

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 1

As everyone gasped in horror or outrage, Romilda was watching Harry's eyes. That, in itself, was nothing new; she'd been crushing on him for months, what with his wild untameable hair and those gorgeous eyes with the reputation for not always doing the right thing.

There was also the fact that he was one of the few males in the school who understood the importance of regular bathing.

As such, she was able to see it all in his eyes: the shock that was quickly followed by resignation as his name was pulled out of the Goblet of Fire.

She watched him trudge away, her heart feeling like it was breaking for him. As soon as he was gone, the whispering started.

"Attention seeker," the particularly rank-smelling Weasley was stating loudly enough to be heard a third of the Gryffindor table away. Others were agreeing with him, and she could already see Malfoy – the only boy at Hogwarts who managed to bathe less than Weasley – starting a loud rant about it.

She was about to start a defence of Harry, when glanced across at the Slytherin table. Her pretty blonde friend, Astoria Greengrass, shook her head hard, and then nodded in the direction of the doors to the Great Hall.

Romilda waited a few seconds and then walked out. She was shortly joined by Astoria. "He didn't do it," the Slytherin girl said quietly, as they headed away.

"Yeah, I was just about to tell everyone that."

"Which is *exactly* why I stopped you. If no one else sees that, it means that no one was standing up for him, right?"

Romilda nodded.

"So if everyone is against him, we can use that to make friends with him!"

"Tori, you're so smart you make my teeth hurt," Romilda said slowly. "Maybe we can help him with the tournament!"

"Why, thank you," Astoria giggled. "And you're right."

"What about the Slytherins being upset with you for helping him?"

Astoria shrugged. "Daphne may be as thick as two short planks, but I don't think anyone will bother her; everyone is convinced that she is some sort of Ice Queen, and all the boys are scared of

her. They don't know that she acts like that because she doesn't have the brain power to walk and smile at the same time."

"She *is* pretty, though."

"I'm pretty, too, plus I got Mother's brains."

"Her modesty, too, no doubt," Romilda teased.

"Watch it, Gypsy," Astoria replied in a similar tone. "Or I shall have you run off my land!"

"And I shall use my ancient Gypsy powers to curse you into marrying a smelly blonde ponce, and have exceptionally painful childbirths which will addle your brain to name every child something ridiculous!"

"Ewww, not Malfoy!"

"Yes, and every night you shall have to sleep with his pure-blooded lack of bathing!"

"I give, I give," Astoria laughed, holding her hands up. "Anyway, back on topic. We need to get him alone and offer our friendship and support!"

"I'll trail him when he comes back to our common room, and from there, I'll use our mirrors to tell you where he's going."

"Okay, I'm going to head back to the dorms and see if leaving some deodorant spells on Malfoy's bed will help him take the hint."

"Later, Tori," Romilda said, giving her best friend a quick hug, before hurrying up to Gryffindor tower. She said the password and took the couch nearest the exit. As she sat, she scowled, and grabbed a book to read.

The common room filled rapidly and everyone was still talking about Harry and what a prat he was. She rolled her eyes.

"Of course you roll your eyes," Vicky Frobisher said with a snide tone. "Harry's got such wonderful eyes," she mocked.

"Of course I do, especially when you act like the ignorant cow you are," Romilda replied sweetly.

"Everyone hates him, Vane, and we can hate you too," Vicky whispered.

"And then I'd have to let everyone know about the love letters you sent my brother," Romilda replied, whilst checking her nails were perfect. "Offering..."

"Bitch," Vicky snarled, before turning and storming off, leaving her alone.

“Romilda nine, Vicky zero,” she chuckled to herself. An eerie silence swept through the room as a distraught-looking Harry entered. He looked around, had a brief, but quiet, confrontation with the smelliest Weasley, before hurrying up to his room. A minute later, he left, and the noise picked up again.

Romilda got to her feet, and frowned as Granger moved out as well. She followed the older witch, realising that Harry’s friend was following him. That could ruin their plans, so she looked around, hiding behind a corner. She peered around the corner before firing of a small levitation. For the first time, she wished she knew more spells – a stunning spell would have been better. Luck was on her side, as the spell hit just as Hermione’s foot brushed the carpet, causing her to trip.

Hermione tumbled to the ground, her bag flew open, and an ink pot rolled out and started to leak onto some parchment.

“My essay!” Hermione squeaked, as she tried to rescue it. “Bugger. Stupid rug,” the bushy-haired girl muttered. “I’ll fix this, and then go find Harry,” she continued to herself, before heading off in a different direction.

“Tori,” Romilda called after fetching her communication mirror from her bag.

“Romilda?”

“Library, quick.”

“I’ll be right there!”

Romilda paced nervously as she waited for her friend. She’d peeked in already, to see him in a corner, hunched over, and desperately paging through an ancient-looking tome.

“Hey, Romi,” Astoria panted. Her face was a little red from exertion. “Malfoy’s already trying to find ways to help embarrass Harry.”

“Want a few seconds to recover?” Romilda asked. “And like what?”

“Yeah, thanks, and no idea yet.”

As her friend’s breathing evened out and her cheeks returned to their normal porcelain white, Romilda suddenly found herself nervous. “You go first,” she said with an embarrassed giggle.

“What! No, you – *you’re* the Gryffindor!” Astoria said back with her own little giggle.

“But you’re the smart one!”

“And you’re the muscle,” Astoria retorted.

“Fine,” Romilda muttered, and squared her shoulders.

“Hold it, Vane,” Astoria said, grabbing her. “Remember what I always say to you?”

“A bull in a china shop is an analogy, not a guide line,” Romilda recited with some irritation.

“Exactly,” Astoria replied primly. “So here’s what we are not going to do: insult the bossy one, or the smelly one, unless he gives us an invitation to do so.”

Romilda took a deep breath and calmed down. “Thanks,” she muttered. She took her friend’s hand, and dragged her into the library. “Hi, Harry,” she said cheerfully, as she came to a stop next to him.

He looked up at them, his eyebrows raised above his glasses.

“I’m Romilda Vane, in case you never caught my name. And this is Astoria Greengrass, dunno if you’ve ever seen her around.”

“Harry Potter,” he replied automatically.

“May we sit?”

“Why?”

“Because we’re, like, the only two people in the school who believe you,” Romilda said confidently.

Harry blinked. “Really?”

“Yup.”

“What my enthusiastic friend is trying to say,” Astoria interrupted dryly, “is that, from what we’ve seen and heard of your school history, you try and stay out of the limelight, but often get thrust in it, to your obvious discomfort!”

“Yes, thank you, Tori,” Romilda muttered, feeling slightly embarrassed. “Hey,” she said, as the idea hit her, “it’s probably a trap! Someone’s out to get you.”

“That’s disturbingly true, and quite insightful,” Astoria mumbled. “How did you think of it?”

“Oi, bitch,” Romilda pouted at her best friend.

Any further squabbling was stopped as Harry chuckled. “Yeah, sit down.”

Romilda walked around the table, letting Tori take the seat to his left as she sat on his right. “So, yeah, I’m Romi, this is Tori.”

“You don’t like your names?”

“Too many syllables to be said in a hurry,” Astoria explained. “So what are you reading?”

“I’m trying to see if there is any way out of the tournament.”

“Because you don’t want to be in it?” Romilda asked curiously.

“Exactly.”

“Oi, brain girl, anything?”

Astoria rolled her eyes, and reached out, closing the book Harry was reading before assuming a professorial stance. “The Goblet of Fire is a Class One restricted item, held under the control of the Department of Mysteries. The creator was executed, after it was found that he had powered the charms with a blood sacrifice of five virgins, and that instead of charms there were in fact geases to ensure that those selected were forced to participate. The Wizengamot ordered that the Goblet be destroyed, but Silas Crotchworthy, the Minister at the time, overruled them and used it for the first Triwizard Tournament.”

Romilda clapped enthusiastically, as her friend finished her recital. “The Greengrass book of history?”

“Yup, I looked it up when my mum told me about the tournament this summer.”

Harry’s head dropped to the table with a bang. “So,” he muttered, “no way out?”

“Nope.”

“And Tori’s family has their own history book?”

Tori gave a slight cheer at her nickname being used. “Yes,” she said in her a normal voice.

Harry sat back up. “Bugger!”

Romilda giggled.

“Traditionally,” Astoria added, “the first two tasks are recovering something from an animal or a location. At Hogwarts, it has always been an animal for the first, and either the forest or the lake for the second.”

“Bugger,” Harry sighed once more. “So it will be something like acromantulas?”

Romilda shivered.

“What are they?” Astoria asked.

“Giant spiders,” Romilda replied. “There was a nest near where we stayed a few years ago. They tried to grab a cousin, and my whole clan went medieval on them!”

Astoria shivered. "I hate creatures," she muttered. "And I'm not going to join the Care of Magical Creatures class, either."

"Oh?" Harry asked sharply, before he modified his tone. "Why?"

