

Best Man

“Harry, can we have a word with you?”

Harry looked up from the book he was reading and smiled slightly. “One each?” he asked the six red-haired men and one red-haired girl in front of him. “That would be an interesting sentence.”

“We’d,” George said.

“Like,” Fred continued, before looking at Ron.

“You,” Ron added with a grin, before looking at Ginny.

Ginny smirked. “To.”

Percy rolled his eyes and added, “Be.”

“Bill’s,” Charlie drawled.

“Best-Man,” Bill finished, before breaking into laughter as the other Weasleys started to celebrate.

“Congratulations,” Harry said dryly. “However, that sentence, as interesting as it was, raised a question for me. What the hell are you talking about?”

Bill sat down on the end of Harry’s bed, while the others collapsed into various chairs, on the floor, or in Percy’s case, a perfectly conjured leather arm chair. “I’ve had a problem deciding which of these idiots should be the Best Man at my wedding,” Bill explained.

“Hey, we resemble that remark,” Fred said with a grin.

“Indeed,” Percy murmured. “The consensus was that we didn’t feel that any *one* of us should be above the others, despite *my* opinion that it should be Charlie, as the second eldest.”

“Pfft,” Charlie blew through his lips. “So, we had a think about it, and decided that *you’d* be the best person for the job, and *we’d* all be Ushers. Well, all of us except Gingersnap over there – she gets to be one of the bridesmaids.”

Harry placed his book down carefully. “You want me to be Best Man,” he asked in an attempt to gain clarification, “and everyone but Ginny will be Ushers?” As they nodded, he continued, “What degree of madness led you to *this* solution?”

“We are serious,” Bill said. “Fleur approves; after all, you’ve spent so much of the summer helping us out, she thought we should acknowledge it. And you’re practically part of the family already. We all approve for similar reasons.”

Harry sighed in resignation. “I’d be honoured. What do I have to do?”

“Not much,” Charlie said. “The bachelor party is already arranged. Basically, all you have to do is turn up at the ceremony, hold the rings, sign the Register afterward, and give a speech at the reception.”

“I thought you weren’t having a party?” Harry asked.

“We’re not, officially,” Bill grinned.

“Yeah,” Fred agreed, “it will be very, very unofficial. And very under-the-table.”

Harry winced. “I don’t want to know,” he muttered. “Okay, I’ll do it. Now, if you can all leave, I’ll get dressed and check that the caterers are ready for the big day on Saturday.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Bill said as he led his siblings out of the main bedroom.

Harry shook his head and climbed out the four-poster bed. He wandered into the bathroom, and after showering and shaving, he pulled on some clothes and looked out the window.

On his front lawn several wizards were erecting a large marquee, in preparation for the wedding.

It had been a slightly strange summer; everything had changed with Dumbledore’s death. He hadn’t known at the time, but Dumbledore had been his Guardian for legal purposes in the Wizarding world and was using that authority to ensure that Harry did what was needed – including silently

giving him permission to participate in the Triwizard Tournament. The Guardianship had expired with Dumbledore, so there was no one to stand between him and his inheritance. The Goblins had been happy to allow him access a little early, not wanting to irritate the heir to two of the oldest families in the Wizarding World. They had also thrown in a week long crash course in how to manage his estate.

Which led him here, to the Black summer house, arranging Bill and Fleur's wedding, as the original venue of the Burrow had been cancelled due to Dumbledore not being around to place the wards.

Harry had volunteered the Black residence, simply because it already had the wards built in, and as such, was obviously safe.

He hadn't quite realised that by doing so, he'd invited Fleur to move in, and for everyone interested in the planning of the wedding to treat his home like an open house. Fortunately the place had enough rooms for a small army.

It was an ongoing circus – so he'd taken to spending most of his days hiding in the library, reading through the extensive collection of spell books. He had glanced at some of the fiction books available, but had been concentrating on increasing his chances of survival for when he finally met Voldemort.

It had only been a week before he'd been joined by Fleur, who was trying to escape both Molly Weasley and her own mother, both of whom had turned what was originally intended to be a relatively quiet occasion into one of the social events of the decade.

The fact that Harry had offered to foot the bill had been gratefully accepted and utilised, until he'd had to step in and take control, to ensure that what occurred stayed within the boundaries of good taste and practicality – and paid at least a scant regard to a realistic budget.

The weeks with Fleur had been fun though, as he'd started to become good friends with the French quarter-Veela – much to Ginny's disgust. She didn't seem to approve of the friendship, although Harry wasn't quite sure exactly why.

"Morning," he called, as he walked between the flower arrangers and the decorators. The issue of security had been solved with a judicious use of Veritaserum and some scanning charms to ensure, each morning, that the people who were working who were they said they were, and that they weren't under the *Imperio* us or had any plans to do anything to disrupt the wedding.

"Good morning, Harry," Fleur greeted him as she walked over. "Quick," she whispered, "I've got us a private room away from all this madness."

He grinned and followed her into one of the many studies.

"This is insane," she sighed as she collapsed down onto one of the seats. "My muzzer is as bad as Molly. All I want is a quiet wedding, not this, this..." she threw her hands up in the air and said something in French that Harry was pretty sure was not translatable in polite company.

He smiled at her. "There's only two more days to go, so relax. I've trimmed the guest list so that only people who are known to be on our side are coming. Molly and your 'muzzer' yelled at me for an hour over it the other day."

"I am sorry," Fleur sighed. "You have been so wonderful over all of this, Harry."

He shrugged, "I'm happy to help out my friends."

"Did Bill talk to you?"

"About being Best Man? Yeah, he did. I said yes."

Fleur clapped her hands together delightedly. "Thank you."

He shrugged.

"It would be nice to have a, how you say, chicken night."

"Hen night?" Harry suggested.

"Yes. But if Bill is not having ze deer night, it is not fair."

Harry didn't bother correcting her this time, as he felt somewhat guilty about the fact that Bill *was* having a stag night.

A house-elf appeared with a pop and placed two breakfasts on the table between the two chairs. One was muesli; the other was a full English breakfast.

"How can you eat that rabbit food?"

"It's not rabbit food," Harry protested as he took the muesli. "I've not got the stomach for a full breakfast at this time of the day. I prefer a large lunch."

"A good breakfast sets you up for the rest of the day," Fleur countered.

"So does a good lunch."

Fleur smiled and they ate in silence.

"Ready to join the organisers?" Harry eventually asked, with a marked reluctance.

“*Non*,” Fleur sighed. “But we shall do it anyway.”

“Cheer up,” Harry grinned. “Two more days and you’ll be off on your honeymoon.”

“To *Egypt*,” Fleur complained with another sigh.

Harry guided her out of the room, well aware of the part-Veela’s dislike of Egypt, well, not a dislike per se, she had just spent too much time working there for it to be considered a decent holiday destination – even if it was the only place they could afford. Which is why *he’d* changed their honeymoon arrangements to the Bahamas. It was going to be his official present to them.

“Harry, there you are,” Molly said. “We need your opinion on the food.”

“For the next two hours, I am at your disposal,” he said with a smile. The time limit was deliberate, as the first time he hadn’t set one; he’d spent the entire day looking at bridesmaids’ dresses, to his unending horror.

Harry looked around the room in mild disgust. He hadn’t realised that the stag night they had planned included the use of the cottage at the end of his estate. It would have been nice to have been asked for permission to use it, which would have been granted, rather than the assumption being made. The Weasleys, probably under Fred and George’s influence, seemed to be working on the theory that it was easier to get forgiveness than permission, with the result that Harry discovered the party when it was already in full swing.

