Unreasonably, that annoyed him too, but Cedric realized that his nerves had very little to do with the upcoming task and more to do with the direction his life would take afterwards.

Then again, since he couldn't concentrate, it was just as well that he didn't have any exams to take, although if he did, at least his mind would have been somewhat occupied. Instead, Cedric spent his time in the back of the class doodling on a piece of parchment, drawing pictures of Snitches and Bludgers and various types of broomsticks. The lack of Quidditch this year had taken away one of his methods of stress relief, which left him with only memories of the game. Thoughts of his night-time flying with Harry flashed across his mind, and he sighed as he charmed his illustrated Quidditch set to move across the paper in a miniature game. Visions of his last conversation with Harry kept reappearing, and he didn't seem able to turn them off, something that concerned him slightly because he had always been able to focus his abilities when required to.

He gazed at the action being played out on the piece of parchment, as a flock of Snitches flew past a broomstick at high speed while a Bludger crashed into the handle of another, smaller broomstick on the left side of the page, shattering the handle and causing the pieces to spiral helplessly off the edge. The group of Snitches had separated and the miniature winged balls dashed off in different directions as one of the broomsticks dived after one group while a Bludger barrelled through the second. The Snitches moved out of the way of the Bludger, but a badly-drawn one wasn't quick enough, and the larger ball clipped a golden wing. The damaged Snitch flapped its useless wing frantically as it desperately tried to maintain altitude, but eventually it failed, and the tiny orb dropped off the parchment.

Cedric watched the movements in distracted fascination. With no goal hoops or Quaffle, Beaters or Seekers, indeed, no players, the game, such as it was, could only spin on endlessly with no hope of victory for either side. Somehow, the chaos on the paper reflected the disquiet in his mind, and he moodily crushed the paper in his hand and thrust it into his pocket, putting an end to the impossible situation.

Finally, Markus and Jamie finished their exams and met him at the back of the classroom. They were both grinning from ear to ear, and Cedric was genuinely pleased for his mates. 'So?' he said as he arched his eyebrows questioningly.

'Easy as the proverbial pie, my friend,' Markus quipped as he clapped Cedric on the shoulder. Jamie's face was flushed, and Cedric had noticed him speaking with Professor McGonagall before. The Gryffindor Head of House had an almost-pleased expression on her face, and Jamie had been blushing then, too. Cedric could only surmise from that exchange that his friend had received extremely high marks in the subject. 'And what about Jamie?' he asked, although he suspected that he already knew.

'Our friend James has the cat-lady beaming like a first-year. Just imagine, he decided to turn his silver spoon into an Osprey, with more detail on the wings than even the **Guide to Advanced Transfiguration** suggested!

They all laughed, and Cedric shook Jamie's hand enthusiastically before they went down to lunch. The Great Hall was abuzz with the palpable stress of examinations past and those still to come. As they made their way over to the Hufflepuff table, Cedric finally saw Harry, and even though they only shared the briefest moment of eye contact, the hollow look in the Gryffindor's eyes wasn't Cedric's only concern. Even from this distance, and despite the general confusion of magical energy in the room, he was still able to hone in on the turbulence that was Harry's magical signature well enough to feel as though the fight had gone out of the younger boy. Cedric understood enough about Hagrid's penchant for dangerous creatures to know that Harry would need all his skill and every bit of luck he possessed to get through the final task, and although he couldn't very well just walk over to the Gryffindor table and say that, he knew that he *had* to do something.

He fished in his pocket for a piece of parchment but only came up with the crumpled piece that he had used earlier. He groaned as he smoothed out the wrinkles, and his hand trembled slightly while he wrote a hasty note on the bottom of it underneath the still-flying brooms and Snitches.

Harry,

I just can't seem to apologise properly when I'm with you, and everything comes out wrong, so allow me to do it this way. I don't suspect you of cheating and I never did, but I'm concerned, both for you and for what we might face in the task. This isn't collusion, okay, but practice your Disarming Spells and make sure you have a good grip on Stunning and Blocking Spells. They're really good to get you out of tight spots, and there are sure to be many of those.

Please, please, be careful.

Cedric

A movement out of the corner of Cedric's eye drew his attention to Harry, who was walking out of the Hall. He quickly folded the note and charmed it into Harry's pocket as the Gryffindor walked past his table with his eyes fixed on the floor in front of him, studiously avoiding Cedric. Ron and Hermione were directly behind him and nodded their hellos to Markus and Jamie and then to Cedric, who wished that he could iron things out with Harry so that they would both be settled enough to compete in the Tournament properly. Markus' words about keeping emotions out of it kept replaying in his mind, and that concept would be just fine if it wasn't for the fact that emotions were running high today, and not just for him.

After lunch, Jamie stood and shrugged his school bag onto his shoulder. 'Well, lads, I'm off to Divination.'

'Predict well, my friend,' joked Markus, and they all laughed.

Cedric nodded his agreement. 'Yeah, g'luck, mate, although you seem to be on a roll today.'

Jamie grinned and hurried along to catch up with Katie and some others as they set off towards the North tower. Cedric and Markus, in unspoken consent, walked out the front doors into the sunlight and made their way down to the lake in companionable silence. As they reached the lakeshore, Cedric conjured some squishy armchairs for them to sit in, and Markus raised his eyebrows in appreciation. 'Now, see, THAT'S why you're our Champion.'

Cedric cleared his throat pointedly.

'Sorry, sorry, I mean "one of our Champions",' he groused, but grinned as he said it, so Cedric knew that there was no offence taken. They both settled into their chairs and stared across at the Durmstrang ship floating serenely on the still waters of the lake.

Markus let out a long sigh. 'I love it here.'

'Mmm,' Cedric agreed, and another long silence passed between them. A slight movement on the ship caught their attention, and they watched as Viktor Krum dived from the deck of the Durmstrang ship into the water.

'Hope the Squid doesn't get him, although by now they should be friends, eh?'

Cedric snorted, and they watched as Krum swam briskly from the bow of the boat to the stern and back, several times.

'He sure is fit, that one,' Markus observed.

'That he is,' Cedric agreed, and there was a gap of silence while they both looked at each other and then burst into raucous laughter.

'So, after Div, Jamie is finished with his exams. What about you? Potions on Friday and that's your last, yeah?' Cedric asked as he wiped away tears of laughter.

Markus nodded. 'Professor Snape is sure to come up with the Draught of Living Death, or perhaps some obscure concoction that we've never heard of.'

'See why I gave up Potions?'

His friend smiled. 'It's not all that bad though, mate. I mean, once you can get past Snape's cheerful demeanour, the actual study is really quite fascinating. It's incredible what you can accomplish with some ingredients and a fair bit of knowledge.'

Cedric nodded at his friend's impassioned speech. He'd never had an interest in Potions, and Professor Snape's attitude had certainly not helped matters any.

'Besides,' Markus continued, 'he doesn't climb all over us the way he does with your boy there. I don't know how Harry handles it.'

'He's strong.' Cedric's voice was almost a whisper.

'Maybe so, but still, Snape on a rampage is pretty difficult to take.'

Cedric was jolted out of his musings and looked across at his friend who was studying him intently. 'I think he's the strongest person I know, Markus. Seriously, what he's been through and what he continues to have to deal with; I just have this feeling that his inclusion isn't above-board. I can't explain it...'

'I know, I know, but you feel it.'

'Yeah, I do, and I'm pretty nervous about this final task.'

'You'll be fine, mate.'

'Thanks, and I figure I *will* be all right, but remember, Fleur and Krum don't have any school loyalty to Harry, and furthermore, they're just as qualified and probably very eager to wrest the victory away from the host school.'

Markus gave a short but loud laugh. 'Well, if it were a Quidditch match, I'd say you'd have your arse beat, or perhaps a beauty contest, but, well, no offence, but you're not THAT pretty!'

Cedric chuckled in spite of himself. 'Don't discount either of them, Markus. The Goblet chose them because of their abilities, and any of the champions are more than capable of becoming the winner.'

'Even Harry?'

Cedric nodded slowly even as he considered the question. 'Yes, even Harry. He may be inexperienced and only a fourth-year, but he's powerful, Markus, he really is. Not only is he incredibly gifted with natural flying ability, but his magical signature is so strong that I can pick it up even among all the clutter of Hogwarts.'

Markus eyed Cedric doubtfully. 'Is it really that strong, or have you just become so attuned to him that you'd be able to pick it out from miles away?'

'Not "miles away", Markus,' Cedric admonished gently.

'Well, it bears thinking about, mate.'

'Yes, I suppose it does, but in any case, the fact is that I can feel his presence.'

'Even here?'

Cedric closed his eyes and tipped his head back as he reached out with his senses. *There!* He could feel the faintest throb of Harry's confused aura on the very fringes of his consciousness, and the vibrations dusted his mind with the gentlest of touches. He smiled and nodded.

Markus raised both eyebrows in surprise. 'No kidding.'

Cedric nodded again. 'No kidding.'

'Well then, if he's so powerful, why are you that concerned about him? Surely you should be concentrating on getting yourself to the Cup before everyone else?'

'There's something off, Markus. Something's not... right, not safe. I feel it in my gut.'

'So you still think someone's trying to do him in with the Tournament.' The words were a statement rather than a question, and Cedric nodded.

'I think he's in danger, and I don't mean from the creatures in the maze.'

Markus' eyes narrowed, and he shifted towards the edge of his seat as he regarded Cedric intently. 'What kind of danger? Shouldn't we go to the Headmaster if you suspect something?'

'No!'

Cedric's reply was a little too quick and emphatic for Markus not to take notice. 'What's all THAT about, 'Diggs? Why not Dumbledore? Surely he'd be the one to put an end to any potential trouble?'

Cedric was caught. On one hand he wanted to tell his friend everything he suspected, but a part of him knew that he should keep those opinions to himself, especially given the way that Harry had reacted to his suspicions. 'Well, no, I'm sure that the Headmaster will have everything in place during the task. It's just a suspicion, that's all.'

Luckily, Markus only quirked an eyebrow at him but he seemed satisfied with Cedric's reply. A faint splashing sound from the lake heralded the end of Krum's exercise session, and they looked on incredulously as the Bulgarian Seeker was lifted out of the water and gently deposited on the deck of the boat by a long tentacle.

Markus shook his head in disbelief. 'That's just too strange.'

Cedric agreed. 'Yeah, well remember what I said about the Champions. Don't discount anyone.'

'Hannah likes him,' Markus muttered, a bit darkly, as he angled his head towards the Durmstrang champion, and Cedric whipped his head around to look at his friend.

'Krum?'

Markus laughed easily. 'It's not that she likes him *instead* of me or anything, but he's famous and hugely popular and... well, she just likes him.'

They both watched as Krum grabbed a large towel and dried himself off before wrapping it around his shoulders and disappearing below the deck. Cedric smiled at his friend warmly. 'I don't think you have anything to worry about with him, though. You're more than enough man for her, and besides, he seems to have his eye on Hermione Granger.'

'Oh, you're right, and he *did* take her to the Ball, didn't he?'

'Yes, and they appeared to be quite cosy. Then again, from what I remember, young Weasley didn't seem too pleased by all that.'

'Cedric, how did you have time to see all that plus spend all that time with Cho...?' Markus' voice dropped off towards the end of his question, and he blushed as he turned away, belatedly realizing how silly a question that was. 'Sorry, mate. Forget I said anything.'

Cedric smiled encouragingly and shook his head. 'No, it's fine. I was with Cho, but I had time enough to look around.'

'Too busy looking for Potter, no doubt. I still can't believe that all happened right under our noses.' Markus huffed, but his half-hearted pretence at anger was completely transparent.

Cedric remembered the night well, and the faintest ghost of a shiver trickled up his spine. 'I just didn't know what to do about it. There was all this energy around us whenever I stood anywhere close to him, and I was surprised that nobody could see it, or feel it.'

'I think I know what you mean.' Markus muttered as he ducked his head, and something about his admission and the tone of his voice suggested to Cedric that this wasn't merely a casual remark. He turned quickly and regarded his friend. 'Oh, yeah? Anything I should know?'

Markus blushed deeply, a colour that rivalled Jamie's customary shade, and when he met Cedric's eyes, a wry smile played on his lips. 'Well, nothing earth-shattering, but I... we... Well, blimey, Diggs, I don't know how to put it into words.'

'Then just let me feel it,' Cedric encouraged gently.

'What?' Markus looked genuinely confused.