"Because I am a twelve-year-old human girl without a drop of Giant blood in me; Professor Hagrid might not be scared of his animals, but I am."

"Hagrid wouldn't let them harm you," Harry said gently. "The only incident I know of was with Malfoy, and that was completely his own fault."

"Yes, with the hippogriff," Astoria replied. "But I was scarred by a creature in a detention earlier this year," she said, holding out her arm and showing off a small scar. "Pomphrey can't get rid of that."

"Oh," Harry said. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" Romilda asked curiously.

"I thought that she was only saying it because she was a Slytherin," he admitted in shame.

Astoria harrumphed. "I am *not* like *them*," she said sternly. "I'll let it slide this time, but *don't* do it again."

"Yeah, Tori has more cunning in her little finger than the entire fourth year." Romilda didn't like the amused expression on Harry's face. She'd been informed that Astoria's stern-face was extremely cute by her father, the last time Astoria had tried it.

"Which isn't difficult," Astoria added with a small grin, "because I've seen more cunning bird poop than that lot."

Harry chuckled once more. "You want to know a secret?" he asked.

"Yes," Romilda replied, hearing Astoria say it at exactly the same time.

"The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin, but I'd already met Malfoy, so I begged it not to!"

"A Slytherin, in Gryffindor," Astoria muttered. "That's genius. *I* should have done that!"

"The only reason she didn't is because she looks before she leaps," Romilda said. "Unlike me, who prefers action!"

"Yeah, she can be as sneaky as anyone, sneakier sometimes, but doesn't always think things through."

Romilda pouted playfully at her friend again.

“Harry!”

All three of them looked up, as Hermione sat down opposite Harry. “Vane, right?”

“Romilda, and this is Astoria,” Harry introduced them. “Romi, Tori, this is Hermione.”

Romilda shared a glance with Astoria, before they both turned. “Hi!”

“What are you two doing here?”

“We don’t believe Harry entered himself,” Romilda announced, “and as the rest of the school seems to have contracted a simultaneous case of hopefully terminal stupidity, we thought we’d come and help Harry.”

“Indeed,” Astoria agreed.

“Oh, that’s good.” Hermione looked at Harry, and sighed. “Ron’s still, well…”

“Being a git?” Romilda suggested.

“Romi,” Astoria moaned. “For the next two minutes you are banned from speaking anything until you have thought about it for ten seconds first.”

Romilda stuck her tongue out.

“Sadly, she’s accurate,” Hermione said with a wry smile.

“Great,” Harry sighed.

“While I’m being castigated anyway,” Romilda continued, following her instincts, “how *do* you both put up with him?”

“What?” Hermione demanded, standing.

“Hermione,” Harry snapped. “I’ve already made an idiot of myself once; you don’t need to do so as well.”

Hermione blinked.

“What do you mean, Romi?” Harry asked in a gentler tone.

“Well, he smells, almost as badly as Malfoy,” Romilda said. “How often does he shower?”

Harry looked away.

“Harry?” Hermione asked slowly, as she sank back down. “That look makes me suspicious. How often *does* Ronald bathe?”

Harry muttered something Romilda couldn't hear.

"Once every fortnight?" Astoria repeated with a shudder.

"Ears of a puma, that one," Romilda said proudly.

"Harry James Potter," Hermione said crossly. "And why do *I* not smell him?"

"Localised charm," Harry mumbled with a shrug. "Fred and George taught it to me. I reapply it every few days to me and you."

"And you were going to continue to apply it?"

"I have to sleep near him and you're my best friend."

"Pure blood males believe that bathing, a Muggle fashion, is beneath them, so they use a lot of scent. That's how Malfoy controls his stench."

Hermione placed her elbows on the table, and placed her head in her hands. "Give me the charm, Harry. I'll find a way to modify it so that I can tell how badly he smells."

"But..."

"I really, truly, appreciate what you have done for me, but he needs to learn that personal hygiene is important."

"Okay."

"Can we be taught it as well?" Romilda asked hopefully.

Hermione looked at her for a moment. "Hermione Granger," she said, offering her hand.

"Romilda Vane," Romilda replied, shaking it. Hermione gave the same greeting to Astoria. "You know, we need to find a way of disabling Malfoy's perfume, just on principle."

"I can do that," Astoria said.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed. "We wouldn't want Malfoy coming at you."

"He's afraid of my sister," Astoria shrugged.

"Oh, right, Daphne," Hermione said. "She doesn't talk much. Harry, she's the pretty one that sits next to Nott in potions."

Harry nodded. "The one who walks around like she's got something unpleasant stuck up her posterior." Harry winced. "Sorry, I didn't mean to insult your sister."

“Heh,” Astoria giggled. “She only does that because she can’t do two things at the same time. She took a magazine to the restroom once and almost ended in hospital, as she was so engrossed in reading she forgot why she was there!”

Romilda burst into giggles, and to her surprise, so did Hermione.

“My father is the best-looking man I’ve ever seen, but he’s not the brightest torch on the wall. Mum married him in a fit of lust, but he does love her back, and he tries. Daph’s nice, but Father showed her how to act, and that’s how she stays. None of the idiots in Slytherin, and you know, the world realise that it’s Mum that has the real power; she’s the one that organises little accidents for outsiders when nasty things happen to our family. Everyone believes it’s Daph that causes them.”

“Interesting,” Hermione said with a small smile. “I take it Daphne’s getting help with her essays?”

Astoria nodded. “I do love her, so I help as much as I can.”

“That explains the disparity,” Hermione said happily. “It’s always bugged me that her class performance and her essays don’t match – but with every fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh year swearing that they hadn’t helped her, the professors just thought that she did better in an out-of-class atmosphere.

“But enough gossip, where are we on the research?”

“There’s no way out of it,” Harry said glumly. “The Goblet itself is an evil device that I’d be shocked is in use, if I hadn’t lived in this world for three years, and the first task is probably retrieving something that’s guarded by a beast.”

“What sort of beast?”

Harry shrugged. “Acromantula, Cerberus, knowing the Wizarding world, probably a Nundu or something equally as ridiculous.”

Hermione sighed deeply. “Great. So, ideas about how to get past some unknown creature? You could summon it?”

“Nope,” Astoria replied. “Two tournaments ago, that was tried, and it worked. They’ve put anti-summoning charms on the items since then.”

“Oh,” Hermione said abruptly. “So there are some wizards with common sense.”

“A few,” Romilda agreed.

“Maybe speed is the answer,” Hermione mused. “If you’re moving fast enough, you might be able to snatch it.”

“A broom?” Harry suggested. “I could summon a broom!”

“Yawn,” Romilda said loudly. “Boring. Next.”

“Well, excuse me for wanting to live,” Harry snapped.

“Live? Animals want to *live*, Harry. Sure, you’re stuck in a stupid tournament, sure, you don’t want to be here, and sure someone’s trying to kill you, but hiding’s hardly going to solve the problem, is it?”

“Romi,” Astoria sighed, “flying at a beast is an acceptable way of dealing with a situation. It minimises risk.”

“Yeah, but it’s so boring it sucks! It has no class, no style. Look, not only is he Harry, he’s *the* Harry Potter. Speaking of which, why don’t you use the name?”

“Huh?” Harry asked, looking confused.

“You know, give a few interviews, sell a couple of endorsements – the Harry Potter Lightning Bolt broom, you’d make a fortune!” Romilda said enthusiastically.

“I don’t *want* to be famous.”

“Too late,” Romilda sing-songed instantly. “You already are! Look, like it or not, you had something to do with Thingy dying. Tori thinks it was your mum or dad that did something, but regardless, you were involved. So you were and are famous.”

“Wait,” Harry said, looking at Astoria. “You think what?”

“Logically, it makes no sense that you are so magical that you survived a curse with a hundred percent success rate as a baby, so something else must have helped.”

Harry looked at Hermione, and smiled. Romilda wasn’t quite sure what the smile meant.

“We agree,” Hermione said lightly.

“That’s Astoria,” Romilda said, proud of her friend. “Who is following in your footsteps with her grades,” she said to Hermione.

“Only I’m not planning on taking as many classes as you did in the third year.”

Harry and Hermione shared another amused look. “Good for you,” Hermione said.

“Well, now that I’m embarrassed, meet Romilda, the person Snape hates the second most in the school – Harry being number one, obviously,” Astoria said.

“What? Why?” Harry demanded.

“Because Romi’s a genius at Potions. Better than any of his seventh years!”

Romilda felt herself blushing. “Gran’s really, really into Potions,” she explained, “and I’ve been helping her since I was five.”

“A Gryffindor, good at potions? It’s Snape’s worst nightmare, and he can’t even mark her grades down, because her aunt’s on the Potioneers Union Practical Potioneers Examining Team,” Astoria added.

Harry’s eyes shot to Hermione’s. “See, P.U.P.P.E.T. is better than S.P.E.W.”

Hermione stuck her tongue out.