The stag night seemed to involve a lot of drinking and loud noises. All of the non-Weasley guests were members of the Order of the Phoenix, so he wasn’t worried about the security of the party, but rather more the participants’ safety, as Kingsley and Remus, both roaring drunk, had started to wrestle playfully – bouncing off walls. There was also a large amount of what smelt like cigar smoke in the air, and it was making Harry slightly nauseous.

The biggest shock was Percy. It seemed that with a few drinks inside him, he could really let himself go. The normally restrained member of the Weasley family was currently on the table, doing a dance that proved his heritage beyond doubt. Fortunately for all concerned, he was still dressed.

The twins were casting spells at everyone and anyone who came near them – changing hair colour and length, and turning people into random animals.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Ron shouted, jumping onto a chair and wobbling dangerously as he attempted to balance himself. Harry’s best friend was currently seven beers past being drunk and heading full-on towards insensibility.

“It is time for the evening’s entertainment,” he slurred. “With thanks to our bene... benef... Harry.” He raised his glass in Harry’s general direction. “Annd ... here they are! Strippers!”

Harry rolled his eyes. This was definitely the last time he was ever going to throw open his wallet for this bunch. The fact that he could afford it was completely irrelevant; it was the fact that there was no way on earth that he would ever have authorised a stripper, or six, he corrected himself as they sashayed out of the bedroom and into the main room.

There was a loud howling noise of appreciation as one of the witches removed her hat, allowing long blonde hair to cascade down her back. She bore a passing resemblance to Fleur - if you’d had more than your fair share of drinks, that is.

Harry sighed and turned, walking out of the cottage before the one who appeared to be honing in on him could get any closer. He cast a locking charm on the door, not wanting to be bothered in any way by the witches. The noise, even out here, was similar to the roar of a Quidditch crowd, so he cast a silencing spell on the cottage, and slowly walked away, settling down against a tree stump and looking up at the stars, searching for the constellations.

“Harry?” a voice asked out of the darkness, breaking his concentration. He had no idea how much time had passed.

“Fleur? What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” the hooded and caped figure responded.

“Lower your hood,” Harry said softly, pointing his wand at her as he rolled to his feet.

“Do not worry, it is me,” Fleur replied as she lowered her hood, revealing the pale blonde hair and aristocratic features. “I teased you about your muesli this morning.”

Harry nodded, sliding his wand away absently. “I’m just out for a walk,” he said casually. “Care to join me?”

She smiled at him radiantly. “Normally, I would, of course, but tonight, I shall be rewarding my fiancé for not having a deer night.”

Harry gulped and desperately tried to think of a way out of this situation. He *really* didn’t fancy being anywhere near Fleur’s reaction to what was currently going on in his cottage. “I don’t think Bill’s here,” he lied.

Fleur frowned. “Bill told me himself that he would be spending the night alone, getting ready. I shall go in and surprise him with his fantasy.”

“I don’t want to know,” Harry muttered and winced visibly as a howl of enthusiasm made it obvious that his silencing charm was no longer in effect. It

lingered in the air between them and he groaned as Fleur's eyes went wide.

"He's having a party," she whispered in shock. "He lied to me?"

"No," Harry said urgently, trying to stop Fleur as she walked up to the window.

"Let me past, Harry," she ordered as he stood in her way.

"No, you don't need to see this. Yeah, he made a mistake, but it's just a few guys having a few beers, a few of his brothers and other members of the Order turned up with some beer unexpectedly."

"You are a loyal friend," Fleur muttered. "But you are a miserable liar." She feinted left, before taking a quick couple of steps to the right and rounding him as he went the wrong way, showing some of the skills that had made her the Triwizard Champion for her school.

Harry winced; this could only end badly.

Very badly .

Fleur looked in through the window, grumbled under her breath that she couldn't see anything clearly and then cast a charm to allow her to see into the cottage. She looked for a second, before she seemed to literally freeze.

Harry walked over to her and looked in through the window. Fleur couldn't have chosen to look at a worse time, as it seemed that stripping wasn't the only thing on offer from these witches. The blonde one – who looked like a cheap and tawdry knock-off of Fleur – was on her knees between Bill's legs, her head bobbing up and down. His hair was a lot shorter than normal, but his scars were clearly visible. The other strippers were in various states of undress and were engaging the other men in the room, although Charlie was on his own.

While Harry didn't understand the words Fleur whispered, he didn't need a translation spell to understand the sentiment behind them. After a moment, she ran out of French and shifted to English. "I will kill him," she whispered slowly. "After I stood by him through everything, this is how he responds? With that – that cheap *putain* !"

"Fleur," Harry whispered. "I know it looks bad."

"Looks bad?" Fleur demanded, "Looks bad? I'll show you 'looks bad.'"

As he watched, feathers started to sprout from her skin and she seemed to shrink slightly. The back of her robes appeared to bulge, and in her hand, a ball of fire appeared.

"No," Harry cried, tackling the enraged Veela to the ground.

"Let me go," Fleur hissed, her voice sounding raw and angry.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not going to let you do something you'll regret when you regain control of your temper."

Fleur bent her left arm into an awkward looking position and punched him straight in the face. He groaned and rolled off her, shaking his head as he tried to get rid of the lights that seemed to be circling him.

Fleur jumped to her feet and stormed away from him. As she approached the front door, he rolled to his feet and charged. He slammed into her and picked her up, carrying her away from the doorway and into the open. He tripped and landed hard on her, winding them both.

Fleur struggled on, trying to kick him. Since it was obvious she wasn't going to leave the area willingly, he grabbed at his necklace, missing once, twice, before he managed to activate the Portkey and send them both to his bedroom.

Fleur responded by finding a way to free her feet and kneeing him hard in the groin.

Everything turned white for a second and he would have screamed if he'd had any breath left. The avian-Fleur seemed to nod, and then stood, heading toward the door. It took all of his will power to pull his wand out and fire a wordless stunner into her back. She collapsed gracefully onto the floor.

Harry curled up into a ball and prayed that the pain would go away soon. It was almost worse than the Cruciatus. When the pain had faded to a dull throbbing, he was able to think clearly enough to cast a healing spell on his groin, and groaned in absolute relief as the agony faded. With Fleur still unconscious, he took the time to check himself for any injuries his spell might have missed, and was relieved when everything seemed intact.

He looked down at her thoughtfully, cast some complex locking charms on all the doors and windows, making the latter unbreakable as well, and removed her wand from her pocket.

"Rennervate," he whispered.

Fleur slowly climbed to her feet and looked around groggily, before looking down at herself. The feathers faded away as if they had never existed, leaving only a young woman with a devastated expression on her face. She dropped to her knees and burst into tears.

Kneeling in front of her, Harry pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. She buried her face into his neck and sobbed. Unsure what else to do, he stroked her hair silently and continued to hold her tightly. "I am so sorry," she eventually whispered against his neck.

“What for?” he asked in surprise.

“That you had to see me like that,” she said with an audible sigh. “I hate it, I hate that I become – *that* .”

“Fleur,” Harry said, leaning back so that he could meet her eyes, “we all have monsters inside us. Yours just happens to be a little more visible, but it doesn’t change who you are.”

“You believe that?” she asked quietly, moving forward so that her face was still against him.

He nodded. “I felt like I had one inside me when I saw Ginny kissing someone else last year.”

“What happened?”

“I took control of it. It’s a part of me now, under my control, and no one else’s.”

“I have tried so hard,” she sighed. “But when I saw Bill with that, that, that *salope* , I lost control and the monster came out.”

“You could never *be* a monster, Fleur. I know it’s hard, but you have to learn from this, so that if it happens again, you try that little bit harder.”

Fleur leaned away from him slowly and opened her eyes. She looked at him for a second before her eyes went wide and a look of horror appeared on her exquisite features.

“I hit you!” she gasped, touching the bruise on his cheekbone with the tips of her fingers.