'Just sit back, close your eyes, and let the feeling flow over you. Open up and let it in, or out, or whatever you do, but just feel it, and I'll know.'

Markus squinted sceptically at Cedric in the fading sunlight and shrugged, settling back into his armchair and closing his eyes. Cedric took a deep, cleansing breath and closed his eyes also as he concentrated on clearing his mind and his emotions, focusing everything into sheer white light so that he would be open and ready for Markus. They had tried this once before, years ago, but Markus had been resistant to it then and hadn't been able to let his emotions free. Cedric suspected that this time it would be different, and slowly, ever so slowly, he felt it building, the tingling warmth of passion tinged with excitement and the slightest hint of fear. The sensations rolled away from Markus and enveloped Cedric, the colours intensifying as the feelings grew more powerful, and they suffused his mind with a deep, rich yellow that swirled amid deep reds and warm rose tones. Cedric smiled to himself happily yes, his friend was in love.

Markus shifted in his chair, and the colours in Cedric's mind faded. Brief though it had been, he understood the depth of feeling that Markus had for Hannah, and he couldn't stop the broad grin that broke out on his face as his friend regarded him with an almost sheepish expression. 'What, Diggs? C'mon, let's have it.'

'That was good, Markus. Very powerful, and a bit frightening too, wouldn't you say?'

Markus groaned and leaned forward on the chair, resting his elbows on his knees as he ran his hands over his face. When he finally met Cedric's eyes, his mouth quirked into a half-smile and his hair was in a state very reminiscent of Harry's riotous mop. The image brought with it a wave of very similar feelings to what Cedric had just experienced through Markus, and his stomach flipped over in a decidedly uncomfortable, yet welcome, manner.

'It's all so new and so... big, mate. I never expected this.'

Cedric nodded. 'Sometimes the intensity is there for a reason. I think that your magic complements Hannah's, and perhaps that's why it feels so overpowering. How does she feel?'

'Oh, c'mon, Diggs, you're really asking *me* that question?' Markus' expression of disbelief was complete.

'Yes, I certainly am. She must have told you something or given you an indication of something?'

'Well, maybe. I think she holds her breath when she first sees me and her eyes get all unfocused...'

'And what do you feel then?'

Markus shifted uncomfortably and scratched his chin. 'Um, sort of tingling and warmth all over, and my heart beats something fierce.'

Cedric tried to look gravely serious. 'Sounds like it, Markus.'

'Sounds like what?' Markus' eyes had widened slightly, and he shifted forward anxiously in his seat.

'Mucho mas, Papi.'

'Prat,' Markus huffed, but he was amused. 'It's way more than mucho mas, Diggs.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

Cedric's heart expanded with happiness for his friend. 'It's all right to feel that way, 'Kus, really.'

They stood as the sun sank lower into the sky behind them, and Markus cleared his throat nervously as he looked at Cedric sideways. 'So is that how it feels for you? Y'know, with Potter?'

Cedric looked at his feet, feeling as though he was blushing down to his bones. He Banished their chairs in an effort to buy himself some time as he thought about the question. He'd never expected Markus to ask something like that, but then again, his friend was nothing if not direct.

'Erm, something very much like it, yes.' *But it's so much more than that!* But Cedric knew that his friend wouldn't understand the true depth of his emotions. Markus seemed to consider that for a moment as they walked up the incline to the castle. Suddenly he turned to face Cedric. 'I still don't really understand it, Diggs, but it's good if you feel that way too.'

A wash of pure emotion welled up in Cedric's heart, and his throat felt suddenly dry. He nodded and swallowed, unable to speak, thankful that Markus at least partly understood him.

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The lengthening shadows of the setting sun continued their slow march across the landscape, and as dusk began to settle around them, the friends returned to the castle. They walked through the front doors in time for dinner and joined the rest of the students in the Great Hall. Jamie was already eating dinner at the table, and they crossed the room to join him.

'So, James, how was it?' Markus boomed as he clapped his friend on the back.



Jamie almost choked on his mouthful of food and took huge gulps of pumpkin juice to help it down. 'Godric's groin, Markers, *warn* a man before you do that!'

'Sorry, mate, but we're eager to hear.' Markus' broad grin did nothing to support his words; in fact, he didn't appear in the slightest bit remorseful to Cedric. They sat on either side of Jamie and helped themselves to dinner as they waited for his news.

Jamie finally swallowed and cleared his throat. 'Well, you know, a little of this, a bit of that. Trelawney thinks that I'm a born Seer, and she made grand suggestions that I should return after NEWTs to apprentice with her.'

Cedric tried to hide his grin at the incredulous look on Jamie's face. 'So, it went well, then, did it?'

Jamie laughed. 'Yeah, well enough.'

The friends concentrated on their dinner, and after dessert Markus suggested that they have a final run-through of all the hexes and charms they'd practiced. Jamie nodded his agreement, but Cedric shook his head. He didn't want to prepare for task anymore, as he felt that his skills were sufficiently honed and he remained confident in his abilities.

'If you don't mind, I'd just like to visit with the two of you.' Markus regarded him carefully for a moment and then shrugged as he nodded in agreement. They rose and made their way back to the common room, where it seemed as though the library had exploded. Their housemates were gathered around desks and other pieces of furniture, on the rugs and in the corners, in groups and individually, with their textbooks and bits of parchment strewn over every horizontal surface. Cedric nodded to Ernie and a couple of the other fourth-year students, who were almost buried by what looked like their Transfiguration notes, and then followed Jamie and Markus to their dorm.

'Poor blighters,' Jamie commiserated. 'Thank Merlin I'm all done.'

'No kidding,' Markus noted. 'Only Potions for me and then I'm free. Then again, we could have all just become Champions and been exempt from them altogether. Isn't that right, Cedders?' he said merrily as he clapped Cedric on the shoulder and walked through the door to their room.

Despite Cedric's reluctance to discuss the task, Markus and Jamie still managed to review most of the defensive spells and hexes, as well as tracking and directional spells. Cedric let them have their moment, knowing that they only wanted to help him to the best of their abilities, and somehow it felt better to just talk about the spells instead of having to perform them. It was oddly calming, knowing that he was prepared with such a vast array of magic at his command.

Some time later, as they discussed the finer points of butterbeer, Markus' stomach growled loudly. They all laughed and, as one, made their way down to the kitchens. The house-elves were nowhere in sight, and Jamie brought out a pitcher of pumpkin juice while Markus and Cedric walked with trays laden with biscuits, mince pies and chocolate éclairs. Cedric had even found a treacle tart tucked away in the back of the pantry and had added it to their selection. They settled onto a long table and proceeded to make quick work of the snack. Cedric caught himself looking hopefully at the door every few minutes or so, but it stubbornly refused to open, and gradually his heart sank as he realized that he was unrealistic in thinking that Harry and his friends would be down again.

'No Gryffindors tonight, Diggs?' Markus' tone was surprisingly sympathetic, and Cedric remembered anew his friend's feelings and what they'd shared earlier at the lake.

'No. No Gryffindors at all.' Cedric felt so dejected that, despite being with his two best mates, he was sure his face was an open book, and he realized it was true when Jamie slung an arm around his shoulder.

'I don't think it's a permanent thing, Cedders. The Tournament is a lot to handle, especially for him. Next week will be time enough to talk with him. Just let it go for now and get past tomorrow, yeah?'

Cedric nodded distractedly and knew that Jamie was right; intellectually he knew that, but somehow his heart and his gut feelings told him something different. Still, there wasn't much that could be done in the next twenty-four hours to change things.

They didn't discuss the upcoming task as they munched on their snacks, and for that, Cedric was grateful. Although Markus still seemed eager to fine-tune their modified version of the Tracking Charm, he didn't push the point, and eventually they talked about their plans for the summer. Jamie had plans to visit with Katie, and Markus' family had booked a villa in Italy for a two-week vacation.

'What about you, mate?' Markus poked Cedric in the ribs. 'Provided you can actually leave your house without being mobbed after you win the Tournament and all what do you have laid out for this summer?'

Cedric hadn't really thought about the fame aspect of a potential Tournament win, and that gave him pause, but he chose to focus on the pleasurable things in his future. 'Well, my cousins Anne-Marie and Joan are coming over to spend a few weeks, and since you two lads are otherwise occupied, I thought I'd take them across to the Weasley place and introduce them to the twins.'

Markus laughed; a full, rich sound. 'Those cousins of yours, they're the ones who sent you all those postcards from Arizona last year, yeah?'

'Yes. Their grandmother and my grandmother were first cousins, so even though we're not "close-cousins", they're still family enough, and we get along really well. It's a shame that we live so far away, but every few years they try to get out here for a visit. It's been a while since they've come across though.'

'So, will you have enough room at your place for the two of them plus the two of us?' Markus' eyes twinkled à la Dumbledore.

'You're already taken, Mister Hughes,' Cedric admonished mockingly.

'Of course I am, no question about that, Diggs; but still, I'd like to meet the famous cousins from across the pond.'

'Well, I happen to know for a fact that Anne-Marie has a crush on Jamie.'

'Seriously?' Jamie's eyes lit up in surprise.

'Yeah, and Joan thinks that Markus is an absolute stud.'

Markus gaped and Cedric took advantage of the utter silence to drive the point home.

'In fact, they both think that,' he declared and sat back to enjoy their reactions. Markus was virtually preening himself and Jamie seemed lost in thought. Suddenly, he sat up and fixed Cedric in his gaze.

'How do they know about us if we've never met them, Cedders?'

'They've seen pictures, my friend.'

'Represent well, do we?'

'Apparently so, yeah. So, depending on when Markus' family trip ends and whether we can get together, yes, I'd imagine that we'd have a grand time, all of us.' Cedric beamed, just imagining the lively bunch of friends and family in his home. His mother adored the girls and his father got along extremely well with everyone.

'What about Harry?' Jamie asked. 'Do you know what he'll be doing for the summer?'

Cedric felt his face heat up a bit, and he cleared his throat. 'He has to spend some time with his Muggle family until his birthday that's at the end of July and then he plans

to stay with the Weasleys until school starts.'

Jamie and Markus exchanged looks and then grinned at him knowingly. 'Well, then, that'll be perfect,' drawled Markus. 'All of us bundled up together in the summer heat. I can't believe we didn't think of this earlier!'

They all laughed and Cedric breathed a sigh of relief as he munched on a biscuit. Yes, the summer was shaping up to be just grand.

The friends returned to their almost-deserted common room, and after taking a long shower, Cedric lay back on his bed with an exhausted groan. He fell asleep quickly, but his slumber was disturbed by dreams of flight, and of fright, and he was running through a house desperately searching for someone or something, screaming '*Impedimenta! Impedimenta!*' with no result. Unable to see what he was casting at in the darkness, he felt the cloying fear of the hunted, that he was in danger, and he tried to find Harry, knowing that the Gryffindor was also in danger. Cedric ran down a flight of stairs, his back to the rail, still shouting, '*Stupefy! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!* and throwing hexes over his shoulder wildly into the darkness at a foe he could not see, all the hexes that he'd told Harry to use, only Harry wasn't anywhere around, but Cedric could still *feel* his presence...

Cedric awoke bathed in sweat, his heart pounding and his mouth dry. His hand shook as he reached for his wand and silently conjured a glass which he filled with water from the end of his wand. He tried to control his breathing and get a hold of himself, but he heard the sound of shifting from the bed to his right.

'You okay, mate?' Markus' voice was groggy and sounded oddly disembodied, and Cedric could just make out the silhouette of his friend sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

Cedric closed his eyes briefly and shook his head as if to rid himself of the images. 'Yeah. Just a bad dream. Sorry I woke you.'

'You'll be all right?'

'Sure.' But Cedric wasn't as confident as he tried to sound. He waited, scarcely daring to breathe until soft, snuffling sounds from the bed told him that Markus was asleep once more.

TBC

A/N: Reviews = love.

## The Morning of the third Task

Chapter 19 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

Disclaimer: Several lines of dialogue have been taken directly from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, while others have been modified slightly to fit this story. No copyright infringement is intended.

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Breakfast that morning was the same as most mornings, but Cedric found even the toast virtually inedible. He freely admitted to himself that he was a bit nervous, but knew that he should at least try to eat something, so he picked half-heartedly at a piece of toast and sipped his cup of tea. The warm, sweet liquid helped somewhat, but the fluttering in his stomach only increased when, against his better judgement, he glanced at the Gryffindor table and caught a glimpse of tousled dark hair.