“So, how is your social experiment going?” Astoria asked.

“What experiment?” Harry asked back, looking confused.

“Well, Hermione’s far too intelligent to start a campaign without checking the facts beforehand, so she must be running it as a social experiment to see who is influenced by peer pressure, and as a way of examining the general activities of House-elves.”

Romilda noticed both Hermione blushing and Harry noticing the same blush. Astoria, sitting on his other side was looking only at Harry.

“Interesting,” Harry said slowly, turning his amazing eyes on to Astoria, “I’m hideously lacking in knowledge when it comes to House-elves, and to be honest, despite having one as a friend, I’ve never looked into them.” He shrugged lightly. “I’d rather fly than actually do research,” he grinned at Tori, “so could you please give me a rundown on the House-elves?”

Astoria smiled brightly, and Romilda realised her friend had no idea Harry had asked for Hermione’s benefit. Right then she saw that he *could* have been a Slytherin. Hermione, on the other hand, had a grateful expression on her face now.

All Romilda’s plans about getting rid of Hermione were suddenly rendered moot. Harry and Hermione were friends, very close friends, with a protectiveness of each other that surprised her. But, the good thing was that she had seen the look on Harry’s face before, when Romilda had been protected by her brother.

Harry was protecting Hermione the same way a sibling would. Which meant that Hermione was not a romantic interest and therefore not threat, therefore she could be turned into a valuable ally.

Romilda started to pay attention again, as Astoria finished explaining about the symbiotic relationship between wizards and House-elves, and how some House-elves could draw their magic from magical buildings, if the building was magical enough, but they needed the permission of the owner. And in return for the magic, they would work as hard as they could for the providers.

“Dobby,” Harry called, as Astoria finished.

“That’s Malfoy’s House-elf,” Astoria said, as a strangely dressed House-elf appeared.

“Dobby is free House-elf,” Dobby replied.

“And a good friend of mine.”

The House-elf practically burst into tears.

“Are you okay drawing magic from Hogwarts, or would you like to draw from me as well?” He offered. “You don’t have to bind or anything, but I don’t want you suffering!”

Romilda felt her mouth open, as she stared in shock. A quick glance showed that the other two females in sight in the empty library were looking as shocked as she was.

Dobby appeared to have had his entire body frozen. It took him close to a minute to make a response, though it seemed much longer as he stood there motionless.

“Harry Potter sir is willing to share magic with House-elf, without bonds?”

“Of course Dobby, we’re friends,” Harry said simply, as if that made his utterly strange offer acceptable.

“Can Dobby be doing a spell on Harry Potter sir?”

Harry shrugged.

Dobby waved his hand, and nothing seemed to happen, except Dobby’s eyes widened. “Harry Potter sir is great and powerful wizard,” he said, but then the House-elf stopped.

“But what?” Romilda asked directly. “No one here is going to get mad at you for speaking the truth.”

Dobby took his ears in his hands and started to tug.

“Stop that,” Harry said irritably. “And speak. I’ve already been embarrassed today by idiots saying stuff that isn’t true, so I’d actually appreciate some truth about now.”

“Harry Potter sir is great and powerful wizard, but,” Dobby cringed, “he is smothering his magics!”

Harry tilted his head. “I’m what now?”

“Stopping yours magics, Harry Potter sir, you is holding it really tight and squeezing it and it’s not growing!”

Dobby disappeared with a pop.

“Harry,” Hermione said suddenly, her tone sharp. Everyone looked at her, startled. “Are you a wizard?”

“Yes?” Harry asked.

“That sounded like a question. Are you a wizard?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to survive this tournament?”

“Yes, you know that.”

“Do I?” she asked.

Harry looked hurt.

Romilda felt like she was at a tennis match, as she turned to look at each of them in turn. Rather than keep looking at each, Romilda looked directly at Harry once more, trying to understand what he was feeling.

There was a touch of anger, resignation, and hurt, but under that was... was... She closed her eyes and tried again; this sort of thing was in her blood, but she always found it so hard. Her gran could tell someone's shoe size with a look, and then serve them their most innermost thoughts as a dessert. Romilda, on the other hand could barely guess someone's sex right – although she would never confess getting that large Slytherin's gender so very wrong.

How was she supposed to know Bulstrode wasn't part troll?

“Average,” Romilda said suddenly.

She felt three pairs of eyes look at her. “Harry wants to be average,” she said. “He wants to fit in, and not stand out, to be average.”

“Why?” Astoria blurted in shock, looking at Harry.

Harry was looking around wildly, looking for escape.

“Don't you dare try and run, Harry James Potter,” Hermione said firmly. “We are going to get to the bottom of this. And if I have to track you down for it, it will be much worse for you!”

“I could try logic?” Astoria suggested. “A personality is the particular combination of emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural response patterns of an individual, right?”

“That sounds like it came from the Encyclopaedia Britannica,” Hermione agreed.

Astoria nodded. “So, it would make sense that something in Harry's life has made him feverishly desire being average.”

“Not average,” Hermione said suddenly. “Normal. That's it, isn't it? All your life, you've been

told how good normal is, and how bad abnormal is?”

Harry didn't say anything; he just looked down, and looked defeated.

“Harry,” Romilda said, drawing on all her empathy. It would be easier if she could take his hand, but she couldn't work up the courage. “No one here is judging you, we just want to help you, we want to be friends, to have fun, to study, to play games, and to make sure that we can do that next year, and the year after, and the year after.”

Harry looked at her, and she could see the torment in his eyes.

“Hermione's right, isn't she, you've been indoctrinated haven't you?”

He nodded stiffly, once.

Romilda wanted to hug him, but knew that this really wasn't the time. She didn't know how he'd react, and she really didn't want to screw things up.

“You know what another word for abnormal is?” he asked, almost whispering. “Freak.”

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione whispered.

“Oi, gyppo whore, get the fuck over here; me and the boys need some entertainment,” Astoria said in a low flat voice. “If you're good, we'll give you a few shiny knuts for your time.”

Romilda looked at her friend, frowning. She really didn't want to remember that day.

“You're the second daughter, Greengrass, a worthless waste of flesh, but I'll tell you what, come over here on your knees, and if you do a good job, I'll take you as a mistress for a year or two, give you some real experience.” Astoria shrugged. “I was ten when that happened to me. Romi was eleven.”

“Who was it?” Harry demanded.

Astoria tilted her head to the side. “Why?”

“It's disgusting,” Harry said, his eyes flashing.

“More disgusting than being called a freak by people who are supposed to love and support you?” Astoria asked.

Harry froze.

“So yeah, you were called a freak. I've had older men try to persuade me to blow them since I was ten, I don't even know the first time that Romi was targeted for bigotry. But here's the difference.” Astoria leaned in and stared at Harry. “Mum obliviated the git who propositioned me, and he's now completely incontinent, and as for sex ... well, his tackle dropped off three days

afterwards.

“The men who tried to grab Romi were cursed. They’ve had nothing but bad luck since then. I bet most of them are in the gutter, barely alive, but with their lives destroyed. How’s your *family*, Harry?” She sneered the word, loading it with the contempt it deserved.

Harry shrugged slowly. “There’s nothing I can do, I have to go back there.”

“Why?”

“Professor Dumbledore said there are blood wards.”

“And?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Well, no, not really. If blood wards are that important to you, put up new ones; it will cost you about half a pint, but that’s it.”

Harry looked confused. “But... It needs my mum’s sister to work?”

“Aunt, right? The closer the family tie, the less blood you’d need. A few drops, maybe.”

“Hermione?” Harry asked, looking at the bushy-haired witch. Romilda turned to look as well, utterly fascinated.

Hermione blushed slowly. “I don’t know how those wards work,” she admitted in a small voice. “I’ve seen a few references, but nothing in depth.”

Astoria pulled out a piece of parchment and her quill. She scribbled on the parchment for a few seconds, and then passed it to Hermione. “Two books on warding, you can owl-order them.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said. “You’re paying for them.”

Harry half-smiled and nodded. He looked at Hermione for another long moment. “I’ll take one for the team,” he sighed. “Is it dark magic?”

“That depends on your definition of dark,” Romilda responded. The last thing she wanted was her friend being seen as invaluable, without her. “It’s normally seen in bad taste, and generally frowned upon, most people wouldn’t even mention it, because half a pint is a lot of blood, but it’s not illegal. Blood’s used all over the place in legal documents. Basically, you have to use a Blood Quill to write the runes in the key stone. It’s not difficult, it’s just unpleasant.”

“Does it hurt?” Harry asked curiously.

“Not unless you were using a blood quill that’s been cursed. The curse was a lovely option that was popular a hundred years ago to discipline unruly children,” Romilda said with a shrug. “It

went the same way as corporal punishment in schools. It's assault, basically; all the Aurors are pretty strict about it.