Harry winced. “I forgot about that one,” he apologised.

“That one?” Fleur asked, her voice rising.

“You wanted to get up,” Harry explained, “and well, I’ll just say that you used a perfect defence against over-amorous men.”

Fleur reached into her pockets. “Where’s my wand?” she asked, as she came up empty.

Harry looked at her. “Are you going to run away?”

She shook her head, her long hair bouncing slightly. “The monster is gone; I have regained my temper,” she promised.

He passed her wand back slowly.

Fleur slid closer to him and gently touched his face again before using her wand to heal both the bruise and the cut lip he hadn’t noticed. The pain in his face had been minor compared to the other pain, but he sighed in relief now that it was gone. She nodded and reached down. His hand shot out and caught her wrist. “I’ve already healed that one,” he said dryly.

Fleur frowned and nodded. “I am so sorry, Harry, after everything you have done for me.”

“It’s not a problem, honest,” he said. “Besides, I am slightly responsible for what happened.”

“Oh?” she asked, one of her elegant eyebrows rising curiously. “How so?”

“They paid for the strippers with my money.”

“You knew about this?” Her tone was even, but somehow still menacing enough to make him shudder.

“No,” he said, raising his hands defensively. “Well, I did know about the party. But it was just supposed to be a few beers, a last goodbye from his brothers and a few friends. I didn’t know about *them* !”

Fleur looked at him and nodded. “You are telling the truth,” she decided. “And that makes it worse!”

“Look, Fleur…”

She climbed to her feet and started to pace between him and the door. He also rose and took a few steps back, collapsing into a seat.

Fleur undid her cloak and threw it onto the back of another chair. Harry looked at her and blinked in disbelief, before turning his head away. He could feel his cheeks turn bright red.

She was wearing a semi-transparent black teddy with matching stockings, and nothing else.

“It seemed such a good idea,” Fleur sighed, although there was new tone of faint amusement in her voice. “Ginny suggested it. Bill told me once that the idea of being seduced by a naughty Veela was his fantasy. I was even going to let him spank me!”

Harry choked on his own breath at that revelation. “Fleur,” he begged, “please stop. That’s too much information!”

“Oh, so you wouldn’t like to spank me?” she challenged with the barest hint of a smile on her lips.

“Yes – no - wait, this isn’t *about* me,” he spluttered.

“Look at me, Harry,” Fleur demanded.

“Put some clothes on first,” Harry pleaded.

“Harry, look at me!”

Reluctantly, he turned his head and looked at the blonde Veela. She had turned slightly, one of her legs slightly in front of the other, as she posed for him. The front and the back of the teddy were connected by thin strands of the material, the visible flesh somehow emphasising the concealed.

“Am I not attractive?” she asked quietly.

He nodded. “You are.”

“What about sexy?” she asked. “Am I sexy?”

He gulped. “Yes, Fleur.”

“I am Veela,” she whispered. “I do not mind anything in the bedroom, or even out of the bedroom, I even enjoy, what’s the words? *Fumer le cigare* and I *avalé la fume* !”

The only words Harry recognized were cigar and swallow, and it was enough for him to get the gist of what she meant, and if possible, he felt even more embarrassed. He nodded, not sure what else he could say.

“Then why is my fiancé getting it from that *putain* ?” She burst into tears again.

Harry groaned under his breath again and stood, hugging her again. He tried to find a safe spot to put his hand, but the back of the teddy seemed to be non-existent, and he couldn’t seem to find somewhere that was covered.

“You are a good man, Harry,” Fleur whispered.

“I’m just me,” he sighed.

Fleur stepped back and shook her head. “I am going to change.”

“Thank God,” Harry muttered.

Fleur smiled faintly. “I will take that as a compliment,” she said. “Don’t go anywhere, Harry.”

He smiled back at her. “Where would I go?” he asked. “This is my room.”

She looked around. “I’ll be back in a moment.” She walked to the doors and tried to open them, before turning to look at him.

“Sorry,” he said, and cancelled the spells.

“Very impressive,” Fleur said quietly. “Gringotts would hire you in a second.” She walked out the door and vanished from sight.

Harry kicked off his shoes and sat down on his bed; he thought about taking his robes off, but wasn’t exactly comfortable with the idea of Fleur finding him any more undressed than that.

He absently banged his head against the headboard a few times. He didn’t even know where to begin with his thoughts. What the hell had they been thinking? It was bad enough having a party and lying about it, but strippers? If you could call those witches something as relatively clean as strippers. Somehow he was going to have to fix things with Fleur so that the wedding would still go ahead.

Perhaps after he punched Bill in the face – hard – repeatedly.

And as soon as the wedding was over, he was going to remove everyone else’s access to his vaults. Money just seemed to make everyone go mad. All he’d wanted was to share his good fortune with his friends and family, and instead he’d been used and abused, as rather than use it for important things, they spent it frivolously, on things like new brooms and strippers.

Fleur returned a few minutes later wearing a white terrycloth bathrobe. Her long blonde hair was down and flowing over her shoulders. She was carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses in her hand.

“If Bill is having a party, we will have a party as well,” she announced firmly. “And you know something, I am happy that it is just the two of us.” She opened the wine with a touch of magic and poured two large glasses.

“You are my only real friend,” she announced with a sad little sigh.

He frowned as he accepted the wine and sat cross-legged on the end of the bed and watched Fleur as she looked around his bedroom. “This will not do,” she muttered. She pulled her wand out of her pocket and transfigured the chairs into comfy sofas, and moved a table between them. She then whispered a spell and placed her wand on the table, so that it was acting like a candle. Fleur smiled and sat down, indicating that he should sit opposite her.

He nodded and used his wand to extinguish the other lights, before collapsing into one of the comfy sofas.

"We shall drink wine and tell each other secrets," Fleur said softly. "And when tomorrow arrives, we will both know that someone understands us."

Harry raised his glass and saluted her. "Why am I your only real friend?"

Fleur laughed softly and took a sip of the wine. "I am Veela, Harry; men do not want to be friends with a Veela – they want to fuck her."

Harry coughed, some of the wine going down the wrong pipe, at her unexpected profanity.

"There are no rules tonight," Fleur declared, a little unsteadily. "My fiancé is probably screwing that *putain* right at this moment, so I am allowed a little profanity."

He could see more tears start to run down her face, and he placed his glass down and moved around the table, kneeling before her. He reached up and pulled her into another hug, very glad that he didn't have to worry about where his hands went on her thick robe. Fleur buried her face in his neck again and sobbed heavily. After a few minutes of Harry stroking her back, she finally pulled back, her eyes red rimmed. "I look awful," she mumbled.

"You could never look anything less than beautiful," he reassured her.

"Thank you, my friend," she whispered, and took another deep sip of the wine.

Harry moved back onto the couch and looked at her. "So, how about those Harpies?" Fleur smiled, and they moved onto safer subjects. He noticed that, as they talked, the wine bottle never seemed to get empty, now matter how much they drank. It was good stuff too – or as far as he could tell. He wasn't exactly an expert.

"Why did you say you have no friends?" he eventually asked again.

"Apart from you," she clarified. "Men look at Veela as sex objects and not much more. I am only part-Veela, so it hasn't been all that bad for me, but it was worse at school. Everywhere I went, the boys would fall over me, and the girls hated me for it. It wasn't something I could control, so I pretended that it didn't matter." He nodded, silently encouraging her to continue. "That was why I went to work for Gringotts, because they are Goblins. They do not care and are not affected by me. It was heaven. Of course, that was where I met..." she trailed off.