The post owls arrived in a flurry of wings, and a large, brightly-coloured envelope arrived for him via an unfamiliar owl. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and he ripped open the seal to reveal a card.

Good luck, favourite cousin. Win well, and we're looking forward to seeing you this summer. Can't wait!

Much love, AM & J

Jamie and Markus had read the missive over his shoulder, and he laughed as they said 'Aww' in unison.

'Diggs, are you sure they're related to you?'

'Yeah, Cedders, they sound too good to be true,' Jamie teased as he jabbed him in the ribs. Cedric was about to reply with a jab of his own when he heard Malfoy shout to Harry and saw the ensuing struggle between Harry and Ron over a newspaper. He shoved the card from his cousins into his pocket as he glanced around the Hufflepuff table and noticed that one of the fifth-years had a copy of the *Prophet*. Trying not to be too obvious, he craned his neck to read the headline.

"HARRY POTTER 'DISTURBED AND DANGEROUS'"

His stomach churned at the thought of what that particular reporter could have dug up about the young Gryffindor, especially since she hadn't attempted to contact either him or his friends since that day in Hogsmeade. He *had* to read that article, and he caught the owner's eye. 'Hi, can I have a look at that when you're finished?'

The girl Charisse, he thought her name was blushed deeply and promptly handed the paper over. Cedric flashed her his best 'thank you' smile and turned to the front page, reading the article so quickly that only scraps of information made their way into his brain " *the scar is still hurting... collapses at school... Potter can speak Parseltongue... set a snake on another boy... might resort to the Dark Arts... desperation to win the Tournament...* "

Cedric felt as though he would be physically sick. How dare that venomous excuse for a reporter have the effrontery to print such blatant lies about Harry on the cusp of the final task? He looked over at the Gryffindor table where Harry, Ron and Hermione's heads were bowed together in hushed and urgent conversation, even as Malfoy and his ubiquitous henchmen continued to poke fun at them. Cedric was about to walk over to the table convention be damned when he spied Professor Sprout walking down the Hufflepuff table, her hands wringing together in that nervous way she had and nodding offhandedly to the greetings from her House.

'Cedric, please stay behind after breakfast. The champions will meet in the chamber just off the Hall as soon as the rest of the school has gone to classes.'

'But, Professor...' Markus protested, but his outburst was halted by a small hand.

'Mister Diggory's parents have arrived, as well as the families of the other champions. This is simply an opportunity for a little relaxation before the task.'

Cedric remembered his father's last letter and groaned. *Relaxation? As if that were possible.*

Jamie patted Cedric encouragingly on the shoulder, and Markus quirked his mouth sympathetically. 'Yeah, Diggs, good luck with that. We'll see you later, maybe for lunch.'

Cedric nodded and looked around while the Hall emptied as the students made their way to classes. Professor Sprout nodded to him once more from her position at the Head Table

Fleur joined Cedric, and they crossed the hall into the side chamber. At first, Cedric was completely occupied with his mother, who hugged him tightly and lavished praise on him. His father's face was wreathed in smiles, and he shook Cedric's hand enthusiastically. He was marginally aware of Krum entering the room, but there was still no sign of Harry. There were two people standing in the corner, and although the woman's back was to him, the young man she was with had red hair, instantly reminding him of the Weasleys. Upon further scrutiny Cedric thought he recognised him. Bill Weasley quite grown up now - had been Head Boy during Cedric's first year at Hogwarts. His hair was much longer than Cedric remembered, and was that a fang earring? He smiled and nodded to them, noticing that Mrs Weasley appeared to be searching for Harry, and snippets of the conversation he'd shared with the Gryffindor that night at the lake came back to him. He was happy that Harry had someone here to cheer him on, and he should have known they'd come since the Weasleys were the only 'real' family Harry ever had.

Cedric stuck his head outside the door and easily spied Harry, who was still sitting at the Gryffindor table looking a bit forlorn. He wanted to go over to him and apologise properly; maybe take a walk with him down by the lake, like he'd done with Markus yesterday. Somewhere relaxing, quiet, and private, but that certainly wasn't in the cards today.

'Harry, come on, they're waiting for you!'

The utterly puzzled look on Harry's face was so endearing that Cedric's breath caught in his throat, and he hoped that the heat in his face didn't show a few moments later when the young boy appeared in the doorway. Cedric didn't miss the way his father's face fell at the sight of Harry, but his mother laid a soothing hand on Amos' shoulder, and the moment passed. Still perfectly poised, his mother changed the topic of conversation slightly. 'We're both so proud of you, son. The Ministry is a perfect place to work and you will certainly bring extra prestige to the post whatever post you take on.'

His father looked at him intently. 'Yes, and the sooner the better'

'Now, now, Amos, let him get through the task, and the future will take care of itself.' His mother looked up at him imploringly. 'You *will* be careful, won't you Cedric?'

'Yes, of course I will, Mum.' *What kind of question is that?*

'Still, it is better that the boy have a good idea of what to do with his influence. Winning the Triwizard Tournament is no mean feat, and the fact that the tournament hasn't even been *played* in so long adds extra clout to the title.'

'Yes, Amos, all that is fine and good, but now isn't the time for that.'

Amos Diggory turned to his wife. 'And just when IS the time, Sheila? He blows off my ideas in his letters, and he's unfocused generally.' He then turned to Cedric, who strove to remain calm in the face of his father's outburst. 'I don't know what's gotten into you, Cedric, but your future is important, and you need to start thinking about it now and making plans and getting things in train so that when you leave Hogwarts you'll be able to walk into the position of your choosing.'

'I *understand* that, Dad, but I'm not unfocused, and I don't think that my wanting to wait until after the summer will be a huge problem in those plans.'

Cedric was exasperated with his father's single-mindedness, and his stress level rose even higher when it was obvious that the man wasn't listening to a single thing that he had to say. In fact, Amos Diggory kept right on talking. 'Why wait? Why not intern with the Ministry over the summer? You're Hogwarts champion, after all, and I'm sure if I had a word with the head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, I could get you a summer job with the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad. That way, you'd have first-hand knowledge of the workings of the place. I'll set that up as soon as I get home.'

Cedric's head began to feel as though his brains were being squeezed, and he rubbed his forehead roughly. 'I'm not the only champion, Dad.'

'Don't try to tell me that Potter is still considered a champion, Cedric,' Amos hissed. 'I don't know what Dumbledore was thinking to allow such a thing to happen, but rest assured, that boy is in no way equal to the likes of you!'

'Amos,' his mother said warningly, but his father rounded on her. 'No, Sheila, it's a farce, an absolute joke. To think that they'd actually allow that boy to compete...'

Cedric had been keeping an eye on Harry and the Weasleys in the corner even as he tried to tune his father out, and his stomach jumped when they began walking towards him. Belatedly, he remembered that the door was behind him, and he tried to move aside without being too obvious, but as Harry passed them, Amos turned towards the young Gryffindor.

'There you are, are you?' he said, looking Harry up and down. 'Bet you're not feeling quite as full of yourself now Cedric's caught you up on points, are you?'

'Oh, *Merlin, please not now.* Cedric desperately wanted the ground to open up and swallow him, but Harry only looked up in confusion. 'What?'

'Ignore him,' Cedric said, trying to keep his voice low while glaring at his father. 'He's been angry ever since Rita Skeeter's article about the Triwizard Tournament you know, when she made out you were the only Hogwarts champion.'

His entire body vibrated just from being in close proximity to Harry, but he could see Harry's face cloud over and felt the dangerous shift in his aura that signalled his growing annoyance. Cedric wanted to de-fuse the situation, but just then his father spoke up again, loudly enough for Harry and the Weasleys to hear. 'Didn't bother to correct her, though, did he? Still... you'll show him, Ced. Beaten him once before, haven't you?' His father clapped him on the back emphatically, and it stung, as did the words.

That was a bloody Quidditch match, for love's sake! Cedric groaned as he felt Harry's annoyance morph into anger, but it was Mrs Weasley who took up the charge and stepped up to Amos.

'Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos! I would have thought you'd know that, working at the Ministry!' The woman was impressive when angry, Cedric thought, and he took advantage of the momentary confusion to glance at Harry, whose face was flushed, his green eyes startlingly brilliant as he looked up. Cedric felt his father spool up for another go, but just then, Sheila Diggory laid her hand firmly on her husband again and forestalled any future argument.

Harry's gaze barely met his eyes as Cedric looked at him, desperately hoping that the young boy understood that ~~he~~ didn't think that way, but the Gryffindor just muttered, 'Forget about it,' as he turned and walked through the door, followed by a still-scowling Mrs Weasley and a bemused-looking Bill.

Cedric sighed, his stomach in knots. If his father was behaving this way over a simple article in the newspaper and an imagined affront to the Diggory name, he didn't want to consider the man's reaction to the news that Harry and Cedric were... well, involved. The threatening headache bloomed brightly between his eyes, and he was just able to hear his father's continuing rant. 'The nerve of some people...' Amos was saying as he dragged himself back to their company.

Cedric allowed himself to feel the anger that had been bubbling up inside him. He'd tried to prevent it from surfacing, hoping that his parents were there out of their desire to see him, to wish him well, and to encourage him in the task rather than prepare the rest of his life. Instead, they had only helped to increase his nervousness, and he was

very annoyed by his father's remarks about Harry. 'You know, that was rather unnecessary.'

'Unnecessary? It's an outrage!' Amos spat.

Cedric gritted his teeth for a moment before he tried to explain. 'Look, Harry's a part of the competition, so just cut him some slack and let him get through it the same as the rest of us.'

Amos huffed, and the look on his face could only be described as condescending. 'He's nowhere *near* your league, Cedric; surely you can see that? Besides, you need to concentrate on winning the Cup. That's what's important here.'

Cedric was suddenly and completely angry. The emotion barrelled through him with enough force to cause him to take a step backwards, and he concentrated with everything he had to remain rational. 'You might want to think that life isn't always about winning, Dad. Sometimes it's about living.'

To the casual observer, the look on his father's face must have been frightening. Normally a florid man, Amos' face was almost puce in colour, and Cedric feared that his father was having an apoplectic fit.

'And just what life lessons have *you* learned this year that qualify you to make a statement like that to me? You have no idea what life is, my boy, nor what it's all about, but mark my words, nobody ever got anywhere by just "living." You've got to work at it, fight for what you want, *grab* it with both hands and not let go. And believe me, no paper-pushing clerical position in the Department of International Magical Cooperation is the type of job that will take you places. You've got fame, Cedric, and you have to use it.'

His mother's brows furrowed. 'International Magical Cooperation? What's wrong with working in your father's Department?'

Cedric's headache had firmly established itself between his eyes, and he rubbed the back of his hand along his forehead distractedly. 'It's not that I *don't* want to work there, but I'd like to explore my options a little further before I decide.'

'What's there to decide? You'll need a job, and it's a fine place to work.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Sheila,' Amos said dismissively. 'Anyone can work there, but not *my* boy he's too good for that place. After he wins the Tournament, he'll be rubbing shoulders with the true movers in our society, not slumming about with beasts and beings.' He turned all his attention to Cedric now. 'Perhaps you'll even become Minister for Magic in the near future. You can do anything, Cedric, *be anyone*.'

Cedric opened his mouth to say... he didn't know what, but just then the Headmaster entered and suggested that the champions show their families around the castle. Smiling as best he could, he crooked his elbow gallantly towards his mother. She placed her hand on his arm, and together they walked through the door into the Entrance Hall, Cedric pointedly leading them in the opposite direction from where Harry had disappeared with the Weasleys.

He took great pleasure in showing his mother their common room and dorms, and she was positively enthralled with the Prefects' bathroom, which she hadn't had access to in her years at Hogwarts; they even managed to get a glance at Moaning Myrtle, just seconds before she disappeared into the sink. They visited for a while with the ghosts and then went into the kitchens for a quick snack. Later, he steered them carefully around the Whomping Willow, which was planted the summer after his mother graduated, and then they proceeded down to the greenhouses where they examined his and Markus' Mandrake project for Herbology. The plants were proudly displayed in a corner of the greenhouse, and Professor Sprout had allowed them to complete their presentation by attaching their project notes to the adjacent walls. Amos appeared reasonably pleased with the high marks that Cedric had received, but undercurrents of disquiet and annoyance still swirled around the three of them.

Sheila Diggory was an astute woman, and Cedric noticed that she occasionally gave his father long looks. He didn't need his empathic abilities to know that there was quite a lot of tension between his parents, and he was amazed by just how different people could be and how strongly their differences could run, despite his being bonded to them by blood. Although he wanted to talk to his mother privately, there never seemed to be a moment with just the two of them. Shaking his head, Cedric resolved to put all negative thoughts behind him as much as possible and just concentrate on getting through the day.