"But we're drifting. In short, if blood wards are what you need, then half a pint and a blood replenishing potion and you're set to go. I'm sure there are load of people who'd be happy to have you stay with them. Hell, I stay at Tori's for most of the summer when my family's traveling, because her place is so well warded."

Astoria nodded. "I'll bet that our family tree has someone in it that is related to the Potters. I can talk to Mum if you'd like?"

"I'll ask Professor Dumbledore," Harry said with a nod.

"Why?" Romilda asked.

"Because he said I have to say there."

"So?"

Harry looked at Hermione. Hermione opened her mouth, and then closed it and shrugged. "Maybe he's your guardian?"

"He's never said so," Harry replied slowly.

"Then he's not, he's probably just advising you because you're the last of your line," Astoria said. "So, yeah, anyway, we've gone off on a tangent again. Mum will find someone you can stay with, so with that out of the way, why hold yourself back."

"Someone to stay with," Harry muttered. "Sirius..."

Romilda jerked, and opened her mouth.

"Think, and then speak," Astoria snapped before Romi could speak.

Romilda paused, and counted to ten. She took a deep breath. "I was only going to say that we could put a doozy of a curse on him, for betrayal!"

"Yes," Astoria muttered, "which is why I stopped you. Use your gypsy power, girl!"

Romilda did as she was told, focusing on Harry, and all she was getting was a sense of family. And if he wasn't scared, and thought of Sirius as family, well, then, something else had happened. "Black's innocent?" she asked in disbelief.

"That's what I figured," Tori said in agreement. "It always seemed a little suspect, and the way Harry said his name combined with the rumours about last year, and well, it was suddenly obvious." They both turned to look at Harry, who was looking at them in disbelief.

“Peter Pettigrew was my parent’s secret keeper. He framed Sirius, and turned into his Animagus form, a rat, and escaped. He then hid at the Weasleys for years.”

“Ooo, oo, ooo!” Romilda said, bouncing in her seat. “So you should be able to get some of the rat hair?”

“Potentially,” Hermione said slowly, “especially if Ron’s habits extend to other places. Why?”

“Because he’s betrayed Harry, as completely and utterly as it is possible to do so, we can use that that betrayal to give him *such* a cursing!”

“Really?” Harry asked. “Like what?”

“Well, personally, I’d like to use the one where every time he goes to the toilet, it feels like someone is ripping his balls off with a nail-spiked glove. And then, we can add the one where he feels the overwhelming urge to streak in public – so that he gets arrested regularly, and no one has any respect for him, or use for him, and he dies alone!”

Harry blinked. “That second one,” he said, “it forces him to streak in public?”

Romilda nodded.

Harry slowly started to smirk. “Oh, yes,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Yes, indeed.” He paused. “Can we time, roughly, when he’d do so, after the curse?”

Romilda opened her mouth, paused, and then nodded slowly. She looked at Harry directly. “That depends. Your average wizard or witch can cast the curse, and if they have been betrayed, it would work – eventually.

“A really powerful wizard, on the other hand, one who was comfortable with himself, one who wasn’t squishing his magic, well, he could set the curse to go off to the minute.”

“Seriously?” Harry asked, excitedly. “To the minute?”

Romilda nodded. She pulled her wand out, and held it in her left hand. “On the breath of my forebears, on the dreams of my children yet to be, on the punishment of pain too much to bear, I swear that I have not led you false.”

There was a soft light, and nothing else. Romilda had often used this oath when she was a lot younger (and innocent) to get out of trouble. She hadn’t realised until later that her not offering to do this on other occasions normally meant she was guilty.

“That’s great, Hermione,” Harry said excitedly, looking at his friend. “I can curse Pettigrew to reveal himself in public, that will show that he’s alive, and get Sirius a trial, where he can finally prove his innocence, and then I can use the blood to move the wards, and live with him!” Harry’s eyes started to flash, “and then I can have friends around, and visit them, and everything,” he continued with enthusiasm.

“If you’re actually a powerful wizard,” Hermione interrupted dryly. “And not some middle of the road, normal, non-freak.”

Harry paused. “I just want to be normal,” he said softly. “You know? Not show off, not scare away friends.”

“I won’t be jealous, Harry,” Hermione stated. “I’m better than you in academics.”

“I’ll always be better than you at potions,” Romilda added confidently.

“I know far more about how our world works,” Astoria finished. She gave Harry a cheeky grin, “and my Charms essay that Daph entered last week got a better mark than yours,” she finished impishly.

“Dobby is good cleaning House-elf,” the House-elf piped up, reappearing with a snap. Romilda had actually forgotten he’s been there; they’d never had House-elves growing up, and she had adopted everyone else’s attitude toward them when she had arrived at Hogwarts.

“Ron,” Harry said weakly.

“Friends stick by you,” Hermione said with a shrug.

Harry took a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly. He closed his eyes.

“Oooooo,” Dobby whispered. “Harry Potter sir is great and powerful.”

The pen on the table started to rattle. “Harry?” Hermione asked.

Harry opened his eyes. They were glowing the most amazing green colour, “I’ve let it out, and now I can’t stop it,” he said worriedly.

The chair Romilda was sitting on started to vibrate as well.

Hermione rushed around the table, and hugged Harry. Romilda looked at Astoria, they met each other’s eyes, before they shifted so that they could join in the hug.

As soon as Romilda touched Harry, she felt magic surge into her, in the single most amazing magical feeling she’d ever experienced. She felt herself absorbing some of it, and could see that Astoria was doing the same thing, her blue eyes were glowing as well.

Suddenly, it started to diminish.

“Let him go,” Astoria mouthed, “we don’t want him to freak out!”

She took the advice, and regained her seat. Hermione did the same thing a few seconds later. The House-elf looked amazed at what he’d just seen.

“That feels good,” Harry admitted. “Thanks. For everything.”

Romilda beamed at him, as did Astoria.

“So, Harry, I expect you’re going to do better in practical demonstrations now that you’re not trying to do the spells with most of your power locked away?” Hermione said, in a very firm tone.

“I guess,” Harry muttered.

“No, not ‘I guess’. Think of Sirius. You’ll need to practice to get used to your power, so you can use the curse!”

“I will,” Harry said firmly.

Astoria looked at her watch. “Okay, this has been fun, but curfew is in a few minutes. We should do it again tomorrow, so we can work out how Harry’s going to survive.”

“Oi,” Romilda interrupted, “Harry’s going to rock this tournament, none of this barely surviving. He’s got two smart girls to help with the spells, and me to help with the important style! He’ll send the Veela home in tears, send the Quidditch brute back to his broom, and make the pretty boy feel as inadequate as his ability in bed!”

Romilda felt everyone look at her.

“How do you know about his ability in bed?” Astoria asked.

“Oh, he nailed one of my cousins last summer. Well, if you can call thirty seconds of vigorous thrusting followed by ten minutes of crying ‘sex’!”

Astoria and Hermione giggled, while Harry had a weird expression on his face. “Which one was cry…” he started. “You know what? Forget it. I don’t want to know.”

“So anyway, my point is, with my style, Hermione’s smarts, Astoria’s ability to extract every advantage from the rule book, and Harry’s power, we’ll help Harry be a legend, and he can use that, so that when we curse Pettigrew, he can publicly demand a trial for Sirius to find out what the flip happened all those years ago!”

“Harry,” Hermione said gently. “I think Romilda is right. If the *Harry Potter* turns up at the tournament, does well – amazingly well – then demands to know how his godfather spent years in prison for Pettigrew’s murder, if Pettigrew is apparently still alive – think of it, the political pressure will be massive, it’ll be unstoppable.”

Harry looked down. He took another deep breath. When he raised them, there was a new determination in his eyes. “For Sirius, and for myself. Let’s do this!”

“All right!” Romilda yelled, jumping to her feet. “This is going to kick arse!” She paused, to see the other three giggling at her. She pouted at them. “Fine, you Englishmen have the enthusiasm of

dead squids! I'll just celebrate for all of us." She raised her hands above her head and did a little Gypsy dance on the spot, one with a lot of little jumps and sharp changes of vertical direction. She was well aware that it made certain parts bounce around as well.

Astoria rolled her eyes, but smiled as well. She stood. "Right, I need to head back. We going to meet here tomorrow?"

"It will be a bit public," Hermione frowned.

"Oh, Dobby is knowing a place!" Dobby said. "Is room of many things. Will be perfect for Harry Potter sir."

"Have you got your magic, yet, Dobby?" Harry asked.

Dobby shook his head shyly. "Sir is being sure?"

"Yup."

Dobby made a wave with his right hand and then his eyes bulged, and he actually grew an inch – fortunately his tea-towel clothing was still long enough to cover him. "Dobby is whole!" The House-elf jumped up and down in joy, before hugging Harry hard.

"Dobby, can I ask you to do me a really nasty favour?"

Dobby nodded eagerly.

"Can you check Ron's stuff for rat hair?"

Dobby sniggered, and snapped his fingers. A robe appeared. Dobby peered in the pocket and then handed Harry a few hairs.