"I understand, a little," he said, eliminating the awkward pause as Fleur tried to avoid mentioning her fiancé. "I've always been judged because of being the bloody "Boy Who Lived. I never wanted to be famous, and never wanted to do half the things I've done. All I wanted was to be Harry, grow up, and have a bit of fun." He sighed heavily. "As it is, every time I've turned around, someone was there, judging me and expecting me to be something I wasn't, just because of something my mum did."

Fleur nodded. "You felt trapped?"

"Feel," he corrected. "Even now, with all this going on, I can't escape who I am, and who I have to be. I don't like growing up; everything changes."

"That it does," Fleur agreed. "I couldn't wait to grow up and get out of Beauxbatons and be on my own."

"What about your family?"

"Less than perfect," she admitted. "I was born soon after my parents were married – I was a bit of a surprise and they were not ready to handle raising a part-Veela daughter. Papa's mother was a Veela, but sadly she died before I was born, and well, Wizards are not the only people hung up on blood purity."

"What about Gabrielle?"

"*She* was planned, and they used the experience with me to deal with her. I feel like an outcast."

"That's fucked up," Harry said with a slight smile.

"Damn right," Fleur agreed.

"Fuck 'em, and fuck the world!"

Fleur laughed and emptied the rest of her glass. "Fuck ze world," she agreed and slammed the empty glass down on the table. She grabbed the bottle and filled her glass again, and then looked at him.

He held out his glass for her to top it up.

"What was your childhood like?"

"Fucked up?" he offered. Fleur laughed again, encouraging him as he had encouraged her. He leaned back and stared at the ceiling, well aware that the wine was the cause of his loose tongue. "I grew up in a very nice cupboard," he told the ceiling. "I had a small mattress, a thin blanket, and even occasionally had something to eat."

"A cupboard?" Fleur asked. "That is the small room where people keep coats, *n'est pas*?"

Harry nodded. "Under the stairs," he clarified.

"I do not understand," Fleur said. He looked at her to see that she was pouting prettily at him, her forehead furrowed with puzzlement.

"My uncle and aunt didn't want me. As far as they were concerned I was a burden, and one that might corrupt my cousin with my 'unnaturalness'. From about the age of five, I knew I wasn't wanted. I tried to run away once, but I was caught, and after the police left, Vernon locked me in the cupboard for two weeks, with only one meal a day."

Almost before he knew it, he was in Fleur's arms, his head pressed against her neck, as she hugged him tightly. "I have no tears left," he whispered. "Not for them, not for who I was. I'll save my tears for when Voldemort is dead and I am finally free."

"What then?" Fleur asked.

"I don't know, and I can't think about it."

"Why not?"

"Because all of my dreams always end up broken on the floor, and I am alone, as I always am. As I will be at the end."

"You have friends – we will be with you."

He moved back and smiled softly at her. There was a strange intimacy in the air, perhaps caused by the alcohol, perhaps by their stories, perhaps even a result of stray magic in the air. He reached out and lightly touched her face, his fingers stroking some hair behind her ear tenderly.

"I've never told anyone this," he eventually whispered. "I am the only person who can kill Voldemort, and no one can help me do it. It is my hand that will kill him. There will be just the two of us, and only one of us will walk away alive. It is my life, it is my fate and it is my destiny."

"How long have you known?" she asked.

"I was told over a year ago."

"That is why you have worked so hard this summer on your spell casting?"

"I'm not going to lose, Fleur," he told her. "Even if I die, I will take him with me."

"I believe you," she said, and after a long silence, it was her turn, to reach out and lightly stroke her fingers over his scar. "How are you so strong?"

He tilted his head slightly and looked at her. "I'm not strong, not really."

"No," she teased, "you just decide to kill Voldemort, you just happen to have a Veela who thinks that you are her best friend in the world, you just happen to throw your home open for everyone who needs it, you just happen to take control of my wedding to ensure that things go smoothly. You just happen to do so much, Harry, so you can not deny that you are strong."

"Fleur," he said softly, "I'm as weak as anyone else. I have my doubts, I have my moments of irrational behaviour, of fear, of childishness, and I've made mistakes, so many damn mistakes."

"Of course you have," she agreed. "But when your back is against the wall, when everything is against you, what do you do?"

"Fight," he exhaled. "I do everything I can for my friends, for my family, for the people I love."

"It is an idiot who never feels fear, who never has any self doubt; it is a hero who acts despite these."

He shrugged softly, "I'm just me, and that's all I want to be."

"You are you, the heroic, kind, nice brave man that you are. You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I have many regrets, Fleur. My parents, Cedric, Sirius, even Dumbledore. I've seen them all die in front of me a million times; they taunt me with their deaths."

"Do *they*, or do you taunt yourself?"

"Does it matter? The result is the same."

"It does matter, because you are feeling it," she whispered. "I didn't know your parents or Sirius, I only barely knew Cedric, but I did know Albus. We talked a few times, and I found myself turning to him for advice when I left school. He was a wonderful man, and yet a flawed one, like so many. But I guarantee this, Harry, he is not blaming you. And from what I know of your parents and Sirius, they are not blaming you either, and Cedric would have blamed only himself. That means that the only person blaming you is you."

"I know," he admitted freely. "Logically, they would be proud of me; logically they would be looking down at me and trying to help. But logic fails at night. Logic fails when I'm alone. Logic fails when the nightmares start and invade my dreams."

"These dreams, they are yours?"

He nodded. "Occlumency is up to scratch these days," he said, tapping his head.

"Then we will get to the root of this survivor's guilt you are feeling."

"Survivor's guilt," he echoed, "that makes a lot of sense." He smiled slightly, "In a logical way."

"I always make sense," Fleur said, favouring him with a soft smile. "So you are feeling guilty because you survived and they didn't. Because you watched them die – even if you can't remember your parents. You wish that it was you dead and that they had survived, that you had given your life for theirs."

Harry blinked, surprised at her accuracy. "Yeah."

"And because you are alive, you torture yourself and help make the idea that you will die come true, so you won't feel this guilt anymore."

He opened his mouth but nothing came out – he didn't know what to say, what he could say. Fleur reached around and picked up the wine bottle, topping them both off again. He took a long drink and was surprised to see his hands shaking.

She emptied hers in a single movement, and then took his hands, holding them still. "Do you ever think about eternity?"

He shook his head. "I'm too into now to think of the future."

"I'm not talking the *future*, but *eternity*. The future is the rest of your life, regardless of how long you live. Eternity is what happens after that." He nodded. "Eternity lasts forever, so that your entire life up to this point is the mere blinking of an eyelid, a movement of a fly's wings, a beating of a heart. It is nothing."

He nodded again; entranced by the ways her eyes flashed, by the passion in them, the passion in her face.

"Do you want to spend that time with your parents disappointed that you gave in so easily, with Sirius wondering where your courage went, with Albus sad that you didn't learn the most important lesson – that life is here to be lived? You are talking yourself into an early death, Harry, and they would hate that, wouldn't they?"

He looked at her for a long moment, and raised his hands, still held by hers, and took another drink. She didn't let him go, didn't release his eyes.

He wanted to give a flippant reply but he couldn't break away from the spell she was putting him under. He felt a tear escape from his eye and roll down his cheek. He felt open, raw and exposed in a way he had never felt, not even when his mind had been invaded by Voldemort.

"Everything," he croaked, before wetting his lips. "Everything I know about them tells me that you are right," he admitted, more to himself than to her. "I have to live," he mumbled. "I have to live."

"You do," she agreed. "And you won't be alone."

"Will you be there?"

"Of course," she said simply.

He relaxed, suddenly aware of just how tense he was, and exhaled deeply.

"This is the problem with alcohol," Fleur said with a smile. "It opens you up to intense conversations."

"No shit," he agreed.

Fleur giggled as he yawned. "Getting tired of me?" she asked.

"I'm here as long as you need me," he promised.