Cedric and his parents returned to the Great Hall to have lunch with Markus and Jamie. His mother doted on both boys while Cedric smiled as he enjoyed a brief, happy moment, turning his thoughts to the upcoming summer when they would all be together, relaxed and free. Their lunch was interrupted by a house-elf that appeared beside their table and informed his father that his presence was required in the Headmaster's office for a Floo call. Amos left the table quickly, and Cedric was almost ashamed to be relieved.

Despite his earlier resolution to relax, he still wasn't able to do much more than nod in response to the questions that Jamie and Markus asked him, for he found himself still preoccupied with the upcoming task and the feeling that he needed to iron things out with Harry.

'Cedric, love, are you all right? Not too nervous about tonight, are you?'

'No, Mum, I'm fine. A bit nervous, yeah, but that's normal.'

His mother reached over and brushed his hair back from his forehead, smoothing his windswept locks, and for a moment, the chatter of the Great Hall diminished and the two of them were inside a private cocoon. The moment stretched, and he looked around curiously, but everyone else was carrying on as normal, and he realized that his mother had cast a non-verbal and very discreet Notice-Me-Not Spell.

Her kind eyes crinkled at the corners as she bestowed one of her famous smiles on him. 'Cedric, a mother knows when something is amiss, and I don't mean the task. What is it, love?'

Of all the unexpected things in life, this was certainly something Cedric hadn't seen coming, and he shifted nervously. Here was the chance he'd waited for all morning: finally, he and his mother were alone, as alone as two people could be in the Great Hall during lunch, but she had given him this, their own bubble of protection, and he knew that he couldn't let it pass. He just didn't know how to begin. 'It's... well, it's the task actually. I have a feeling that something is going to happen, but I don't know what it is or who it will happen to.'

Sheila narrowed her eyes. 'Is it something happening to the others, or to you?'

'I don't know, but I feel that the danger is centred on Harry.'

His mother seemed to consider that for a moment. 'Yes, well, he certainly has had his fair share of danger, the poor dear. Still, if he's in this Tournament he must have something that makes him worth it, Cedric, despite what your father thinks.'

Cedric breathed out, and the sound quavered in his own ears. His mother believed him and didn't think badly of Harry! He had known that his parents didn't always see eye to eye on things, but with the added pressure of his argument with Harry and the upcoming task, he'd begun to feel a little as if the world was against him. Paranoia wasn't something he was familiar with, but at least he was now able to get some perspective and see it for what it was.

His mother must have seen the relief on his face because she embraced him in a quick hug. 'I'm sure that the Headmaster wouldn't allow anything to happen to Harry.'

'But something already *has*, Mum,' he said urgently. 'He's in this Tournament, underage and at quite a disadvantage. They're not for the faint-hearted, these tasks, let me tell you.'

'He seems to have handled them very well so far, Cedric. What are you *really* concerned about?' As usual, his mother cut directly to the core of the matter, and Cedric's

stomach jolted. For a moment he wondered just how transparent he was. Could he be so obviously worrying about Harry that he didn't realize? No, he couldn't be, but she was his mother, and she knew enough about him to understand when he was troubled. He knew that he would be relieved if he told her, and he knew that she loved him unconditionally, but could he really, *truly*, tell her this?

'I-I'm just apprehensive about the task, Mum, really, and I can't help but feel that Harry's in more danger than the rest of us are. I just don't like it that the odds are stacked so significantly against him.' *Well, at least that's a version of the truth.*

His mother nodded, and her grey eyes were pensive as she gave him one *of those* looks, the ones that usually came immediately before she reminded him that his feelings were usually signs of the discord and disquiet around him, but that even though he believed them, he should always temper his reactions with some degree of rationality. She couldn't know that when it came to him and Harry, rationality played a VERY small part, and although he knew that his mother made sense, the nagging feeling that something was awry persisted.

During lunch, Jamie and Markus must have realized that Cedric was wound tighter than a Time Turner before a three-decade leap because they accosted him in the Entrance Hall and took him for a long walk around the grounds. How they managed to get him away from his parents, Cedric didn't know, but he would be eternally grateful to his friends for their efforts to help him retain his sanity. They stood on the cliffs overlooking the Black Lake, and Cedric shuddered involuntarily at the memory of his time beneath the murky waters.

'Seems like so long ago, doesn't it?' Jamie mused wistfully.

Cedric roused himself from his reverie and focused on Jamie's caring eyes. His friend's empathetic abilities had always been quite a bond between them, and he suspected that Markus had occasionally felt left out because he couldn't relate to the way the two of them communicated. Cedric had often felt that he needed to try harder with Markus, not because he had to, but because he wanted his dark-haired friend to be as equal as Jamie was. What Markus lacked in intuitive and emotional ties, he more than made up for in fierce loyalty and outright determination.

Cedric sighed. 'It certainly does.'

'You know, Diggs, we thought that after you'd won the second task it would be a simple case of maintaining that lead to eventual victory, but it's more than that, isn't it?' Markus' voice was soft, but his eyes burned with an intensity that made Cedric shiver, and he nodded as his friend continued. 'Look, mate, I know that I told you to keep emotions out of it, but I was wrong. You can't separate your emotions from yourself because they're a huge part of who you are, so just be careful tonight.'

Jamie nodded his agreement. 'Yeah, Cedders, and after the task, win or lose, whatever happens, it's a celebration, all right?'

Cedric looked at his friends, *really* looked at them, and understood at a deeper level that, although they didn't always agree, the bond that tied them together was as powerful as a blood bond, and perhaps even more so because it had been entered into willingly and had been perpetuated by the combined efforts of all three of them.

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Later that evening, as they all sat around the table for the feast, his father returned and was speaking in hushed but rapid tones with his mother, who cast anxious glances in Cedric's direction. Cedric's stomach clenched as he wondered just what his father was up to, and it wasn't long before he found out. Amos Diggory strutted across to their table, his face flushed and shining with pride and importance. 'Well, my boy, I've been on the Floo with some very important people. It would seem that merely being an entrant in this Tournament is more than enough to open the *right* kinds of doors.'

*Oh, sweet Circe, must we do this now?* Cedric was beginning to feel nervous about the impending task, and he resented the fact that his father simply didn't appreciate the pressure that he was under, but Sheila Diggory's calm voice interrupted his father's speech. 'Amos, why don't we just let Cedric concentrate on this task and then we can discuss his future when it's all over? What he needs from us is our support.' His father huffed indignantly but mercifully remained silent, and Cedric looked over at his mother gratefully, not caring whether or not it was weak, but he really felt as though he *needed* someone on his side. Despite Jamie and Markus' unwavering support, the constant tension between Cedric and his father was wearing him down. Additionally, the happiness that he usually felt whenever he thought of Harry was conspicuously absent tonight, and the worry that the younger boy was still angry with him weighed heavily on his mind.

All too soon, Professor Dumbledore announced that the task would begin shortly, and the Great Hall erupted with thunderous applause. Cedric stood, relieved to finally *do* something. His father smiled beatifically as his Mother hugged her son tightly. 'Best of luck, sweetheart,' she whispered against his neck.

'Thanks, Mum,' he murmured, feeling conspicuously like his eleven-year-old self when he had left his parents at the train station for his first year at Hogwarts. He turned and shook his father's offered hand, trying to get past the resentment that still flowed through him.

'Good luck, my boy,' Amos said briskly. 'We'll talk again afterwards.'

Cedric no longer had the energy or the will to argue with his father, so he nodded mutely as he kissed his mother on the cheek and proceeded to the Entrance Hall where Viktor and Fleur were already waiting. The Bulgarian appeared carefully neutral and nodded to Cedric as he approached, and then to Harry, who was a few steps behind him. As the four champions followed Mr Bagman down the steps and in the direction of the Quidditch pitch, Cedric hung back while Harry spoke briefly with the Ministry official. His nerves were strung fairly tight and only unwound a fraction after Mr Bagman finished his conversation. Mercifully, it had been short, and as the older man moved away from Harry to lead them all down to the field, followed closely by Fleur and Krum, Cedric walked nearer to Harry and fell in step with him. Harry glanced up briefly, and Cedric felt the usual confusion of Harry's aura whirl that much quicker, but neither of them spoke. The Gryffindor didn't seem overly angry or anti-social, just pensive, and Cedric was so caught up in his own array of nerves and doubt that he almost jumped when Harry cleared his throat.

'I got your note.'

Cedric merely nodded, hoping that it would be enough, not wanting to betray his own emotions.

'Thanks, you know, for the "not-colluding" suggestions.' Harry's voice was strained, and Cedric felt the tension coming off him in waves. There was enough tension among them all to drive everyone mental.

'Any time, Harry,' Cedric said softly as he breathed out some of his tension, but that didn't prevent it from returning with full force.

'I *had* been practicing,' Harry said, somewhat petulantly, and for an instant, his eyes flashed with something, but it was gone too quickly for Cedric to discern.

'Good.' And it *was* good that Harry had taken his note to heart, but he could only hope that the Gryffindor had paid as much attention to everything that he had written.

'Yeah,' Harry deadpanned.

*Or, perhaps not.* Their stilted conversation clawed at Cedric's heart, and although they were walking towards the Quidditch pitch, he still felt the need to pace back and forth in the soothing repetition that always helped him to think. Nothing that he'd done so far had been able to make up for their argument, but oddly, he didn't feel anger from the boy beside him, just anxiety.

Despite everything they'd been through, Cedric felt that all the closeness that he and Harry had shared had somehow disappeared with the setting sun. His hands shook slightly from nervousness tinged with a bit of despair and frustration, as well as an urgency that he couldn't explain or rationalize. He opened his mouth in an attempt to explain things to Harry, or even only *one* thing, but they had arrived at the Quidditch pitch. The enormous hedges surrounding the entire playing field gave Cedric the impression of a fortress, and a small gap in the side closest to where they stood appeared to be the only entrance.

Harry was scanning the rapidly-filling stands, and Cedric moved closer to him as he tried to catch his eye, but to no avail. He wanted only a second, just one moment in which to connect with the Gryffindor and be able to *feel* him. Instead, he was only able to look on as Harry smiled and waved to the Weasleys. He appeared quite calm, Harry did, and Cedric was thankful for that. *Finally the waiting is over. I'll just try to get to the Cup as quickly as possible, and that'll be the end of this bloody Tournament.* He, in turn smiled and waved at Markus and Hannah who, together with Jamie and Katie, were sitting directly behind his parents.

'...Mr Cedric Diggory and Mr Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts school!'

Despite his nervousness, a small ripple of pleasure shot through Cedric at hearing his name and Harry's in the same sentence, and he tried once more to make eye contact with the shorter boy, but the crowd erupted so loudly that he barely heard the rest of Mr Bagman's speech.

'... on my whistle, Harry and Cedric! Three two one '

There was a short, sharp blast of a whistle, and Cedric realized that he'd run out of time.

*I'm so tired but I can't sleep*

*Standin' on the edge of something much too deep*

*It's funny how we feel so much but we cannot say a word*

*We are screaming inside, but we can't be heard. - Sarah McLachlan*

TBC

## The Cup

Chapter 20 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

A/N: See Chapter 1 for disclaimer. Thanks to my beta team of charmed310, Snapeophile and JaneAverage for all their wonderful work.

With the whistle blast echo still ringing in his ears, Cedric chanced a sideways look at Harry as they both hurried through the gap in the hedge, and all at once the noise of the crowd died away to nothing. The silence seemed to overpower them as they stood shoulder to shoulder between the tall hedges, and his breathing sounded unusually loud as they moved through the darkness. He lit his wand in order to get his bearings a split second after Harry did the same right in front of him. The hedges towered above them on all sides, and he felt the magic that pulsed through the foliage. The images were scattered and confused, but Cedric was certain that it was the enchantments placed upon them. They stood together for a moment, wary of their next move, and Harry turned to look up at Cedric with a warily apologetic expression.

'Listen, Cedric, about what I said... you know, before...'

'Harry, look... let's just do this, okay?' Cedric saw the hurt in the younger boy's eyes and regretted it instantly, but the task at hand and the Tournament were still of the utmost importance. He would have to put his feelings for Harry aside until after the Cup was won. There would be time enough after this task to sort out the rest of his life.