"Not nasty, that's just cleanings. Dobby will show Harry Potter sir the special room in morning. Dobby needs go tell other House-elves about how lucky Dobby is!" The House-elf popped away.

"Are you okay getting back on your own, Astoria?" Harry asked.

"Yup, no problem," Astoria said.

Romilda walked around the table and hugged her friend. "See you tomorrow."

"Yup, bye Harry, Hermione."

"Bye, Astoria," they said in unison, and Astoria walked out.

"Come on," Hermione said, picking up her bag. "Let's get back to the tower."

Romilda picked up her bag, and was thrilled that she and Tori had been accepted as friends. They

walked in companionable silence, and all too soon they entered the Common Room.

There was a hush, again, as they entered, and everyone stared at them with distrust. After everything that she had learnt about Harry today, about his family, Romilda felt her temper erupt.

“Merlin, you people suck,” Romilda said loudly. “I guess what people say is true, Gryffindor is the house of leftover losers. Not loyal enough for Hufflepuff, certainly not smart enough for Ravenclaw, not even cunning enough for Slytherin, so you losers got here by default, because you certainly aren’t brave enough to be Gryffindors.” She spat on the floor in front of them to show her contempt. “Tosspots, the lot of you. And worse, hypocritical tosspots. How many of you tried to enter and failed? Are you jealous? You are pathetic.”

Romilda fluffed her hair. “Night, Hermione, Harry,” she said, and walked in to her dorm room.

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“It’s actually good to know where I stand with you lot,” Harry said in to the stunned silence. Hermione looked at him sharply; she hadn’t expected him to say anything.

He shrugged. “McGonagall said your house is supposed to be family.” He snorted. “You are. Arrogant and bigoted bullies, just like the Dursleys; we may be in the same house, but you are acquaintances, nothing more, nothing less.” He turned, and for the first time that Hermione could remember, he hugged her. “Night, Hermione.”

“Night, Harry,” she replied, as he walked off, his gait far more upright than it had been just a few hours ago. She was aware that everyone was looking at her, and she looked back, seeing what Harry and Romilda had seen. She saw scrapping children. In the corner of her eye, Ron looked like he was fuming, and she found that she didn’t care. Before, she had been torn, not wanting to lose either of her two friends; now she wasn’t. Tonight she’d made friends with a couple of girls who were smart, funny, and didn’t care that she was brainy. And more, one was a friendly pureblood, the other a full gypsy, both with access to magic she’d never even seen before.

She shook her head in displeasure and walked to her dorm. She quickly cleansed herself and got into bed. It was only when she was behind silenced curtains that she allowed herself to laugh at the expression of a whole house full of Gryffindors looking scared of a second year that was proud of being a gypsy.

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“Harry Potter sir?”

Harry awoke with a groan, to see Dobby hovering over him. He bit back his instinctive urge to swear at the elf. The face was not one he wanted to wake up to. “Dobby?”

Dobby nodded urgently. “Dobby was wondering. Dobby is telling other House-elves that you is letting me be sharing magics without bond. Other House-elves are wondering if great and

powerful Harry Potter sir would be freeing them as well?”

“Do I have enough magic?” Harry asked tiredly.

Dobby nodded hard. “Enough magic for lots and lots and *lots* of House-elves, with plenty spare for Harry Potter sir to be great and powerful wizard.”

“Then yeah, tell ’em to knock themselves out,” Harry yawned, as he turned over and went back to sleep. He didn’t even notice as House-elves joined him, quietly standing behind Dobby.

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In the Hogwarts kitchen, there was something of a party going on. Far more House-elves than had ever been seen at Hogwarts were dancing with each other, while others were drinking Butterbeer. The noise level was huge, before one House-elf floated up to the ceiling, stopping just short.

“Cully is calling for attention,” the House-elf shouted.

The other House-elves quietened down. “So, House-elves are being free,” he said. “And House-elves are being powered, but House-elves need to hide it, right?”

“Right,” the other House-elves shouted back.

“How is we doings that?” Cully asked. “And would Great and Powerful and Really Great Harry Potter mind?”

Dobby floated up. “Great Harry Potter would not mind. Hims being embarrassed by praise for helpings. Hims always been great to Dobby, even when Dobby was bad House-elf.”

There was a series of sighs of pleasure from the House-elves.

“Hows we hiding it?” Cully asked again.

“Old House-elf McFooie knows!” a House-elf shouted.

“Speak, old House-elf!”

“Wizards are thinking House-elves are being stupids,” he stated, to some irritated grumblings from the gathered House-elves. “We plays on that.”

“Ooooo,” came the noise from the crowd.

“How?” Cully asked.

“We says that we don’t need wizards anymore,” McFooie said.

“But we does, we is needing Great and Powerful Harry Potter sir.”

“Ahhh,” McFooie called. “But he is being *wizard* , not *wizards* !”

“Ooooo,” the crowd chorused again.

“McFooie is wise old House-elf,” Cully said. “So is agreed, we is telling wizards we doesn’t need wizards?”

Everyone nodded.

“But,” Cully continued. “We has to look for ways for us to gets free of even Harry Potter sirs, not for us, but for our children’s children’s children, when Great and Powerful Harry Potter sir is gettings olds.”

There was a lot of nodding. “But as we is being frees, we can now be lookings for it, without breaking our words.”

There was a huge cheer from the gathered House-elves.

“That is being for later. Now is being for party!”

“What abouts breakfast?”

Cully smiled evilly. “Cully has plan!”

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“Romi?”

Romilda rolled out of her burrow in the covers, and grabbed the mirror she always kept in bed with her. “Tori?”

“I’ve found out what Malfoy is planning,” she said, already rolling her eyes. “He’s thought up some badges that switch between saying ‘Support Cedric Diggory’ and then ‘Potter Stinks.’ He’s paying a seventh year to make them.”

Romilda blinked. “Potter stinks?”

Astoria nodded.

“What is he, six?”

“Well, he doesn’t bathe; he has no manners, no sophistication, no deportment, no taste, and no ability in class. And he doesn’t know how to talk to girls.”

“So yes,” Romilda said and giggled. “He’s six.”

“Tori, I told off the Gryffindor house last night. I lost my temper.”

“Could you try losing your temper at all the other houses?”

Romilda shook her head. “You know I look weird when I fake it.”

“True,” Astoria mused. “Anyway, can you let Harry and Hermione know?”

“Will do, see you after breakfast.”

Astoria nodded and vanished from the mirror, and Romilda reluctantly rolled out of bed and started to get ready for the day. She arrived in the common room, to find that it was empty. She hadn't even seen her roommates earlier.

She was joined a few moments later by Hermione. “Quiet, isn't it?” Hermione said.

“Yeah, not seen anyone this morning.”

“They're either mad or ashamed,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“It doesn't matter,” Romilda said with a matching shrug. “Losers.”

Hermione giggled, and then looked up as Harry entered. He'd showered, and had his robes draped over his arm. “Morning,” he said. He paused, and looked at Hermione. “Erm.”

“Erm?” Hermione asked.

“I kinda allowed some House-elves to use my power last night, like Dobby.”

“Some?”

Harry shrugged. “I think it might have been all of the Hogwarts House-elves. Dobby said they wanted to be powered and not bonded.”

Hermione dived forward and hugged Harry hard. “Now you don't have to wear a S.P.E.W. badge,” she joked.

“Hurray,” Harry replied dryly, weakly waving his hands.

“I won't tell Astoria,” Romilda volunteered.

“Thank you,” Hermione said primly. “I've learnt a lesson I won't forget. I got so caught up in the idea of emancipating slaves, that I didn't bother to actually find out what it would do to them.” She paused, “or think of such an obvious way around it.” She had a proud look on her face that made Harry blush slightly.

“Okay, Tori found out that Malfoy's paid someone to create badges that say ‘Support Cedric Diggory’ and then ‘Potter stinks.’”

Harry blinked. "What is he, six?"

Romilda laughed. "That's exactly what I said! And we agreed that he is."

"Okay, let's go to breakfast," Harry said. "And see who is wearing these badges."

They walked downstairs, finding that everyone must be at breakfast already. They entered, and Malfoy immediately shouted, "Oi, Potter, seen these?" He showed off the badge proudly.

Harry paused in the doorway. Romilda frowned, wondering why the professors weren't doing anything.

"Potter stinks?" Harry asked. "What are you, Malfoy, six?" He turned his back and walked to the foot of the Gryffindor table. Romilda looked around, and was surprised at just how many students were wearing them. Even some of the French and German students were sporting the insulting badges. She knew Astoria would have memorised each and every student who was wearing them.

Romilda wasn't surprised that every single Hufflepuff was wearing them. She joined Harry at the table with Hermione, and started to eat the breakfast that appeared on the table.

"What's this?" someone shouted from the Ravenclaw table. Uproar quickly followed. Harry and Hermione looked confused, and then up the table. It seemed that all the other students were having a thin gruel for breakfast.