"I'll hold you to that," she replied intently. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"I think that we've established that beyond any shadow of a doubt," he said.

"Good." She leant forward and brushed her lips against his. "Friends kiss," she whispered.

"No, not like this," he protested weakly.

Fleur smiled at him and he suddenly realised just how beautiful she was, and how much she wanted him. She kissed him again, harder, and this time he kissed her back and was blown away. He'd never been kissed like this before – his kisses with Ginny seemed childlike and innocent compared to this passion and desire, to this kiss from a woman who knew exactly what she was doing.

He felt her hands roaming his back as he put everything he had into the next kiss, every secret thought he'd had about her since first seeing her at the Triwizard Tournament –everything. Fleur moaned against him, and he closed his eyes in pleasure.

"No," he whispered, tearing his lips from hers and scrambling away from her.

Fleur looked at him, her expression a cross between devastation and pain.

He groaned and scrambled back, so that he was kneeling before her. "Fleur," he whispered, the tears falling down her face indicting him. "Fleur," he tried again, desperately searching for the right words. "This isn't right, not like this. You're upset about what happened in the cottage, and you're as drunk as I am. We're confusing this atmosphere and our friendship with something else."

"You don't want me either," she whimpered.

"I do," he said, "more than you can ever know. But you're in love with Bill, you're marrying him tomorrow. You can't throw that away over something stupid. This is something you would regret tomorrow. Wedding days are for happiness, not for regret."

She looked at him for a very long time. "You are truly my friend," she whispered. She leant forward and kissed him very tenderly.

He kissed her back, far too aware that this was the last time he would ever kiss this remarkable woman.

"Thank you, for everything," she said.

"Any time," he replied simply, as he moved away from her – and from temptation. He yawned again. "I think I need sleep."

She nodded, "I do too. It's going to be a big day."

"That it is," he agreed.

Fleur stood and walked to the door, before she paused and looked back at him. "I meant everything I said tonight," she whispered. "Learn to live life, and remember that your true friends will be there with you."

He nodded and watched as she left. He collapsed onto the bed, mentally kicking himself for saying 'no' to her. 'Yes' would have been so much easier. His tears were his only companion for the rest of that night.

Fleur walked out of Harry's bedroom and immediately shook herself. She had cast a spell to replace the wine in her glass with plain juice before she entered his room. It hadn't been hard to open up to him – she meant what she had said about him being her only true friend. He had worked so hard for her over the summer and he hadn't asked for a thing in return, not even for dealing with her mother. And tonight – well, tonight had proved it.

She checked the time. The hour was late, but she still had things to do. First was availing herself of the bathroom, since the juice she had drunk still had an effect. She felt a lot more comfortable after nipping into the nearest bathroom, and started to work. She jogged downstairs and outside heading toward the cottage, wand in hand.

She looked in the window again, casting the same charm that allowed her to see clearly in the now dimly lit room. It looked like a Roman orgy had taken place inside, with clothes and bodies and food and liquor bottles scattered about. Some of the participants were still moving, although drunken exhaustion was taking its toll.

She stepped back and concentrated hard; she wasn't recognised as one of the most accomplished witches in Beauxbatons' history for nothing. With a few words she released her spell and watched as everyone inside fell into a deep sleep. She wiped away a stubborn tear that insisted on leaking out of her left eye and turned away.

Back inside the mansion, she walked up to Harry's room and ghosted in silently. He was lying on his side, curled up; tear tracks visible on his face.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she whispered. "I promise I'll make this up to you." She cast the same sleeping charm on him, and then added an anti-hangover charm, so that when he *did* wake up, he'd feel a lot better.

That done, she went to try and grab a few hours sleep of her own.

She climbed out of bed at six, having spent the last few hours staring at the ceiling. She was scheduled to start getting ready in an hour's time. She walked into her closet and dressed comfortably in jeans and a plain white blouse. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and gave herself an encouraging look in the mirror. She could do this.

She walked downstairs and into the kitchen. Her mother and Molly were already there, enjoying the first cup of coffee of the day. "Fleur," Molly gasped. "You should be in your rooms. What if Bill walked in? It would be bad luck."

"I'm afraid that things have changed," Fleur said distantly. "Can you please call Hermione, Ginny, Tonks, and your husbands?"

"Why?" Molly asked, looking worried.

"I'm going to have to show you," Fleur replied, trying to lock her emotions down so that they wouldn't bother her.

The two women looked at each other, and then started to move. It took another twenty minutes for all of them to gather, some still barely half-awake.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked. "We're not supposed to be meeting for hours yet."

Fleur looked around. "Please follow me," she said quietly, and turned, walking out of the house and heading toward the cottage. As it became obvious where she was going, she noticed Ginny turning pale.

She paused in front of the cottage and took a deep breath. She raised her wand and chanted under her breath. With a word, she released the spell and caused the entire front of the cottage to disappear, revealing the scene inside.

There were several gasps of shock and looks of disbelief, looks that intensified when the smell hit them. Almost more than the visuals, the smell of

sex made it perfectly clear what happened the night before. The only person she could see missing from the disorder was Remus.

Ginny dropped to her knees, losing the remnants of her previous meal on to the grass. Molly didn't even seem to notice as she stared at her sons, and the state that they were in.

"Oh, Fleur," Hermione whispered.

The same stubborn tear appeared back on her cheek.

"What is the meaning of this!?" Molly yelled. The volume of the yell put a *Sonorus* spell to shame.

The witches were the first to move – they had obviously had less alcohol.

"Oops," said the blonde sleeping on Bill. "Looks like we slept in, girls. Lucky for them they paid us a flat fee in advance or we'd be able to charge them more." Unconcerned with her nakedness, she picked up her clothes and her wand, and nodded toward Ginny. "Thanks for the introduction, sweetcheeks" she said, before she Disapparated, followed by the other witches, most of whom had smirks on their faces.

Without turning her head, Molly said, "Ginevra, return to the house and wait."

"But..."

"Now," Molly said, in a tone of command so absolute that Ginny was running before the word was complete. "Arthur," she continued. "Wake them."

"Yes, dear," Arthur said, before moving over to Fleur's father. They talked quickly, before working together to cast a large sobering charm on the gathered party-goers, and followed it up with a weak *Rennervate* charm.

Groaning, the males opened their eyes and looked around, before freezing – one by one – as they saw the gathered crowd.

Some of them reached desperately for anything to cover the fact that they were naked, others crawled behind pieces of furniture. No one said anything; there didn't seem to be anything that could be said.

Another tear ran down Fleur's face as she looked as dispassionately as she could at the man that until yesterday she would have said she loved with all her heart.

Silently, Tonks moved to one side and looked through a door. Fleur envied her look of relief when she found her boyfriend fully dressed and passed out on a bed.

With a painfully slow movement, Fleur removed her engagement ring from her finger and dropped it. She turned and walked away, ignoring the tears that were now flooding down her face.

"Fleur, wait," Bill shouted, but she ignored him – she ignored everyone as the shouting started. She almost regretted charming them to sleep, but she needed the others to understand why she was calling off the wedding, and the visual evidence had been a necessary part of it; seeing is indeed believing.

She walked into the kitchen and absently poured herself a large mug of coffee. "What happened?" she asked Ginny.

Ginny looked up through tortured eyes. "I didn't know they were *whores*," she whispered. "I promise you, I didn't know."

"Why don't you tell me what happened?" Fleur suggested, hardly recognising her own voice.

"I'd heard about them from Luna - the Quibbler had done a piece on them, but they're the most notorious and popular entertainers in London, and when Ron said he wanted something special, I suggested them. Ron told me who was going to be there, so when we hired them, I warned them that Remus, Ron, and Bill were in relationships, and they promised they'd go easy on them."

"How would they know who was who?" Fleur asked.