He and Harry proceeded further into the maze and after walking for what felt like a minute or so, they arrived at a fork. *Always go right, and you'll never go wrong.* Cedric wondered where he'd heard that before, and even though he was going to give Harry first choice at a direction, he was relieved that the Gryffindor took the left path.

Cedric watched the young champion walk away and noted the tension in his body, the firm set of his shoulders and the word 'Potter' proclaiming him to the world. His heart was pounding but his mind was surprisingly calm with the knowledge that this final task would be the one to decide his future, one way or another.

Once Harry had disappeared from sight, Cedric turned and walked through the opening in the hedge to his right, wand out and at the ready. He saw nothing, but continued up the maze, determined to put as much distance between him and the rest of the champions as possible. The others were surely in the maze by now, and he thought that he could feel their presence, but the auras were skewed somehow, haywire. He felt Krum's signature but it was distorted, much like that day in the forest, and he could sense only the faintest impression of Fleur in a delicate shade of blue, but again, distorted. He felt Harry's too at various points along his own path, but the very magic that was the maze prevented him from getting a proper lock on his position, and he was left with more like the impression of an aura, rather than the aura itself. There was a certain malevolence that intermingled with all of that, and it surrounded them as though pervading from the outside, but the source was indefinable, and that made Cedric decidedly uncomfortable. He passed many turnings on his left and right, and eventually, he turned left and hurried down the path.

A fiery blast whizzed past his head, and he dropped to the ground. The light from his wand illuminated the path ahead, and he saw a gigantic scorpion with its stinger fully curled over its back. A Blast-Ended Skrewt! Cedric groaned and froze momentarily, costing him his slim advantage, then he dived out of the way as another blast from the creature seared his sleeve. He turned in time to see the Skrewt send forth yet another blast. *'Protego!'* he shouted, and the blast ricocheted into the nearby bushes.

*'Impedimenta!'* he yelled, but that did little to halt the advancing creature, so Cedric flung himself into a path on his left in a desperate attempt to get away and was alarmed when he came face to face with the glowing tip of Harry's wand. Adrenaline still pumped through his blood after his near-miss with the Skrewt, and he felt jittery as his heart pounded in his chest. Harry's defensive pose gave him a bit of a nasty turn and his skin prickled at the intense look on the younger boy's face.

'Harry, it's me!' he hissed, raising his hands defensively, but in what he hoped was a non-aggressive manner. After a moment, the wand lowered, and he was met with only wide-eyed scepticism.

'Where the hell did you come from?' Harry asked in a slightly-worried tone, and Cedric shuddered as he shook his head and checked his clothes for burns.

'Bloody Blast-Ended Skrewt nearly had me back there; you'd better get away from here right quick!' Cedric fought against everything that urged him to stay and dived through a break in the fence to his right, needing to keep moving and finish the task. He had seen the surprise on Harry's face and hoped that the boy would also get away from that area.

Cedric continued through the maze, working in logical steps, first a right turn, then a left turn, then right again which would put him in a roughly diagonal pattern toward the centre of the maze. He periodically used his wand to mark certain intersections along the maze to ensure that he knew where he'd been. He came across some of his markings after a particularly confusing set of turns and realized that he'd come full circle without making any headway. Frustrated, he paused for a moment to gather his thoughts and clear his head.

*Relax, Cedric old boy, just breathe and concentrate*, he thought, inhaling deeply before moving on. He continued quickly up the path, but froze when he heard Fleur scream up ahead. He ran towards the sound, wand at the ready, straining with all his might to get to her. He turned the corner and saw nothing but there was a surge in the malevolent power that he'd experienced before. Confused, he moved forward and wondered whether the maze was playing tricks on him. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and he paused, remembering the previous night's dream. He turned rapidly to find Viktor Krum standing before him with his wand pointed directly at Cedric's chest.

'What... what are you doing?' Cedric shouted as he stepped backwards quickly, bringing his own wand up in defence. 'What the hell d'you think you're doing?' was all he managed before...

'*Crucio!*'

The pain was unbelievable, and anguished yells wrenched their way from his mouth as he fell to the ground; his entire body felt as though he was simultaneously on fire and being stabbed by thousands of knives. Every breath was agony and his muscles contracted spasmodically, threatening to break him in two as his heart felt as though it might explode, taking his life with it. His mind grasped for something sane, for anything to make sense, but there was nothing but the shrieking, clawing agony of pain. He dimly heard screams in the abyss and wondered who else was being tortured, not realizing that the screams were his own.

Suddenly, the biting pain stopped. Cedric's mind clawed its way back to the present as his body stopped convulsing, and he curled into the foetal position as he fought back waves of nausea. He was shaking uncontrollably and his breathing was laboured as every breath seared his lungs, and there was a loud ringing in his ears, even as his heart thundered in his chest. He dimly heard someone approach, and his mind screamed, *Danger!* as he hastily reached for his wand. Whoever it was knelt beside him and grabbed his arm, but he pulled back just as he tightened his grip on the handle of his wand, trying desperately to think of a protective spell as he prepared for whatever was to come next.

'Cedric. Cedric, are you all right?'

In his haze, the voice sounded like Harry's, and Cedric realized that he'd most likely gone mad. Harry was probably winning the Cup while he... while he endured the Cruciatius.

'Cedric, can you hear me?' Harry's breathless voice was tinged with anxiety as he pulled Cedric into a sitting position. Still trying to recover from the curse, he could barely do anything as Harry placed his arms around Cedric's waist and helped him to his feet. The Gryffindor's touch was like a gift from Merlin that quieted his raging and frayed nerve-endings, and he shook his head to steady himself, groaning from the pain. The motionless form of Viktor Krum lay mere feet from him, and a burst of anger swelled inside him so powerfully that he took an unsteady step in the Bulgarian's direction to even the score.

A hand stopped him.

'No, Cedric! He was under the Imperius Curse. He wouldn't have known what he was doing!' the younger boy shouted, and his grip tightened on Cedric's arm, his fingers bruising flesh.

They struggled for a few moments before Cedric was able to see that Harry was right. He felt his rage subside as reason fought its way back into his mind, but when Harry suggested that they alert the others to Krum's whereabouts, Cedric hesitated, happier to leave the Bulgarian in the maze forever. It still rankled that Harry and Krum had shared moments together, and even though he knew that nothing untoward had happened, the jealousy still bubbled deep within him. Trying to be rational, he did his best to stamp out those thoughts as he concentrated on doing what he knew was right.

Reluctantly, Cedric raised his wand and sent up a shower of sparks into the air where they hung, glowing overhead. He turned to face Harry and saw his one remaining opponent in an entirely new light. This boy, his brave Gryffindor, *truly* believed in fair play and was more than capable of winning the Cup himself. Cedric felt a thrill of excitement run through his body, a pleasant electrical charge that heightened his senses, and suddenly, he was aware of Harry's closeness, of his sweat-streaked face and his breathing, still uneven after their tussle. The hair on the back of Cedric's neck stood up once again, but this time for an entirely different reason. As he stood in the midst of the swirling, haphazard energy, he realized that this was a pivotal moment. The magical fields of the maze distorted everything, partially blinding his senses, but somehow it enabled him to focus that much more clearly on the reality of *now*. The blood pounding in his head drove home the fact that this was it, the time had come, and he must take the next step towards becoming the man he wanted to be.

Without another thought, Cedric moved forward and pulled Harry to him as he met those lips in a kiss, his tongue hungrily tasting the young flesh and wanting more. His hands were all over Harry as he crushed their bodies together, pulling him closer even as he devoured him. Harry's responses were tentative at first, inexperienced but eager, much too eager, and Cedric's blood roared in his ears like a freight train. His entire body was alive, more alive than he'd ever felt before, and he shuddered as he felt the magic in his chest burst out of him, entwining and merging with Harry's. His excitement at this uncommon act of pure abandon was all-encompassing, and he was relieved that Harry never resisted or objected, but acquiesced to the kiss, parting his lips to take Cedric's tongue into his mouth. Before long Harry was as deeply involved as Cedric, their hands tangled in each others' hair and clothes as the taller boy breathed in Harry's scent, trying to get all of him inside his mind and soul so that no matter what else happened, he would always have *this*.

They were one, he and Harry, and the only sounds were their rapid breathing and the slick, wet sounds of their mouths on each other that muffled their grunts and moans of desire. Cedric broke their kiss and gasped for air, then continued kissing and sucking along the side of Harry's neck as Harry's hands roamed clumsily along Cedric's back and shoulders; then those fingers were in his hair and they tightened their grip as Harry *pulled*. The delicious pain and gentle brutality of it sent pulses of want and need through Cedric's cock, and a guttural roar came from somewhere within him.

Deep in his consciousness he knew that this was wrong, but he was too far gone to resist the singular pull of their magic. Everything was Harry, and he felt control ebbing from his mind. He reached for it with mental fingers but it strayed further from his grasp, and a part of him wanted to be lost in the sensations; to finally let loose and take what he wanted most. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind he heard Markus' words. '*This final task is a job, so just do your job, get the Cup, claim your victory, and deal with the emotional aspect after.*'

With supreme effort, he hauled himself back from the edge. They parted, and stood with their foreheads still touching as they breathed heavily.

'Gods, I've wanted to do that all year,' Cedric panted, a little surprised by his actions and that he had actually said those words out loud. There were no other sounds in the maze but their breathing as they stood in the darkness for several moments, and Cedric's heart thundered in his chest as his mind whirled with too many conflicting thoughts, each striving to occupy his full attention. He stepped back slightly and looked at Harry, who ran his hand through those untidy black locks as though trying to straighten out his own thoughts. *Oh, yes, just do that again!*

'All year?' Harry seemed incredulous, and Cedric smiled ruefully.

'Well, ever since the Yule Ball, I guess.'

Harry shook his head. 'I didn't know. I mean, I thought... well, I thought *something*, but I didn't really think you felt that way too. You kept pushing me away, making me angry, and then after what you said about Dumbledore...'

A warm wash of shame flooded Cedric as he remembered their conversation that night, and he nodded ruefully as he reached out to wipe a smudge of dirt from Harry's cheek. Harry's eyes fluttered closed for a moment at Cedric's touch, and his soft sigh encouraged the caress as he leaned into it. The sight of Harry's acceptance was something that Cedric's barely-contained yearning almost couldn't resist, but logic nudged its way unkindly into Cedric's mind when he remembered that the Cup and the Tournament were still very much in play. He locked onto the unhappy fact that he and Harry were still, first and foremost, opponents. '*Finish the task!* a tiny and miserable part of his mind stated. The rest of his mind, and his entire body, strenuously objected.

He cleared his throat. 'Yeah. Erm, I s'pose we'd better go on...' he managed, unable to look at Harry, almost afraid of what he might see reflected in those emerald depths.

'What?' Harry asked incredulously, and Cedric thought that the younger boy still looked rather dazed by the recent events.

'The task, Harry. The Cup. We'd better get to it.' It hurt to still have to think of the Gryffindor as his competition, but the bare bones of the matter were that they both wanted to win, didn't they, if not for Hogwarts, then at least for their houses.

Harry's expression tightened for a moment before his gaze fell to the ground between them. 'Oh... yeah... right...'

Or *did* they? Harry's reaction wasn't quite what Cedric had expected, and unwillingly, he turned to leave but was stopped by Harry's hand on his forearm.

'Cedric.' Harry's voice, barely more than a whisper, hung in the silence of the maze, and Cedric shivered at the unspoken question that rode on each syllable. He placed his hand over Harry's and moved it to his own chest where he pressed Harry's smaller hand against his thudding heart, and as always, the mere touch of the younger boy's flesh sparked riots of sensation through Cedric's body. He looked intently into the eager younger face and wished for so much more. 'After this is over, okay, Harry?' he murmured. 'When one of us has won, then you and I no longer have to compete.'

Harry's eyelashes flickered as he nodded silently, and Cedric stole a glance at the young Gryffindor who was still close to him in the semi-darkness. He saw the hurt in Harry's eyes, but also understanding.

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After several minutes of stumbling through the maze with the feel of Harry's lips lingering on his own, Cedric felt that he was at last making progress, continuing to mark his passage through the maze and satisfied to know that he had not retraced any of his steps. He had also managed to avoid a sucking, gaping chasm that had suddenly appeared in front of him and threatened to swallow him whole. Reacting quickly, he jumped for the other side, desperately straining his entire body as he willed himself to succeed, and thankfully, his long legs landed on the opposite side and he ran, never turning back to see what lay behind. As he approached another turn, he saw a glowing light down a passage that lay at an angle to his own path. The Cup! A new rush of adrenaline surged through him, and he started sprinting towards the glow, merging into another passage which led directly to the glowing object. As he lengthened his strides and fixed the Cup in his gaze, his only thought was of acquisition. He could visualize his hands closing around the handles and the year-long anguish of the Triwizard Tournament would finally be over. In his mind, winning the Tournament was second only to his longing that his life return to normal, or as normal as it could be, once he could get a chance to sort out his life and his priorities.