Romilda snagged another sausage and ate it quickly, just in case it might disappear.

"Potter!" Snape yelled, "What have you done!"

Romilda turned and stared at him.

"I have done nothing, nothing at all," Harry replied evenly.

"Detention, and fifty points from Gryffindor for interfering with the food!"

Nothing happened. Harry looked surprised.

"One hundred points from Gryffindor!" Snape yelled. Nothing happened again.

From the Slytherin table, Astoria stood and walked over to them. Everyone was watching her. She paused as she passed Snape. "You, sir, are despicable. I cannot live as a charge of a bigoted bully like you," she said calmly, and joined them at the table. "What I find really curious, is that your head of house hasn't even tried to defend you," she said to Harry.

"You're right," Harry said, ignoring the fuming Snape. "And after last night, this is the final straw. I've not done a thing about the food... say, is there a way to leave a House?"

Astoria nodded. "It's done like this. I, Astoria Greengrass, hereby renounce any association with

Slytherin House, on the grounds that it's run by an arrogant offensive bully with spotty hygiene and scant teaching skills."

The Slytherin colours vanished from her robes.

Harry nodded. "I, Harry James Potter, hereby renounce my claim to Gryffindor House, on the grounds that the Head of House condones bullying and that the students are cowards." The Gryffindor colours vanished from his robes.

Romilda smiled. "I, Romilda Rowena Vane, hereby renounce any to Gryffindor House, on the grounds that Gryffindor no longer stands for the values that I believe in."

"I, Hermione Jean Granger, hereby renounce any to Gryffindor House, because it is not a place that I can legitimately call home."

Romilda looked up at the Professors' table, to see McGonagall with a hand over her heart, and a distraught look on her face.

Astoria calmly helped herself to some of the lovely food near the three former Gryffindors. She paused, and looked at Snape, who was glaring at them. "If you don't mind, Professor?" she asked politely. "We are trying to eat."

Professor Snape hovered, before he snarled and retreated. Dumbledore was frowning at them, and down at his plate.

"Cully," he called.

A House-elf appeared in front of him. The House-elf stood up straight. "Professor Dumbledore?"

"There appears to be a problem with the food," Dumbledore said genially.

Cully looked around. "Cully is not seeing problems," the House-elf replied.

"There appears to be gruel for breakfast, rather than the wonderful spread you usually provide."

Cully nodded in agreement. "Yes, gruel," he agreed. "What is being the problems?"

Dumbledore paused. "Why are we being served gruel?"

Cully smiled happily. "Because you is bullies, and some of you is stinky," he explained eagerly. "And bullies get gruel." The House-elf nodded firmly. "Also, House-elves are fed up of dealing with students who don't bathe. Students who don't bathe can be doing their own laundries!"

Dumbledore blinked. "I'm sorry, Cully, but I am going to have to order you to make a proper breakfast."

"Cully thinks that Dumbledore can take his orders and be shoving them into a small, smelly place

where things have been shoved before.”

Romilda almost choked on the egg she’d just taken a bite of.

“Cully, you are demoted. Sharder?”

Another House-elf appeared. “You’s calling Sharder?”

“Sharder, I’m afraid that Cully is no longer head House-elf.”

“Sharder is thinking that Dumbledore is being barmy,” Sharder said. “Barmy peoples not giving Sharder orders.” The House-elf nodded, and popped out.

“Elves are having own power now, House-elves no longer needing wizards,” Cully said, “House-elves are liking work, so House-elves will continue works, but House-elves are no longer following bad orders.” Dumbledore paled dramatically, as did some of the other humans.

Dumbledore gulped. “Cully, how many House-elves are having their own power?”

Cully smiled. “Alls five five of House-elf fingers times House-elf fingers of them.”

There was a series of gasps. Hermione looked at Harry, who blinked in surprise. “What do you know,” he whispered, “it is my fault that they have poor food after all.”

“Shush,” Hermione whispered, her face twitching as she tried to keep a straight face.

“House-elves is no longer needing wizards to live. If House-elves not be treated right, House-elves vanish, and wizards can be making their own cleans and foods.” Cully vanished, leaving a stunned looking Dumbledore.

“Dobby,” Harry called. The excitable House-elf appeared instantly. “Do you know somewhere where four house-less students can stay?”

Dobby nodded enthusiastically. “Has male and female sections, and small common room,” he added. “Harry Potter sir is wanting his stuff moving?”

“Please, Dobby, and could you take care of Tori, Romi and Hermione’s stuff as well?”

“Dobby can be doings that!”

“Thank you, my friend.”

The House-elf shivered in pleasure and popped away. Harry reached out for another piece of toast, and spread some butter and jam oven it. The crunch seemed extra loud, as he took a bite. The taste seemed enhanced by the fact most everyone else was eating gruel. When he had finished, he looked at the others. “Shall we head out?”

“Mr Potter,” Dumbledore called. “My office, please?”

“Why?” Astoria asked. “Because if it’s more bullying, I’m going to have to let Mum know.”

“Bullying is another form of betrayal,” Romilda added eagerly, as it occurred to her. “I can do a gypsy curse for betrayal – it’s really, really nasty!”

“No, Miss Greengrass, Miss Vane, it’s just that I was going to ask Mr Potter about the House-elves. And about the House issue.”

“Oh, you mean our friends?” Hermione asked sweetly. “Friends help each other out, Professor. They don’t make snap judgements without the facts. As for the House issue, why, the Ravenclaws are bullies and made a decision without bothering to find out facts, the Hufflepuffs showed that they are only just and loyal to themselves, and don’t particularly care about honesty, probity, and character, and as for the Slytherins, they have to hide behind Professor Snape to even get close to winning the House Cup, which is hardly cunning and ambitious. So thank you, but I am quite happy to be houseless at Hogwarts.”

“Me too,” Romilda said happily, hearing Astoria agree with her.

“And as for supervision,” Harry said slowly, “it’s not going to be any different. At Gryffindor, we’d average a teacher poking her head into the common room once a month.” He smiled. “As for the House-elves, as Hermione said, Dobby’s always been my friend. If there’s nothing else, then I really need to start studying for the tournament. Tori, is the Goblet of Fire common knowledge?”

“Of course not, do you think the other schools would have agreed to come if they’d known that it was a Class One restricted item powered by a six-fold human blood sacrifice.”

“What!” the French Headmistress bellowed, closely followed by the Bulgarian one saying something similar. “Dumblydoor, is thees true?”

As Dumbledore turned, Harry walked out, quickly followed by Astoria and Hermione. Romilda joined them.

“Astoria!” They all turned, to see Daphne, Astoria’s older sister, jogging after them. “Why are you doing this?”

“Mum’s third golden rule of life.”

“If the world is going right, go left,” Daphne recited, nodding her head with certainty.

Astoria nodded and pointed to the badge on Daphne’s chest. Daphne looked at it and frowned. She took it off. She looked apologetic.

“Yeah, I know, Daph,” Astoria said softly, “you don’t like to rock the boat. It’s okay, honest.”

Daphne smiled brightly, “Okay then.”

“Stay out of trouble.”

“That should be my advice to you,” Daphne said with a slight frown. “But you’ve always been the smart one. Thank you.” She nodded at the others, and walked off, her posture correct.

“Rooms are being ready, Harry Potter sir,” Dobby said, as he appeared with a pop.

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“What is going on, Dumbledore?” Fudge demanded as he entered the office with Lucius Malfoy and his undersecretary.

Albus paused, and stared at Fudge. After the day he’d had, he was not going to be talked to like that by anyone. “I beg your pardon?”

Fudge looked blank.

“My title, Minister, is Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, or Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, or even Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

“What are you blathering on about, Dumbledore?”

Albus smiled grimly. “Minister, you will address me with the respect I am due, or you will be ejected from Hogwarts.”

“Ah hem-hem, it sounds like you are threatening the Minister?”

“Dolores, shut up,” Albus snapped. “Now, Minister, you were saying?”

Fudge swallowed. “My apologies, Chief Warlock.”

“Quite alright, it has been a tiring day,” Albus said, once more falling in to the role he knew infuriated his peers most. “Now, what can I do for you?”

Fudge floundered for a second, and Lucius stepped in. “We are concerned about the fate of the Elves, and the current state of the I.C.W.,” he said in a tone that made Dumbledore want to blast the man through the window.

“Well,” Dumbledore said with a smile, “you’ll be delighted to know that I have already complied with the I.C.W.’s request, by passing Oath-validated memories of the discussions in which the three of you demanded that the Triwizard Tournament take place this year, over my strong objections. I’m sure they will be delighted with the part where you, Lucius, and you, Delores, demanded that we use the Class One restricted item, the one powered by a blood sacrifice, on innocent school children.

“I’m afraid that the I.C.W. believes that to be rather illegal. I, myself, am going to have to stand down from the I.C.W. for my involvement in the setting up of the tournament, for not making it

clear to Beauxbatons and Durmstrang about the nature of the artefact, and for not bringing this to the I.C.W. You two are facing a full investigation for your demands that we use it.”