"Oh, I described them."

"Did you mention Bill's scars?"

"No – only his long hair," Ginny mumbled.

"Bill had short hair last night," Fleur sighed, "and Charlie had long hair. I think that the twins had been playing, as no one had the correct hair."

Ginny put her head down on the table and banged it a few times. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Why did you suggest I go for a walk?"

The red-haired girl looked up and met her eyes. "Because I thought that if you discovered it, but saw that Bill wasn't really enjoying it, you'd forgive him, and be able to trust him as well."

"When I looked through the window, that blonde *putain* was kneeling between his legs. I recognised the expression on his face."

"I'm so sorry," Ginny said again, tears falling down her face.

"You did not know; I forgive you," Fleur whispered.

"I don't know if I can forgive myself," Ginny replied.

"Fleur," her mother called as she entered the room. "Can we talk about this?"

Fleur tilted her head and looked up at her mother. She stood and walked around so that she was sitting at the head of the table, her back to the wall.

"Invite William in," she said firmly. "He can sit opposite me, and everyone else who cares – I'd like Hermione as well, if she would come."

"Fleur," her mother tried again.

"*Do it*," she snapped, trying hard to regain her equilibrium.

Hermione marched in first, an expression of anger on her face. She walked around the table and hugged Fleur tightly, before sitting next to her.

Fleur appreciated the gesture, and was slightly impressed as well. Despite her own pain, Hermione was trying to help her, and for the first time she was seeing just why Hermione was Harry's best friend in the world.

Molly was next in, accompanied by Arthur and her own mother and her father. Remus and Tonks came in next. Remus was looking embarrassed and guilty although she wasn't quite sure what *he* had to be guilty about. The other non-family members were nowhere to be seen, and Fleur suspected they had just left.

"I'm sorry, Fleur," Remus apologised to her. "I should have stopped it when things started to get out of control, but I'd had too much to drink."

She waved his apology away, and he nodded, sitting down next to Tonks, who took his hand.

Bill, accompanied by his brothers in a show of solidarity, was the last to enter. They were all now dressed in the same clothes they had been wearing the day before, and looked much the worse for wear. They sat down quietly, Bill taking the foot of the table opposite her. He looked around uncomfortably, and she knew he was wishing they had somewhere more private to go.

"I'm sorry," Bill eventually broke the pervading silence. "It's not an excuse, but I was drunk – I didn't realise what I was doing."

"Let me tell you a story, *William*," Fleur said quietly. "Last night, I thought that I would reward you for not having a deer night. I put on some of my nicest lingerie, threw my cloak on over that, and walked out to see you."

Bill, and the other males in the room, seemed to turn a shade paler.

"When I got near the cottage, I smiled. Everything was perfectly quiet, and I was so proud of you – I wondered whether you might have a few drinks with your brothers, but I knew that you had done what you said, and I was going to reward you for being a good boy. I looked around, and was surprised to see Harry staring at the stars outside the cottage. I talked to him for a few minutes and he tried to steer me away. Harry is a lot of things, but a good liar he is not." She was almost amused as Hermione and Ginny both nodded in agreement. "It was then that a howl split the air, and I realised that your 'Best Man' had cast a silencing charm and was trying to keep your secret. I manoeuvred around him and cast a spell to allow me to see what was going on. You can imagine my surprise when I saw my fiancé with another woman's head between his legs."

Molly's face went red.

"I lost my temper, and the next thing I knew was that I was in my avian form, in Harry's bedroom, and that he had a jagged cut on his face from where my engagement ring had caught him when I had punched him. It wasn't difficult to piece together that he had somehow managed to stop me – without hurting me – and that was when the pain first hit me.

"I was confused and upset; I couldn't understand what was happening. But I was reassured because Harry was there – and if there is one thing I have learnt over this summer is that Harry can deal with anything."

Ginny and Hermione nodded as well – this time along with practically everyone else.

"For a few minutes, I thought about revenge," she continued coolly. "You were fucking that *salupe*, so I would sleep with Harry."

Ginny and Hermione both flinched; Bill looked down, not meeting her eyes.

"But I quickly decided I couldn't do that. Two wrongs do not a right make, and I couldn't use Harry like that. So instead, I changed into something decent, and returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses. And then I did something I'm not proud of. I decided to see if it was the alcohol that caused men to act with such disrespect. I told Harry that we would have a party of our own, only I didn't mention that my glass would only have cranberry juice in it, while his would have wine.

"We talked for hours – apart from when I broke down a few times and he comforted me – about everything, his childhood and Voldemort," there was a lot of flinches around the table, and some jealous looks from Hermione and Ginny. She was pretty sure that the reasons for them were very different – Hermione because Fleur had managed to get Harry to open up to her, Ginny because of the closeness this implied. She had no wish to tell the childish little girl that Harry had grown up past her.

"And when he'd had a fair bit to drink, I kissed him." She let that sentence rest for a second. "And he pushed me away." She paused again. "And

then I did something else I am not proud of. I turned my Veela power up to full and kissed him again. I threw everything I had at him." There was silence around the table. "And do you know what he did?" she asked rhetorically. "Do you know what this seventeen year old, who was under the influence of alcohol, who was experiencing the most potent form of sexual desire known to the Wizarding world, who was being kissed by an incredibly sexy older woman, do you know what he did?"

"He kissed me back, and in that kiss I could feel the affect I was having on him.

"And then he pushed me away – again – and scrambled away from me. He told me that I was in love with Bill, that I would regret this later, that I wasn't thinking straight. Despite my looks, despite my kiss, despite my powers, despite his intoxication, he refused to betray his friendship with you, Bill, with me, with everyone at this table. Accepting my advances would have been easy. He did not do what was easy – he did what was right.

"So," she finished with an almost growl, "do not tell me that alcohol incapacitated your reason. You had a choice, and you said *yes*, when you should have said *no*. I stuck by you when you were injured, I would have stayed with you if you had become a werewolf, because I loved you as a person, and that *love* was much more than skin deep.

"But the one thing I will not, the one thing I can not accept is infidelity. Anything else I could have dealt with – we would have had a screaming argument and then made up. I would have even accepted your lies about your *deer* night – I wouldn't have been happy, but I would have accepted it.

"But you *cheated* on me, Bill. The circumstances are irrelevant." She couldn't understand why her face was so wet. "I'm sorry for what happened, I'm sorry it has come down to this, I'm sorry that you were tempted last night, and I'm sorry that you gave in."

She shook her head slightly. "And I'm sorry that I have to tell Harry that despite everything he tried to do last night to get me to forgive you, that I am calling off this wedding that he has worked so hard to arrange for us, and that not only did I test him last night, I cast a spell to ensure that he slept through all of this."

There were visible tears in the eyes of a number of the people at the large table.

She slowly got to her feet. "And I'm so very sorry that our relationship ends like this," she finished.

She walked around the table, and out of the kitchen. Everything seemed blurry, and when she saw the room she was due to have been married in, she collapsed and gave into the pain.

She didn't know how long she was there before a pair of arms wrapped around her. "Hermione?" she asked.

The girl smiled sadly. "I'm sorry, Fleur," she whispered. Fleur tried to shrug. "Molly and your mother are cancelling the arrangements and letting everyone know that it's off," Hermione said. "The others have all left. Bill is as devastated as you are – most of them are blaming themselves." She paused for a few seconds, before taking a deep breath. "I know it won't help, but you are not the only person to call a relationship off over this."

"You and Ron?" Fleur asked.

Hermione nodded. "Ginny confessed her involvement to me, and from what I can tell, she was just trying to help Ron arrange a party to remember. She didn't really think things through. She also mentioned that she'd told *them*," (the 'them' was emphasised so that it sounded like an epithet) "to ignore Harry as well. It was incredibly naïve of her to think that witches like that would follow that direction."