'Cedric! On your left!'

The words rang out in the air and he turned, surprised at the closeness of the sound. He realized that Harry was mere metres behind him and also noticed too late an enormous dark *thing* emerging from a passage to his left. Somehow, he managed to avoid a collision but tripped and fell, his wand cast aside as he struggled to avoid injury.

Cedric turned his eyes to the shadow and realized with horror that it was a huge spider with malevolent black eyes which bore down on him with amazing speed. He threw up his arms in defence and heard Harry yelling spells at the beast, which mercifully arrested the creature's attack on him. Unbelievably, it turned away from him and rounded on Harry. Cedric heard Harry's volley of spells, one after the other, none of which seemed to have any effect on the spider this time, and he quickly retrieved his wand and advanced on the creature as it lifted Harry into the air. He could feel his stomach fill with dread, and he pointed his wand at the spider, taking careful aim as he screamed '*Stupefy!*' and desperately hoping to free Harry from the creature's pincers without hitting him by mistake. Harry was struggling with the creature, and he appeared to be in agonizing pain, a fact that caused Cedric enormous concern.

He shouted his spell again, but again to no avail, until Harry finally screamed '*Expelliarmus!*' This time, the spell worked, especially from such a close distance, but as the spider dropped Harry, he fell several feet and collapsed. Cedric ran forward, furious both with the creature and with himself for being so bloody ineffectual, and screamed, '*Stupefy!*' just as Harry raised his wand and did the same, their spells combining powerfully as they successfully thwarted the beast.

Breathing heavily as he ran to Harry, Cedric noticed that the boy's leg was bleeding and that he was in a great deal of pain. Harry leaned against the hedge, grasping it for support, and unable to put weight on the injured leg. Cedric watched as if from a great distance as the light of the Cup illuminated the surreal scene before him: the mammoth spider lying motionless, Harry wounded but fighting to remain upright, and himself, closest to the Cup and certainly able to claim it as his own. He paused, conflicted; although he wanted to win for his father and for the honour it would bring to Hufflepuff, were those reasons enough to leave Harry behind? Was his quest for victory worth the price of his integrity? He studied the younger boy who had twice saved him in the maze, had showed extraordinary courage in the previous tasks, and had survived everything that the Tournament had thrown at him, all while enduring the scepticism and distrust from students and adults alike. He had, in fact, behaved as a true Champion. Cedric knew it, and his heart sank in defeat.

It was over.

'Go on, you take it. You should win,' he said, and he could practically hear his father's wails of anguish at the loss of the prize. Although he relished the thought of glory for his house and for his family, the desire for it didn't burn within him and his sense of honour prevailed. Fair was fair.

Harry's expression was nothing short of stunned, even as he struggled to stand. 'What?'

'You heard me. Just...' Cedric squeezed his eyes shut and took a steadying breath. '... just take the Cup, Harry. The win is yours.'

'Cedric, what are you talking about?'

Cedric grit his teeth. 'The Triwizard fucking Cup, Harry! You deserve to win more than I do.'

Harry grimaced, partly in pain and partly in annoyance, Cedric thought. 'You're already closer to it, and I can't get anywhere on this leg. YOU take the bloody thing.'

'I don't want it,' Cedric growled, his heart so tight in his chest that it was hard to breathe.

'Like hell.' Harry became more and more angry, and Cedric became more and more adamant, eventually turning his back on the Cup and walking towards Harry as they continued their diatribe.

'Harry, I'm not doing you a favour or anything, I just think that you deserve the victory. Don't think this is an easy thing to give away, believe me!'

'Look, Cedric, I don't care about the bloody victory, all right?' Harry shouted and attempted to stand, but he failed miserably and staggered forward with a shout of pain. Cedric moved quickly enough and caught him as Harry fell against his chest, their combined momentum causing him to stumble backwards until he was leaning against the hedge and supporting Harry's weight. He attempted to pull them both into a standing position, only to be stopped by Harry's hands as they grasped around his waist.

'Wait. Just wait. Give me a minute,' he whispered roughly, and Cedric couldn't tell whether his voice was tinged with pain or something else.

The shorter boy's face was scratched and streaked with blood, sweat and dirt, but to Cedric, Harry had never been more *beautiful*. Harry eyes searched Cedric's, green jewels darting from side to side, and Cedric hardly dared to breathe lest he ruin the perfection of that very moment. The spell was broken a second later as Harry reached up and touched Cedric's face, a gentle and hesitant touch which sent fire rippling through him, body and soul. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply as shivers roamed his spine like wild beasts, and the maze, the Cup and his surroundings seemed to disappear as his body shuddered in response to the warmth of Harry's touch.

Harry shifted slightly and groaned as he put more weight on his good leg, but Cedric was strong and held the boy close to him. 'I've got you,' he whispered into the silence



as he looked at Harry, who finally, *finally*, held his gaze, and he could only swirl helplessly in the emerald depths. Harry's lips parted, and Cedric's eyes were drawn to their fullness, so near, so ripe, so... *ready*.

'I know, Cedric...' And he had never heard his name spoken like that, barely more than a breathy whisper and with such longing and desire. Harry's words vibrated in his chest, and Cedric could feel them as he held the boy against him. The combined sensations were enough to make his knees buckle.

Harry's hands reached further, running through Cedric's hair, and he groaned as Harry grabbed a fistful of hair and brought their faces closer. His body exulted in Harry's touch which showed none of his earlier hesitancy as the Gryffindor licked his lips and pulled Cedric's mouth down for a mind-shattering kiss.

Cedric's legs trembled as he gave in to Harry's advances, their hungry tongues entwined in a delicious dance. Their first kiss had started gently and then grew more intense, but *this!* This time, it was Harry's passion that fuelled their fire, and he was insistent, as though he could not get enough. Cedric was almost drunk with the sensations, and his mind whirled as he revelled in Harry, his taste, *oh!* the smell of him, the feel of him, the deep pull of desire and the way his own heart threatened to leap free of his chest. He had kissed a few girls in the past, but nothing in his life had ever felt like this, nothing he had *dared* dream could possibly equal this moment. He ran one hand down Harry's back and pulled him closer still as he delighted in the feel of Harry's body against his own. The younger boy pushed his hips forward, and Cedric moved his thigh, carefully sliding it between Harry's legs. They both enjoyed the friction they found there, and the needy, almost desperate noises that Harry made as he rubbed against Cedric only spurred their passion further.

They parted, breathless once more, and Cedric pushed against Harry's chest to keep him upright as he examined the injured leg with the light from his wand. He was moderately amused that his hands shook and was comforted by the knowledge that as long as the blood wasn't spurting from a wound, there was time, but still, Cedric wouldn't gamble with Harry's life.

'It doesn't look too bad. Madame Pomfrey will have that fixed as soon as the task is over.'

Harry nodded in response, and Cedric suspected that Harry no longer cared about tournaments, or cups, or winning. Not that he ever really did...

'Harry, I... '

'Remember at the World Cup,' Harry interrupted, 'after we'd taken the Portkey and you helped me up?'

Cedric shivered involuntarily at the strong images in his mind of that very event, and he nodded.

'I felt... whatever it was... when our hands met, and I knew.'

Cedric's confused brain tried to make sense of the words. 'You... knew?'

Harry spoke slowly, as though trying to piece together his own thoughts. 'Well, I guess I *hoped*. Look, I don't really have much experience with this sort of stuff, but whatever it is that we have, you know, *together*... well, I like it.'

A rush of relief flowed through Cedric's mind and body as he fully took in the meaning of Harry's words, and suddenly, he could sense Harry's complete soul. For the first time, he could really *feel* him, and there was no more confusion of colours or fragmented thought patterns, there was only a pure, luminous green. Like the green of his eyes, it embodied harmony, compassion and unconditional love, and Cedric was taken aback by its sheer power.

They stood close to each other as Cedric supported the warmth of Harry's body, and together they regarded the Cup.

'Both of us,' Harry said.

'What?' Cedric was momentarily confused at Harry's words.

'We'll take it at the same time. It's still a Hogwarts victory. We'll tie for it.'

'You... you're sure?'

'Very sure,' Harry said softly, and Cedric was not prepared for the intensity of those green eyes nor for the emotion that swelled within him at those words. His mind was instantly filled with thoughts of their mutual victory, of what their lives might entail after the Tournament and what his, what *their* future might hold. He suspected that their 'involvement' might be a cause for some concern, but he pushed those thoughts from his mind as he concentrated on the task at hand.

Cedric was again amazed at Harry's sense of fair play, especially since he knew he would have surrendered anything to the younger boy. Nodding his agreement, he hugged Harry closer to him, lending his support as they moved towards their prize. They paused to smile at each other before they reached for the Cup's handles, and Cedric felt the all-encompassing and unmistakable rush of triumph. He'd won the Cup, he had Harry in his arms and hopefully soon in his life; he'd finally done something exactly the way he wanted. Cedric felt as though he held the world in the very palm of his hand.

'On three, right?' said Harry. Cedric nodded as his heart and soul sang while Harry counted down, but as they each grabbed hold of a handle, he felt an unexpected and all-too-familiar pull.

*I'm so afraid to love you, but more afraid to lose*

*Clinging to a past that doesn't let me choose*

*Once there was a darkness; deep and endless night*

*You gave me everything you had, oh you gave me light* Sarah McLachlan

TBC

## The Graveyard

Chapter 21 of 21

Cedric and Harry - more than just Triwizard Champions.

A/N: See Chapter 1 for disclaimer. Countless thanks to my beta team, charmed310, snapeophile and JaneAverage, who have helped to make this story into something wonderful!

## Chapter 21 The Graveyard

Harry cried out in pain as they landed hard on uneven ground in what appeared to be a graveyard, and Cedric helped him to his feet before they looked around. They were both sweating, and he noticed a change in the air around them; it was rather muggy, even at night. He looked around, feeling as though the entire graveyard was holding its breath, and as he glanced around the perimeter of where they stood, he could just see the outline of nearby buildings. He barely had time to properly register their new location when he was distracted as Harry took a few steps, shuffling around painfully, and he seemed to be in considerable distress. The Cup still glowed balefully, barely ten feet from where they stood, and Cedric silently berated himself that he didn't recognise the telltale magical vibrations of a Portkey while they were in the maze. He fought against the urge to grab it, for although he theorized that it should return them directly to the maze, he also knew that a Portkey could be used to transport wizards over a great distance, and after this unexpected turn of events, he didn't want to risk it just yet. Still, he felt the unmistakable vibrations of danger, and he glanced at Harry. 'Wands out, d'you reckon?' He thought that they should at least be on the defensive in their current situation and gave silent thanks to Markus' war tactics.

Harry was trembling beside him, and Cedric felt a powerful wave of protectiveness, moving closer to the injured boy as they focused their attention on a hooded figure that walked towards them with what appeared to be a bundle of cloth in their hands. The figure stopped next to a headstone a short distance away, and suddenly Cedric felt a surge of bone-chilling dread as a powerful dark aura spread across the area.

'Cedric, you have to get back to the Cup!' Harry's face was twisted in an expression of pain, and Cedric's stomach lurched in fear.

'No! Let me help you and we'll go together!' he hissed and reached out for Harry's arm, shivering as a vortex of hate pulled at him, horribly evil and corrupt, threatening to extinguish all light and life. Beside him, Harry suddenly screamed and doubled over in obvious pain, and Cedric's stomach twisted horribly as the dark aura intensified around them, but when Harry collapsed to the ground and writhed in agony, he was galvanised into action.

Cedric feared that he wouldn't be able to protect Harry from this level of Dark Magic, and his stomach wrenched again as he placed his feet on either side of Harry's body and stood over him with his wand raised and pointed directly at the dark figure. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes, and his heart pounded, the rush of adrenaline heating his body and heightening his senses even as fear licked at his mind, and for a moment his thoughts flickered to the Cup. If he could just keep Harry safe and stave off the attack long enough to get to it...