Lucius and Delores paled dramatically.

“Additionally, Minister, I’m afraid that there will be no hiding place for you, either.” Albus smiled grimly.

“As for the House-elves, they have managed to find a magical source that does not require a slavery contract.”

“This is disastrous,” Fudge moaned.

“Yes, it is,” Albus agreed. “If I can’t negotiate with the House-elves, Hogwarts may have to close. Fortunately, they appear to be continuing to work at the moment, but obviously, without a contract, that leaves us in a tenuous position.

“As such, and as is written in the Hogwarts Charter, I am declaring a full investigation into the school, and myself. I have requested from the I.C.W. a team to audit Hogwarts fully. This investigation will start with the Governors, and will work their way down through the senior leadership team, and the rest of my colleagues, and end with our groundskeeper and our caretaker.

“The I.C.W. is already assembling an independent team. As for the Wizengamot, I have already sent them a letter explaining just why we are facing the worst international diplomatic crisis in many years. It may surprise you to learn that the I.C.W. looks very poorly on a country that uses a cursed object to enslave a witch from France and a famous wizard from Bulgaria.”

Albus almost smiled at the expressions on the three in front of him, and would have, if he didn’t feel such overwhelming guilt himself.

After Harry, Hermione, and his two new friends had walked out this morning, he’d actually stepped back and looked at himself.

He had not liked what he had seen.

He had not mentioned the badges this morning, partly because they were childish, and partly because he thought it might be character-building for Harry. He hadn’t even thought that his lack of action had meant that he was condoning bullying. But he had, and he couldn’t deny it. He knew that Minerva was utterly devastated, more so, because like him, she had no excuse.

And now he had three ex-Gryffindors and one ex-Slytherin, as well as fuming visitors from foreign schools, and chagrined students who’d been given limp ham sandwiches and cold chips for lunch. Not to mention a schoolful of children who had just discovered they could ditch their houses.

At least their guests were getting something slightly better, and the odd student here and there was getting some decent food. One Slytherin had tried to take good food from a third year Ravenclaw,

only for a House-elf to appear, tell him that bullying was bad, and transfigure his robes into a coal sack without sleeves or trouser legs.

Albus had made a note to call the Slytherin into his office later.

“Well,” he said, “I’m sure you’ll want to prepare for the I.C.W. investigation Lucius, I will accept your resignation letter in the morning.”

“What?” Lucius asked, his head snapping up.

“Hogwarts by-laws,” Dumbledore pointed out. “Signed by you, I believe, that states that no one under I.C.W. investigation can be employed by Hogwarts.”

Lucius’ eyes flashed, before he nodded. “After I clear my name...”

“Are you accusing me of supplying false evidence to an I.C.W. investigation?” Albus thundered, jumping to his feet. He allowed his magic to flare; he was a lot of things, but a liar he was not.

Lucius shook his head urgently. “No, not at all.”

“Then there will be no clearing of your name,” Albus said quietly, in an even tone. “All the officials involved have sworn vows of honesty. This investigation will be public, and completely transparent.”

Lucius looked at him in abject horror. Even without using Legilimency, Albus knew what he was thinking: *No, no, that’s not the way it’s done.*

“Now, you may all leave.” The three practically ran from his office, and Albus sat down. He sighed; he hadn’t done that in years. As he had gotten older, he had found himself enjoying playing political games, so much so that he was extremely concerned that he had forgotten why he was playing in the first place.

He had not used his magical power in years, almost encouraging his enemies to work against him, so that he could defeat them in other ways.

It hadn’t taken much to persuade the I.C.W. to enforce honesty charms on all the investigators, and he’d been the bonder as well.

His guilt in not taking down the powerful enemies years before was absolute.

---

“Jinky,” Filius called hopefully. The House-elf that assisted him the most appeared. “Can I ask you a question?” he asked, aware that he was already asking one, but knowing that the House-elf would interpret his words correctly.

“Yous can,” Jinky replied with a nods. “Jinky not answering some questions, though.”

“I noticed that Luna, the blonde third year, received some decent food at lunch. Why?”

“Loveygirl is being nice,” Jinky said with a nod. “She is being bullying victim as well, from other claws.”

Filius closed his eyes for a second. That had actually physically hurt to hear. “Thank you, Jinky.”

Jinky nodded. “Sir is always being nice,” she said, before popping away, she returned a second later with a large roast beef sandwich, leaving it on his table.

“Sir has been failing at his job,” Filius said sadly. He looked at the sandwich regretfully, before he turned and walked to the Ravenclaw common room, leaving the sandwich on the table.

He entered, and saw the Ravenclaws gathered around desks and on couches, as normal.

“House Meeting,” he called. It took five minutes for all his kids to be sat in rows in front of him. He raised his wand. With a few flicks and jabs, he called out the truth charm. While some of his seniors could possibly beat it, none of the younger ones would be able to.

He stood in front of them, on a pedestal, and stared for a long moment. “I have been remiss in my duties. Hands up, everyone who has been involved in bullying another Ravenclaw.”

The number of hands that slowly went up broke his heart. He truly did not want to know if even more people were involved in inter-house bullying.

---

Pomona Sprout stared at the portrait of Helga Hufflepuff. For the first time, she felt like the portrait was judging her, and finding her wanting.

She'd been so excited when Cedric had been chosen to compete, and so upset when Potter had cheated his way in. She, like the rest of her 'Puffs, had felt like Harry had stolen some of their thunder. Not once did she look at things from Harry's perspective.

Despite everything, she had listened to Severus' vicious words, and allowed herself to believe the worst of Potter. And this morning, she had been pleased with the show of support for Cedric, and had ignored the other message. She had almost worn one herself.

She counted herself fortunate she hadn't.

But not once had she thought about what it was called when an entire school turns on an innocent person, and worse, when professors allow it.

“Come in,” she called, after a knock on her door. Cedric entered and sat opposite her. “Professor Sprout,” he said in a low voice. “What if Potter didn't put his name in?”

“It occurs to me,” Pomona replied, “that either Mr Potter is clever enough to bypass Professor

Dumbledore's protections, with no one knowing, or he is innocent." She felt her stomach clench. "Carty?"

The House-elf appeared. "Carty, did Harry Potter put his name in the cup?"

Carty shook her head hard. "Harry the Greatest never went near the cup; hims didn't want anything to do with it."

"Thank you."

Carty nodded and vanished.

"Shit," Cedric muttered.

Pomona couldn't find it in her heart to chastise him. If she'd asked that question twenty-four hours ago, none of this would have happened. He stood. "I'll tell the others."

Pomona went back to staring at the portrait of her Founder.

---

Severus Snape looked around his office, and then down at his possessions. Twenty-four hours ago, he'd been delighted that he could vent some of his hatred of James Potter at his son. Even this morning, he'd been happy to take advantage of the situation with the food.

Only, somehow, the points system hadn't worked, and Potter hadn't been guilty. He'd thought that because James Potter would have done it, his son would have as well.

And that, possibly, was his problem. He always saw James when he looked at Harry.

He wasn't hanging around in Hogwarts. He knew that Albus would not be able to protect him from the I.C.W. investigation, and with Lucius under a separate investigation, he was left short of allies.

He was going to have to go out on his own, and pay his debt by reporting to Albus from outside. He'd drop Albus an owl as soon as he had somewhere safe to stay. At least there was no magical issues with breaking his contract. He'd never be able to teach again, but that was a blessing more than a curse.

He looked at his belongings once more, and had the urge to pout. Every time he tried to pack something that wasn't his, such as ingredients purchased with his department budget, they were removed from his case.

He sighed, and picked up the bag, and headed out. He still might have gotten away with it, if it wasn't for those meddling kids.

---

Barty Crouch Junior, in the guise of his kidnapped victim, stared out the window, wondering just how everything had gone so wrong.

He'd placed Potter in the competition, and now because of some stupid House-elves, everything was falling down. House-elves, of all creatures!

He shook his head, and opened the chest that was holding his victim. He met the hate-filled eyes of the real Alastair Moody, before he raised his wand. Moody tensed. "Avada Kedavra," he said. Moody jumped, but the curse still hit him.

Crouch turned, picked up his bag, and hurried out the door. He wasn't hanging around for the I.C.W. to investigate him. They were bloody bureaucrats, and there was no way he'd be allowed to sip from his flask during the interminable interviews they would set.

---

Albus groaned as the wards reported a killing curse. Could this day get any worse? He popped immediately to the room that the wards reported, to find no one there. He looked around, and spotted the open trunk. He peered in and gasped. Quickly, he jumped in and floated down. Moody was tied up, but was still breathing.

Dumbledore released him, and Alastor jumped to his feet, and stumbled as his fake leg cracked. The retired Auror braced himself against a wall, before pushing off, and punching Albus as hard as he could.