Hermione sighed, "Whatever I had with Ron is over. Whether or not we can be friends again remains to be seen. He slept with one of them last night as well, and like you, I can't accept that."

"I'm sorry," Fleur apologised.

"When everything is said and done," Hermione said slowly, "there was a decision that each of them had to make. Harry didn't put himself in that situation. Remus extracted himself from that situation. The others just went for it – some I am disappointed in, but they betrayed no one. Cheating men caused all this mess. Everybody has to pay for their actions, and you have paid the highest price of them all."

Fleur took a deep breath, trying hard not to break down again. "This was supposed to be the happiest day of my life. You will not be surprised when I tell you this is not?"

Hermione hugged her again. "I have to ask this," she said eventually, "but what would you have done if Harry hadn't said no?"

Fleur looked at Hermione, and opened her mouth and then shut it again. "I don't know," she eventually confessed. "The second before he kissed me, I would have told you that I would have stopped it." She sighed deeply. "If things had happened differently with Harry, I would have called off the wedding anyway, but the blame would have been shared between all of us, and I do not like not knowing for certain how I would have reacted."

"I thought so," Hermione said. "I wouldn't worry about it," she continued slowly. "You chose the right person to talk to last night."

"I'm sorry," Fleur apologised again. "I shouldn't have tried to hit him so hard with my charm. I've never done that to anyone before and I don't know if it might have damaged him."

"After he was possessed by Voldemort, who wanted to destroy him, I doubt *you* did any damage at all," Hermione said bluntly. "In other circumstances, I'd be angry with you, but you weren't thinking straight last night. If I had seen Ron last night doing what Bill did, I would have done the same thing, and ended up crying on Harry for hours on end." She paused again. "And I, too, might have tried to kiss him, just to see if I was still

desirable. I can't be mad at you for doing something I might have done."

"Do you love Harry?" Fleur asked.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "Harry is my closest friend; he is the brother I should have had. We are as close as two people can be."

"Hermione, can I really trust you?" Fleur asked quietly, after looking around to make sure that they were alone.

"If it concerns Harry, then yes," Hermione said simply.

"Harry told me last night that he has to kill Voldemort. There is no one else who can do it. He is as scared of living as he is of dying. I think I helped him get to the bottom of it last night, and it should improve. But he is terrified of being alone at the end."

"He won't be alone," Hermione stated. "I would never let him be alone. No matter how hard he pushes me away, I *will* be there with him."

"That's what I promised as well," Fleur said with a slight smile. "But I don't think that today is going to help. He's seen someone he looked up to – Bill – do something really stupid, and he's already got issues with Ron over spending his money on a broom and then on last night's *entertainment*. He's going to blame himself for what has happened."

Hermione growled under her breath. "I knew he was being too generous, but he's such an innocent at times. All he wants to do is help his friends. I'll bet if Ron had just asked, Harry would have bought him the best broom in the world and been happy to do so."

Fleur nodded. "I'm going to help Harry defeat Voldemort, because I am Harry's friend, not for anything or anyone else."

"I've already pledged to do the same," Hermione stated. "But first, I'm going to have a word with Molly. If any of the Weasleys want to have a relationship with Harry, they need to know everything that has gone on."

"They're not upset about what Harry did last night, are they?"

Hermione snorted. "No, not in the least. Everyone recognises that Harry tried to save the wedding, and while some of them are muttering that you weren't exactly blameless, they accept that if Bill hadn't been screwing that whore, none of it would have happened."

"Good," Fleur said in relief. "Harry is my one true friend, and I'd hate to cause him problems with his other friends."

"You have more friends, Fleur," Hermione said. "Me, for example."

For the first time that morning, Fleur smiled. It wasn't much of a smile, but it was at least something. "Thank you," she said.

"I know how close you are Harry, and how close he is to you. And that's good enough for me."

"What about Ginny?"

"I'm still peeved at her for what she did," Hermione said coldly. "I know it wasn't much, but if she had used an ounce of good sense, she would not have helped Ron hire a bunch of strippers for a stag night."

"Stag night?"

Hermione nodded. "That's what it is called, not a deer night."

"Oh," Fleur said, fighting a blush.

"Don't be embarrassed," Hermione said, hugging her again. "It was somehow fitting; it took away the excuse of it being a stag night."

Fleur felt more tears escape her self-control.

"But to get back to Ginny, Harry's grown up this summer – he's a lot more reflective and liable to think before acting, and he's more patient with the people he cares for. The death of Professor Dumbledore affected him in a profound manner, and I think he's realised, for the first time, he is truly the master of his own destiny, and he has to act like it. I really don't think Ginny understands that. He grew up; she didn't."

"Harry doesn't feel the same way for her any more."

Hermione nodded. "Very few of us stay with our first loves," she said with a sigh. "It's that which gives us the experience to continue." She paused and switched subject. "I'm guessing that you showed Harry the lingerie? What was his face like?"

Fleur giggled. "Yes, I did. I thought he was going to have a heart attack for a second. I also told him that I was going to let Bill spank me."

Hermione giggled as well. "Poor boy."

"But then, when he looked at me, it was with such respect and reverence. I could not imagine Harry demanding his girlfriend to dress up in her old school uniform."

"Bill did?"

Fleur nodded. "I did think about doing it last night," she sniffed, "but I have more class than that." She paused for a second of thought. "Of course, if

he had not *demand*ed it, I might have done it willingly, gladly. As much as I loved him, he never really understood how I think.”

Hermione laughed and nodded in agreement. “How are you feeling, really?”

“Honestly?”

Hermione nodded.

“Like my heart has been broken and all I want to do is curl up in a ball and cry. I love Bill, but all I can see is his face as that *putain* did that to him, when I would have done it if he had just asked – I was even planning on doing that, and a lot more, for him. And the worst thing, the very worst thing, was how much like *me* she looked,” she finished, bursting into tears again.

“Fleur,” Hermione whispered, pulling her into a hug, “I’m so sorry you saw that. She was nowhere near as beautiful as you.”

Fleur didn’t say anything, she just cried on the younger girl’s shoulders until she could regain some sort of semblance of calm. “Thank you,” she eventually whispered.

“What else are friends for?” Hermione asked.

Fleur stood slowly. “I’m going to go and wake Harry and let him know what is going on.”

“Don’t mention testing him,” Hermione advised. “I know you want to, but let it lie for now.”

“Thank you.”

Hermione sighed sadly. “Of course, if you ever try to hurt him again, I will destroy you.”

Fleur laughed suddenly at the unexpected threat. “I *am* going to like you.”

Hermione grinned. “Of course you are. I’m going to help get rid of everyone, and I’ll come and find you two when I’m ready.”

Fleur smiled and slowly walked up the hall of the Black summer house toward Harry’s bedroom. The only sound was the brush of her clothing as she moved, and she could actually appreciate the silence. For so long this summer the house had been chaos, and it almost seemed grateful that things were returning to normal.

She opened the door to Harry’s room and walked over to him. He was sleeping on his side, the covers pushed down to his waist. She reached out to wake him, but paused, and looked at him again.

She had first seen him three years ago, a small boy thrust into a situation not of his choosing. She hadn’t believed him at first, after all, everyone knew he was Harry Potter, and that he was a glory hound. But then he had rescued her sister, and more than that, he hadn’t asked for a reward.

Every single male – her father the sole exception – would have used her gratitude to get something from her. He’d just been embarrassed and tried to brush off her effusive thanks. That had been when she had realised that she didn’t know Harry Potter at all, and that she probably never would.

It had also been the time that she had stopped thinking of him as a little boy.

Over the next few years she’d seen him occasionally from a distance, followed him through the press, and through Molly, and genuinely been interested in what he had been doing.