*'Kill the spare.'*

A high, emotionless voice seemed to hiss the words, and Cedric barely had time to process them, let alone their meaning, before he was blinded by a brilliant green light. There was a sound like rushing wind, and he felt an enormous force push against his chest hard. He stumbled backwards, his arms flailing as he tried to break his fall and...

Nothing.

For once in his life he couldn't feel. He'd gone from a terrifying and tumultuous mix of colour and images and impressions and feelings into this... void. There was nothing here. No more pain, fear, concern, happiness; there was very little of anything more than a cooling, lingering impression of mild confusion. He felt oddly disconnected yet at the same time unconcerned as he realized that there was nothing around him either. Strange. Where was Harry? What had happened?

Suddenly, he felt something like a pull and found himself moving towards a pulsing golden light. Without warning, he was back in the graveyard and witness to an intense battle between Harry and Voldemort. He saw his own body lying off to the side of Harry and wondered why it was on the ground. He no longer felt the force of his blood pumping through him nor the heat and weight of being alive, but instead there was a softly serene sense of coolness and peacefulness. Slowly, the realization came to him that his body wasn't moving and that the enormous freeness and lightness of being that was now his existence could only have come about with his death. In a rush of understanding, he saw the depth of Harry's true feelings for him as they blinded him with their crystal clarity in a way that he'd never been able to feel before from anyone. Complete understanding suffused him now, and he realized that every time Harry had looked at Cedric and Cho as a couple, it was *Cedric* he had looked at, not the girl. Every time he and Harry had paused in awkward conversations or silences, Harry had been as profoundly affected as he'd been, had yearned for the comfort of Cedric's touch, and the Gryffindor's heart had beaten as powerfully as his own. Cedric finally realized that what he'd hoped for all along could have become a reality if they had just been able to break through to one another earlier.

He could almost feel regret.

There was something vaguely similar to sorrow at the realization that he would never again see his parents, never talk with Jamie and Markus again or any of his other friends and loved ones. He realized that his relationship with Harry, still in its infancy, must also end, but oddly, most of what he remembered as emotions faded away. The only thing he still felt was love, but it was a love far more powerful and all-encompassing than anything he had ever experienced during his short life. The emotion seemed to catch him up and embrace him, warming him and welcoming him as it *became* him, and he became it, bright and clear, radiant and untainted by extraneous thoughts or feelings. It was a pure light and an unfathomable power, and he focused all of it on his young Gryffindor who radiated a heady mix of fear and force.

'Hold on, Harry,' he whispered as he moved closer.

Cedric was dimly aware of others like him emerging from the tip of Voldemort's wand, but his sole focus was on Harry. He stood beside the boy and willed him to repel the evil that he was battling, realizing that, once again, everything came down to Harry Potter. Harry's body almost glowed with a white light which seemed to radiate from him, and it bathed everything around him in its luminescence. Standing as he was, so close to Harry, the very air seemed to vibrate with intensity, and it pulsed in waves like a heart beat, the sheer *power* of it like a life force that entwined with Cedric's spectral being and bringing with it a sense of warmth. He reached out to it with everything he had and at the very fringes of what he understood as his consciousness, he felt it. He felt Harry's power, and its magnitude rocked him.

Eventually, Cedric was joined by many others, including a woman with eyes like Harry's and a man who looked so much like him that they could only be his parents. As they stood behind the boy and softly outlined their plan to help him, Cedric knew that this would be his last time with Harry. He glanced at his lifeless body on the ground, limbs flung outwards in death, eyes open but unseeing, lips slightly parted almost in surprise and he tried to remember what had happened. His memories were vague and as insubstantial as smoke; he couldn't remember any details, only that he had been afraid and desperate and that there had been no pain. He knew that his parents would be devastated. His father's hopes of excellence for his now-dead son would be crushed, but he hoped that his mother would handle it better than Amos. Perhaps he should feel something other than this vague understanding of sorrow, but he didn't. It was as though all his worries vanished into the space between his life and whatever existence this was. Still, he knew that he must connect with them once more, if not his soul then at least his body.

'Harry, take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents.' Cedric wanted to be sure that Harry would be the one to save him, that he would take hold of his body and transport him, just as the Gryffindor had possessed his heart and soul.

'I will,' replied Harry, and Cedric could see his face contorted with the effort of holding Voldemort at bay. His eyes also betrayed his sorrow and, yes, his fear.

Cedric moved closer to Harry and whispered in his ear, feeling his incredible love for the boy flow out of his very being. 'You can do this, Harry.' The wide green eyes flickered briefly in his direction, and Cedric felt it almost as a physical connection, a surge of tangibility that he'd not felt since... well, since he'd been killed. Somehow, when Harry looked at him, he felt alive, not metaphorically, but literally, physically alive as a rush of warmth suffused his body, but the moment was fleeting, and he was once again little more than a whisper.

Nevertheless, he edged even closer to Harry, standing behind him and trying to focus everything that he had into the words he must say. 'I'm sorry that I didn't tell you earlier, Harry; I was stupid, or afraid, or... something. I don't know whether it would have changed much, or mattered anyway...' Cedric reached out his hand to caress

Harry's hair, but his hand passed over the unruly mess without feeling anything. He faltered at that, mildly surprised that he should already be nothing more than an image, an echo of his former self, but he pressed on. 'You must realize that you are a very powerful wizard, and one day you will conquer darkness for all of us. You are our Champion, Harry, remember that, and remember that we love you. That I love you.'

He could see Harry's eyelids flicker in final acknowledgment of his words even as the boy fought to maintain control of his wand, and he pushed his love as forcefully as he could into Harry's soul. *You are forever mine, Harry.* Cedric looked at James and Lily, who smiled at him, and as Harry prepared for his final push, they combined their powers with the other victims and surrounded Harry with their love while James Potter whispered, 'Be ready to run... do it now...'

Harry shouted and broke the connection with Voldemort's wand. As Cedric and the other ghostly figures surged forward to thwart the Dark Lord, broadcasting their love before them like a shield, Harry ran, and Cedric turned to follow Harry's progress across the uneven ground. The boy ran, dodging the curses of the Death Eaters as he threaded through the tombstones, the enemy firing volley after volley of spells at him as he leapt over the Cup and dived towards Cedric's body. Cedric watched as Voldemort screamed in fury and aimed his wand at Harry, even as he felt himself sinking backwards into a warmly comforting grey mist. Although he fought to hold on to the scene before him, he was only dimly aware of Harry grabbing his body's wrist and could almost feel the warmth of Harry's hand on his skin.

*Almost.*

As the scene before him faded to black amidst the enraged shouts of the Death Eaters, Cedric heard Harry *Accio* the Triwizard Cup, and they both disappeared. *Goodbye, my Harry,* he thought, and as sight and sound faded away, he finally let go.

*And I will remember you*

*Will you remember me?*

*Don't let your life pass you by*

*Weep not for the memories. - Sarah McLachlan*

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Epilogue

The dark-haired boy sits alone in the office after the Leaving Feast, and Fawkes keeps a close eye on him as requested. He senses Harry's utter despair and disbelief, sorrow and regret; the boy blames himself for the death of the other. Cedric. Fawkes remembers the young man and has heard his owner speak warmly of him, and the bird knows that a great deal of good has been lost to the wizarding world. He also knows that the boy who now sits in solitude is the answer to their darkest problems and that his powers will be more than equal to the task set out for him by the Great Evil.

Fawkes cocks his head at the sound of the staircase moving and cranes his neck as another student walks hesitantly through the open heavy oak door. He knows this young man also. Markus, a Hufflepuff, one of the Headmaster's more frequent visitors as a first- and second-year. The young boy has grown into a fine young man, tall and strong, yet he walks with a slightly stooped posture as though the weight of the world is upon his shoulders. Fawkes understands why Cedric was his friend, and the depth of his anguish pervades the room. He stops just inside the door as he swings it fully open, and Fawkes hears the nervousness in his voice.

'Headmaster? Professor Dumbledore, sir?'

There is only silence, and he hesitates, but Fawkes croons gently, encouraging him further into the room. He walks forward slowly, and his bloodshot and puffy eyes scan the room, coming to rest on Fawkes. An uncertain smile flashes across his handsome face, and the phoenix nods his head in greeting. He knows that Harry has still not moved; from his perch he can only see the very top of the boy's untidy black hair, so he shifts slightly to look beyond Markus at the chair in which Harry sits, and Markus follows his line of sight, turning until his gaze rests on the young Gryffindor.

'Harry?' His voice is thick and heavy with emotion, but the green eyes barely flicker in recognition. Markus walks over to the chair and stands in front of it.

'Where's Professor Dumbledore?'

'I don't know.' Harry's voice is dull and emotionless. 'He called me to his office but he wasn't here when I arrived, so I thought I'd wait.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Dunno.' Fawkes can see that he doesn't care, either. The once brave Gryffindor now slumps as though defeated in the high-backed chair in front of the Headmaster's desk, looking as though he is trying to hide within its armour.

Markus leans against the highly polished surface of the large desk and surveys the boy before him. Fawkes sees that the Hufflepuff is struggling with his own emotions, his face still showing evidence of deep grief, and he croons gently, softly, concentrating the sound towards the young man who takes a deep, shuddering breath and begins speaking.

'When I was Sorted, Jamie and Cedric were the only other new blokes in Hufflepuff all the rest were girls. We ended up as roommates, and then as classmates, and we spent most of that first week trying to find our way around and fit in, you know?'

Harry hasn't moved, but Fawkes sees the barest nod of acknowledgement and knows that Markus sees it too.

'Our first weekend at Hogwarts, we were too tired and, frankly, too nervous, to go outside. Jamie's mum had sent him an enormous box of treats and biscuits and chocolates it was like a miniature Honeydukes, I swear. We sat on the carpet in our dorm and ate almost the entire box as we talked about all manner of things. We must've been up the whole night, just talking and laughing. I didn't know either of them really, but Cedric and Jamie seemed to be very much alike. They thought the same way about many things, and they just understood each other without really trying to. I wondered whether I would be the odd man out; whether they would be best buddies and I'd be the third one, you know, the one left over, but just then, Cedric and Jamie looked at me strangely. For a moment I thought that they had actually read my mind, and Cedric held out his hand to me and said, "Markus Hughes, you're part of my band of brothers." Just like that, he'd done the very thing that I'd wanted him to; he'd adopted me as one of his own, and that unconditional acceptance was so important to me. I'd never had a brother, so I didn't know what it really meant, but I knew that I *wanted* them as my friends.'

A long silence stretches between the two boys as they are lost in their memories, then Markus clears his throat.

'Well, we were really sick that night and ended up in the hospital wing for two days, but still, it brought us together, and we haven't really been apart since.' Markus' voice quavers towards the end, and he is silent for a moment as he gathers his emotions, but he continues. 'Jamie can handle this sort of thing much better than I can; he can just feel things easier, but me... well,' he rubs his hands nervously along his thighs, 'I just needed to see Dumbledore for a bit.'

'You can wait here if you want. I'll go; it's okay.' Harry's voice is still dead-sounding, and Markus raises his hand quickly.

'No, don't leave, really. Look, I can't imagine what I can say to you, Harry. We all feel a huge emptiness inside without Cedric,' and his voice falters slightly, 'but it wasn't your fault that he... died.'

Harry looks up into Markus' face, and a flash of fire ignites in his eyes. 'You weren't there. You don't know what happened. It *was* my fault. I told him that we should both take the Cup for a Hogwarts victory. In the graveyard, I told him to get back to the Cup; I felt the danger, but he didn't listen to me, and I was in so much pain that I couldn't make him leave. He could have done it; he could have taken the Portkey back and been saved. He would still be alive if he'd done that instead of staying...' and Harry's voice breaks.

Markus is silent, and the very instruments in the office seem to cease their whirring. There is no sound save Harry's hitching breaths as he struggles to control the emotions that threaten to burst forth and devour him. Fawkes feels both Harry's hopelessness and his guilt he understands it.

Slowly, Markus kneels down until his eyes are level with Harry's, and for a moment he merely regards the younger boy, although it is obvious that he is collecting his thoughts.

'Harry, listen to me,' he says gently. 'Cedric would never have left you; do you understand? You were... well, you were very important to him, and he'd pretty much pledged his life to you.'

'What?'

'Cedric is... was... very loyal and fiercely protective of those he regarded as friends and family. I think you were a bit of both to him. He... he *loved* you, Harry, very much, even more so than I think Jamie or I realized until the day before the final task.'