But then this summer, after her earlier wedding had been postponed, she had really managed to get to know him. Her Veela charm, that often made men tell her so many things, didn’t work on him, and she had made a friend, for the second time. Her first had been her ex-fiancé, but there had always been a degree of attraction between her and Bill; with Harry, for the first time, it was just a friendship, and she had treasured that more than anything else in the world. He didn’t want to get to know her because of the attraction, because of the chance, but because he wanted to get to know *her*.

He had grown in the last few years, he was still a little short, but his constant hard work had ensured that he was well built. Bill was taller, but didn’t have the same definition to his muscles that Harry did. She’d watched Harry train a few times, admiring his dedication as he forced himself to reach his limit, and then go beyond them.

At least she now knew the pressure he was under, the secret he had kept about his fight with Voldemort, and just why he was working so hard.

She sighed softly. Thinking of Bill made her heart ache and her eyes start to water again. His betrayal hurt more than she had ever expected. It had not been something she had ever expected to happen to her, Fleur Delacour. She was beautiful, sexy, dynamite in bed, and a one-man woman. Why on earth would anyone do that to her?

She looked down at Harry again and resisted the urge to crawl into bed with him. She wanted to be held, and all the pain to go away.

He stretched and slowly opened his eyes. She could almost see the thoughts running through his head. He sat up against the headboard and looked at her, keeping the covers around his waist.

“I called it off,” she said softly, answering his unasked question.

He sighed and his head rolled back as he looked at the ceiling. "Why?"

She appreciated the fact that there was no judgement in his tone, he just wanted information. "I could have accepted everything except infidelity." He opened his mouth but she interrupted. "Even if he was drunk, if he didn't mean it, it doesn't matter, Harry." She paused, "Hermione felt the same way."

A look of absolute horror appeared on his face. "Ron..."

She nodded. "I had to show everyone this morning. It was the only way I could call off the wedding without fighting with everyone."

He banged his head against the wall slowly.

"Remus apologised – he'd not taken part in the debauchery. They were an infamous strip tease group who'll do anything for enough money. Ginny and Ron arranged them."

"Ginny?"

She smiled faintly at his shock. "She wanted to help Ron organise a party to be remembered, and didn't know that they were whores. She also thought that *they* would accept her word that you, Remus, and Bill were not to be touched."

Harry closed his eyes. "So she helped Ron hire prostitutes with my money, and then tried to ensure that I, as the most single male there, would not get anything out of it?" he asked in a slightly dry tone. "How *nice* of her."

"She is a naive little girl who seems to have very little idea of how the real world works."

"Where is she?"

"Molly was," Fleur paused, trying to find the right word, "peevish, and I believe that Ginevra will be, along with the rest of the children, listening to Molly express her displeasure at length."

"How's Hermione?"

"Upset and sad. But she really helped me when I broke down earlier." His eyes flew open, and she smiled slightly at the worry and warmth she could see in them. "I love Bill," she whispered, "that sort of thing doesn't just go away in an instant. Right now, I should be looking at him, promising my life to him."

"I'm sorry."

"As I am, especially that you wasted all this money."

He shrugged, "Money is irrelevant Fleur, it was only to make everyone happy. Don't worry about it – making friends with you, and the things I have learnt this summer are worth more than a few galleons here and there."

"Thank you."

The door to his room opened and Hermione walked in. She walked over to bed and looked at Harry for a second, before she burst into tears.

Harry leant forward and grabbed her, pulling her on to the bed so that he could comfort her.

Fleur moved back slightly, giving the two of them a little space. She was slightly surprised by the complete lack of passion between the two of them. Hermione was growing into an exceptionally pretty young woman, and she currently sobbing onto the shoulder of a very good looking young man – a man who was topless, and yet it was completely fraternal.

"Thanks," Hermione murmured. Fleur didn't catch Harry's response, but she soon moved backward, so that she was sitting opposite Fleur, one on each side of the bed, as Harry sat in the middle.

"There's a box of tissues behind you," he said to Hermione. He clapped his hands sharply, and a well dressed house-elf appeared. "Can you please ensure that everyone leaves as soon as possible, and as soon as they have gone, that everyone's access is immediately restricted. No one is allowed back here apart from Fleur and Hermione without my express permission. And get someone to contact the Goblins, close the Wedding vaults and place the balance back in my personal vault."

The house-elf bowed deeply and popped out.

"Wedding account?" Hermione asked.

Harry smiled faintly at her. "You think I gave everyone unfettered access to the combined Potter-Black vault?"

She smiled proudly at him and nodded. "I did."

He wrinkled his nose, "I was going to," he confessed, "but the Goblins were so strongly against it, that I decided to listen to them. I put twenty thousand or so in a couple of new accounts and gave them access to them."

"Good," Hermione said approvingly. "Taking advice from people who know what they are talking about is a good thing."

“Even if they’re bossy know-it-alls with big hair?”

“Git,” she laughed, smacking his shoulder. Fleur couldn’t help smiling at the sibling-like behaviour between the two of them. It was so natural and unforced.

“Would you like a new necklace?” Harry asked Hermione innocently.

She narrowed his eyes and stared at him hard. “You are *not* knocking out Ron’s teeth!”

“He hurt you,” he whispered coldly.

“I will deal with it, Harry. He can’t do it again.”

“He shouldn’t have done it in the first place.”

“I know,” Hermione sighed. “I honestly think that they all just got carried away.”

Harry grumbled under his breath.

“But enough about that, Harry James Potter, you will tell me the exact wording of the prophecy, right now.”

“But…”

“No buts, Potter.”

“Yes, Hermione,” Harry replied, and then quoted the whole prophecy.

“Exactly where,” Hermione growled, “does it say that you will be alone in that?”

Harry blinked, and then looked at Fleur, who shrugged at him. “One must die at the hand of the other.”

“That just means you have to kill him, that doesn’t mean that Fleur and I can’t be there in all our glory, holding him down while you do it!”

Harry opened his mouth, and then shut it again. “Oh,” he eventually said meekly.

“Yes, Oh,” Hermione continued. “You,” she said, poking him in the arm, “are not running off and trying to save the world without me, got it?”

He nodded; a look of relief in his eyes.

“Right, you two are going to finish your conversation, and then you, Harry, are going to shower and get dressed, and meet Fleur and me in the library. We are then going to try and forget what happened today by planning exactly how we are going to defeat Voldemort.”

“What about school?” Harry asked softly.

Hermione froze and looked directly at Harry. “Your life is worth more to me than my education,” she whispered. “I will finish school when Voldemort is dead, and not before.”

Harry reached out and took her hand. There were no words between the two as they looked at each other, and then the moment was over, and Hermione was walking out of the room.

“Last night,” Harry said casually, “I decided that I was going to punch Bill in the face several times before the wedding – I’d’ve healed him, but I thought his actions were awful.”

Fleur suddenly laughed. “Does she do that a lot?”

“Boss me around? A little.”

“She loves you.”

“As do I her,” Harry agreed. “I’m bloody furious at Ron, I know I should be balanced and on the fence between my two friends, but I’m not.”

“I think that I’ll go down to the library,” Fleur said. “Thank you, Harry, for everything.”

Harry looked at her for a long moment. “Any time,” he said simply.

She smiled at him and walked out of the bedroom and into the library. Hermione was already at the table, a pile of books in front of her. “Give it time.”

“Excuse me?” Fleur asked.

Hermione just laughed under her breath. “Just remember what I said earlier. When you’re over this whole mess, you’ll be fine.”

Fleur looked at her new friend, trying to work out what she meant. She blinked as what she meant hit her. She felt herself start to blush, but it soon faded as her mind turned once more to the events of the day.