Fawkes can see the silvery moonlight glinting off the tears that run down Harry's cheeks as the boy stares at Markus and can sense the waves of sorrow that buffet him and threaten to submerge him.

'What do you mean?' His voice is little more than a whisper.

Markus pulls up another chair and sits beside Harry, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, obviously striving to make the young boy understand.

'That night, we didn't really talk much about the task, or the maze, or spells and hexes. We talked about life after the Tournament, about exams and our upcoming seventh year, about summer vacation, and what we wanted to do with our lives after school. He didn't seem to care about winning any more, not that he ever did, really, but he... he said that you were everything to him. I think he was afraid that I was still a bit sceptical, but earlier that day, he'd explained it to me, or tried to at least. He said that he could feel your magic and sense your aura, that's what he called it, and that somehow you were both connected to each other, but he was afraid that he might lose you. Jamie seemed to understand him better, but I got it anyway. You are the best thing to happen to him in a long time, Harry, and he wasn't about to let that go, regardless of who you were or what your destiny was supposed to be. That's just Cedric, through and through. He said he'd love you all his life.'

The tears fall freely now, sliding down the cheeks of both boys as they sit with their knees almost touching, sharing their sorrow.

Fawkes shifts quietly on his perch as Markus reaches into his robes and produces a book a leather-bound journal in black leather, soft but obviously worn, and embossed with the letters C.D. in fancy script. He runs his palm over the cover slowly, his fingers slowly tracing the letters for a moment, and then he hands it to Harry, who wipes the tears from his eyes roughly with his sleeve before taking the offering with a questioning look. Markus clears his throat, but when he speaks, his voice is husky with emotion.

'That's Cedric's journal. Jamie and I were helping his mother clear out you know, his stuff and we came across this in the bottom of his trunk. His mom just... stared at it for a moment... and she looked like she couldn't bring herself to touch it, or didn't want to, so Jamie picked it up. All at once, his face... he looked as though he wanted to cry, and he held it to his chest so tightly for a moment. He was shaking when he handed it to me, and he said that he could still feel Cedric there, and then he left the room.'

For a moment, Markus is quiet, seemingly lost in the memories, then he wipes his own tears and continues. 'I looked through it a bit, you know, but I began to feel as though I was spying because I shouldn't have been reading his private thoughts. Then, I came across an entry about you, then another and another, and I eventually realized that you should be the one to have it. Diggs couldn't seem to tell you how he felt when... when he was alive, but I think you need to know.' Markus gestures at the book. 'It's all there.'

Another long silence ensues, and there is only the sound of their breathing. Fawkes watches the scene carefully he knows that this is a turning point and that Harry's reaction to the death, and now this diary will be vital to the future of all Wizardkind.

'I have to kill him,' Harry says abruptly.

'What? Who?' Markus' tone and expression are confused.

'Voldemort.' The word is little more than an angry hiss.

Fawkes croons gently to himself as he senses that the fight is returning to the young boy. 'There's no way that bastard can live, Markus. He's responsible for so many deaths: my parents, Cedric...' The last word is a whisper, and yet it sounds clearly in the quiet of the room.

'Perhaps you *will* have to kill him.' Markus agrees, and Harry looks at him sharply, obviously not expecting an agreement. 'But don't presume to think that you can defeat him yourself.'

They exchange a long look, and Harry nods slowly as the unspoken promise of alliance hangs significantly between them for a long moment. Fawkes is pleased to see that Harry appears more resolute, and he trills approvingly as Markus grabs Harry in a warm embrace before he stands. He walks towards the door, and the phoenix can just see Markus turn and catch Harry's eye with his firm gaze.

'Fear not, young champion. You're probably strong enough,' he whispers, and then he turns and is gone.

Harry sits for a moment, barely moving, barely breathing as he runs his hand across the leather cover of the journal. With a shaking hand he opens it. The parchment inside is wrinkled by the ink, and the pages turn easily. Harry reads, head bent, pausing occasionally to read various passages and wiping away tears. Fawkes feels the need to be closer to him to lend him support in a more tangible way and he spreads his mighty wings and descends to alight on Harry's shoulder. The tear-stained face looks up, and Fawkes croons encouragingly, ruffling his feathers in an impressive show of protectiveness.

Harry gives a half-smile and nods, resuming his reading of the diary, and Fawkes is able to catch glimpses of words and phrases as the pages turn. Occasionally, Harry will pause and read something at length, and Fawkes is able to re-live Cedric's experiences of flight, classroom events, the tasks, all his significant moments, liberally sprinkled with details of his feelings after meeting Harry.

The young Gryffindor's hands falter as he turns the page to the last entry, dated 23 June 1995 the night before the task. Harry takes a deep breath and closes his eyes briefly before bending his head to read. Fawkes reads over his shoulder.

*Had a horrific dream, and I must have made noise because Markus woke up! Horrible, horrible dream of being chased, and Harry in danger, and I just couldn't find him to protect him; to save him.*

*This boy, how can I tell him that he's my everything? I'm afraid that I've lost him this time; that my attempt at honesty blew up in my face, and now he resents me. Truthfully, can I blame him? I want so much for him to see me, to know me for me, not as the Champion, or the Seeker, or the prefect, but me. Cedric. Someone who loves him desperately. But will that ever come to pass? The Tournament that once brought us together has also torn us apart. I can't wait until the final task is over, because then, then, I'll finally pluck up the courage and tell him, hold him, kiss him, and make him understand. Will he understand me? And does he love me enough to forgive?*

Fawkes croons again, more to himself than anything, and he is once more reassured that although many have given their lives in the fight against the Great Evil, they have done it with the purest of love for this young Gryffindor, and that love transcends time and even life itself. He looks at Harry with a knowing eye as the boy rises unsteadily to his feet and clutches the diary tightly against his chest. Their eyes meet, and Fawkes is both inspired and awed by the sheer power and determination that he sees beneath the tears and sorrow. Grief and pain will pass, but the Light will prevail.

*When destiny calls you*

*You must be strong*

*I may not be with you*

*But you've got to hold on Phil Collins*

~ fin ~

A/N: I know, and I'm sorry. This story has captured so much of my heart that I've been loath to actually end it, but all things must end. However, as a birthday present, Snapeophile, one of my betas, wrote me an epilogue to the epilogue. She deserves 100% of the credit for it, and I'm posting it here because it reduced me to tears - huge, fat tears that went on and on and ON!

So, may I present....

Talisman

By Snapeophile

A story written in homage to Wizards and Champions by Hogwarts Honey, given this XXth day of April, for her birthday!

~~

"Boys. Come in."

"Mr. Digg...Amos, so good to see you." The two young men swallowed hard, blinking furiously, trying to equate the aged, stooped shell of a man standing before them with their dead friend's formerly vigorous, outgoing father.

"Amos, how are you doing?" Markus asked as Jamie's gentle blue eyes clouded with worry.

But the elderly man declined to answer, waving his hand majestically as if to clear their concern from the room.

"Sit. Please. Sheila's out, or she would have loved to see you two." A sad smile flickered over the old man's colorless face and he paused, as if to collect his thoughts, or gain control over an inner struggle.

"I'm in the midst of a dilemma concerning my dear boy and yourselves. I've puzzled over it, goodness knows, but one would need the wisdom of Solomon to solve it. So, knowing how close you two are, I've decided to leave the decision with you."

Markus shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and Jamie reached over and grabbed Amos' hand. The grieving man startled at the contact, but recovered and squeezed Jamie's hand, mumbling, "There's a boy, there's a boy."

He reached into the watch pocket of his brown corduroy vest, pulling out a smallish object. Markus caught a fleeting glimpse of gold before Amos cradled the item gently in his hand, caressing it like a worry stone with his thumb.

"This was to be Cedric's, as it was mine and my father's before me, and his father's before him. As Sheila and I have no other children, I want this to go to someone who will cherish it as a reminder of Cedric." He opened his palm slowly, much like a bud unfurls its flower and presents a golden, gleaming center. The object was a signet ring. Markus could see the Hufflepuff crest incised in the metal with the house motto, *Justicia quod fidelitas in amicitia quod laboro*, "justice and loyalty in friendship and toil," engraved beneath the shield.

"So now you see my dilemma, boys. One ring and two best friends. I haven't the foggiest idea who should have it, so I'm letting you decide."

The two best friends glanced at each other and smiled. They did not need to verbalize their feelings. They knew exactly to whom the ring belonged.

Chapter 2

"So, it's Slytherin tomorrow. You lot up for them?"

Anger flashed in Harry's eyes before he realized Jamie Bryers was teasing him. He relaxed just a bit and replied in the affirmative, though he was clearly unsettled about this visit from Cedric's two best friends. He hadn't seen Markus since they had talked in Dumbledore's office on the night that Cedric died.

"You know, mate, we didn't seek you out to chat Quidditch," Markus added. "We need to have a private moment, if you please."

"Let's head to the library. No one'll be there now. Everyone's sleeping off Halloween," Harry suggested.

Markus laughed. "We know what you mean. If this wasn't so important, we'd still be back at our flat, flat on our backs!" Jamie guffawed at Markus' pun and rolled his eyes dramatically.

"Ah, it's nice to be back at Hoggy, Warty Hogwarts, even if it is much too early," Jamie chimed in. "We're staying for the match. Can't wait to see you obliterate Slytherin! Is the rumor true that Draco Malfoy's their Seeker this year?"

"Yeah," Harry responded dully. "Word is he's actually decent at it. And his Dad's bought the team Nimbus 2001's."

"Gah! The whole bloody team?" Marcus howled. "You realize how many Galleons that cost?"

They had arrived at the Library, which was, as Harry suspected, deserted but for Madame Pince, who glared suspiciously at the early-morning scholars.

The three boys found a secluded table at the back of the cavernous room. Despite being hemmed in by book stacks, Markus kept his voice low as he began to talk.

"Harry, mate, how're you doing?"

Harry understood that Markus wasn't inquiring about his coursework this term, or even the upcoming Quidditch match. He sighed deeply. "I'm...I'm okay, I guess. I still miss him...think of him...so often. In a way, he's helped me through some tough times. Like last summer, when I had to face that Ministry Tribunal. I was so angry and scared to death I'd be chucked out of Hogwarts. The night before the Inquiry, he came to me, I swear, in a dream. I could feel his calming aura, you know? It was like he was comforting me and shoring me up. It's been that way through lots of bad situations, like with Umbridge, and at the Ministry battle." Harry paused, his green eyes bright with unshed tears. "And then, when I got to live with Sirius, it felt like he was overjoyed for me! And when Sirius was...well... when he died, Cedric was there for me again, he felt almost real." Harry was now staring trance-like at a group of books on the shelves before him. Words were rushing out in a maelstrom of emotion. "I...I didn't feel alone anymore. It was like he was with me, though he can't be a ghost..."

"We know, Harry. We understand. Cedders has been there for us, too, in his own way. He's not a ghost, and he's not stuck between two worlds, so it's got to be his aura," Jamie explained.

"Well, more's the point, we've got something for you," Markus said, never one to belabor a sensitive moment of soul-bearing.

"Here. It was Cedders' by birth, and his Da gave it to us, as his best friends, to give to the...person...who'd treasure it most." The larger boy cleared his throat nervously and grabbed Harry's right hand, opening the palm and placing the signet ring into his grip.

Harry gasped as the warm golden metal hit his palm, and colors began swirling around him, colors only he could see and feel: red, blue, green, gold, just like the first time he and Cedric had been close to each other, in the Room of Requirement, so long ago. He could feel the pulsations in the air, the feeling of connectedness to the boy he had begun to love; his mind flashed back to their encounter in the Maze, and unashamedly, he felt his body respond. His hand closed tightly around the signet ring as he reveled in these feelings, let them wash over him, comfort him, enter his very soul. He could feel, and comprehend fully, Cedric's love for him and the great attraction they had shared. Soon, far too soon, the sensations became weaker, the colors dimmed. Harry slowly became aware of his presence in the library, and of the two witnesses gaping at him.

"Oh, yeah, Markus. We were right. He's the only one who could have this ring," Jamie whispered. The two young men were aware that something momentous, something otherworldly, had happened before them, though they weren't exactly sure what it was. It was clear from the rapturous look on Harry's face that he and Cedric had found each other again tonight.

"He'll take care of you, mate. He'll be your family now," Markus said perceptively as he stood and squeezed Harry's shoulder. The two best friends rose and departed, leaving a dazed, but happy, Harry behind.

~ fin ~

A/N2: So everyone, do you SEE why I wept? Repeatedly?