Albus stumbled back, before landing on his bottom. "How, in the sweet name of magic, could you not recognise that Barty Crouch Junior was impersonating me with Polyjuice, did I teach you nothing about Constant Vigilance, you senile ignoramus!"

Albus sighed. 'Yes', he thought, 'my day could get worse.'

---

Minerva McGonagall was in a complete quandary. She didn't know if she should hand in her resignation, or try and fix things.

Her problem was that she was wearing too many hats. She was the Transfiguration Professor, the Deputy Headmistress, and the Head of Gryffindor house.

And of the three, she had failed the most at the latter, and almost as much at being Deputy Headmistress. She still didn't know why she hadn't stopped the badges this morning. She'd known that they were a bad thing, but hadn't dealt with it.

And then she'd had to watch as three of her Gryffindors had completely and utterly rejected the rest of the students, and worse, had been careful in their vows so that the blame was placed firmly on her Gryffindors and on her.

All of it could have been avoided if she had just asked Harry if he'd put his name in. But they hadn't, and she hadn't, and afterwards she hadn't stood up for him.

And she could not answer the simple question of *why* .

Why had she not interfered with the badges? Why had she not checked on Harry last night? Why had she not discussed the issue with her Gryffindors?

She sighed once more. She needed to remove at least one hat. And it was either going to be the Deputy Headmistress hat or the Head of Gryffindor hat.

And she didn't know which one to pick.

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 2

“Would you be liking dinner here?” Cully asked.

Harry looked up from the table in the library where they’d been sitting. None of the other students had been in the library today, so they’d had free rein. They hadn’t seen any of the professors since breakfast, either.

“Please,” he said. “You do know you don’t have to serve us, right?”

Cully tilted his head. “House-elves are liking work, but House-elves are not liking being forced to punish selves. Harry Potter sir treats House-elves as friends, and if Harry Potter who is great and powerful wizard can nice the House-elves, then others should nice House-elves too.” He nodded firmly, his long ears flapping. “So Cully, and all other House-elves, do work and is prideful of it, but can now have judgements and not serve nasty people.” He paused. “Old Malfoy House-elf now working in my kitchen, him is cooking your foods, him so happy.”

Harry laughed. “Thank you, we’d love some dinner.”

Seconds later, four slate tiles appeared, each bearing four fried scallops on the shell and puréed peas. In the middle of the table, a basket home-baked bread appeared, along with a dish of olive oil with balsamic vinegar floating in the middle of it.

“Wow,” Romilda muttered.

“Yeah,” Astoria added. She used her fork to spear a scallop and bring it to her mouth. Her eyes widened in pleasure.

Harry took a bite as well, and as the taste exploded in his mouth, he couldn’t help grinning. After swallowing, he thought back over the day, and had a nagging sensation that they’d been a little unfocused.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m getting nowhere really fast. What are we really looking for here?”

“Something to help you reclaim the item?” Hermione said, after finishing her scallops.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “But isn’t the point the style, not the action?”

Romilda nodded.

“So how do I do that?”

Astoria frowned. “Speed?”

“No, no, no,” Romilda said, shaking her head. “It needs to be dramatic, it needs to be powerful, it

needs to show the world that Harry is The Harry Potter, and make it so that bad guys fear *The Harry!*”

Harry chuckled at her enthusiasm. “And how do I do that?”

“With a sword, you should attack it!”

“He’ll get flattened,” Astoria said dryly. “Even with a really powerful shield. Say it’s a Nundu, it would blast through it.”

“Then he needs some armour!”

“You’d need some armour made out of a creature just as powerful,” Astoria pointed out, rolling her eyes. “And we’d need to find a blacksmith. And there hasn’t been a magical blacksmith in years, as everyone uses magic, and we’ve not exactly got a powerful creature laying around willing to give us its bones!”

Cully popped in, with another House-elf. “This is being Beaty,” he said. “Beaty was being House-elf to last work for Wizarding Blacksmith.”

“Beaty is being willing to show The Harry how to smith,” the grey-haired House-elf offered shyly, looking at his feet.

Harry blinked. Fire, hammers, noise; Blacksmithing sounded fun.

“Hoggywarts smithy,” Cully added, “it not being used for many many moons.”

“Still,” Astoria pointed out, “we don’t have the material anyway.”

“I think I might know where there’s a dead basilisk,” Harry said softly.

“What?” Romilda and Astoria demanded in unison.

“I killed one in my second year.”

“That would do it,” Hermione said. “We’ll tell the story later, Harry. But really, Blacksmithing isn’t something you can just pick up overnight.”

“No,” Astoria agreed. “However,” she murmured, “there are experience spells and potions that you can use.”

“True,” Hermione muttered. “If we found the spells, and found the extra knowledge from books...”

“Then bam!” Romilda yelled, jumping to her feet. She mimicked a sword, and danced around wildly, “Bash, crash, wallop!” She jumped and slammed the imaginary sword down. “Take that, foul beast!” she declared.

Harry started to laugh at her enthusiasm, and clapped at her portrayal.

Hermione and Astoria clapped as well. With no sense of embarrassment, Romilda bowed, and re-took her seat, just as the next course arrived.

“That’s the way forward,” Romilda said happily. “We’ll have to find a cool spell so that it looks good when The Harry armours up, and then he’ll go out there; slay the beast and poof, we now have one bad-arse public hero who can get poor Lord Black free!”

Harry nodded in agreement, feeling the excitement at the idea of having a home shoot through him again.

“It’s a good job that Madam Pince isn’t here, or we’d be thrown out,” Astoria said.

“I wonder where she is,” Hermione agreed, before she shrugged. “Doesn’t matter, I guess.”

---

“Mum?” Astoria called happily as she jumped on her new bed. She turned the mirror around, so that her mother could see the new place. “This is my bedroom in our little wing. Romi and Hermione have their rooms next door. Harry’s downstairs in the opposite wing. And, we all have en-suites!” She flopped down.

“That’s great, dear,” Cressida Greengrass said with a smile. “I’m so proud of you, my little spark.”

“Spark?” Astoria asked. “You’ve never called me that before.”

“What’s my fourth golden rule?”

“If you have information, use it where it will gain the most reward,” Astoria recited instantly.

“Your little spark about the Goblet kicked off an enormous explosion,” Cressida said with a happy look. “In one day, you’ve got Dumbledore off of the I.C.W., Delores and Lucius under a merciless I.C.W. investigation, along with Fudge, scared away a Death Eater who was impersonating Mad-Eye Moody, caused the downfall of Barty Crouch senior, dragged the whole Tri-Wizard Tournament through the mud, and last, but not least, gotten rid of Snape.”

Astoria blinked. “Oh,” she said. “I didn’t know that.” She paused, and then giggled. “Cool.”

“Very cool, my little spark. Daph’s sorry she wore the badge. She didn’t think about it.”

“I know,” Astoria sighed. “Harry’s really nice, you know? And he’s got such wonderful eyes.”

“And does my little spark have a crush?”

Astoria blushed and nodded. “Yeah, Romi too, but we’re not being stupid about it. We’ll fight

over him in a few years. For now, we're just going to have fun and enjoy being friends with him and Hermione." She smiled. "The smelly one is gone from his circle of friends!"

"You and Romilda have the strangest friendship I have ever seen," Cressida sighed.

"We both know that it's unlikely to last, but until something happens, we're just best friends."

Cressida nodded. "Anyway let me bring you up to date in detail."

When her mother had finished, Tori placed her mirror away, and looked at the time. It was eleven o'clock. There was no chance she could go to sleep without talking about this. She walked out of her room, and in to Romi's. The girl was face down, her body spread eagled under the cover, as she slept. "Yo, Gypsy," Tori yelled.

"Bugger off, I'm gonna curse you so bad," Romilda mumbled into her pillow.

"Mum gave me some incredible news. I'm gonna grab Hermione then go wake Harry up."

"Harry in pyjamas?" Romilda asked, perking up. "No curses for you, not today," she decided.

"Why thank you," Astoria responded dryly. Romilda got out of bed, wearing the pyjama bottoms and tank-top that she always slept in. Together, they went into Hermione's room. The girl was sitting up, reading from a large book. "Mum just gave me some really important news about repercussions from today, we need to discuss it."

"It can't wait until morning?" Hermione asked. "Harry's pretty tired."

Astoria shook her head. "Seriously, it could affect his Sirius thing."

"Right, let's go." Hermione was wearing a similar tank-top to Romi, but with shorts instead. The three of them padded to Harry's room. "Harry?" Hermione called.

"Greeomslasd," Harry mumbled.

"Sorry, Harry, but we need to talk," Hermione tried again. Harry sat up slowly, and Astoria felt like puberty chose that exact moment to kick in, as Harry sat up, showing that whatever else he wore in bed, it didn't come with a shirt.

Hermione climbed on the side of Harry's bed, and sat, crossed legged, next to him. Harry raised himself up against the headboard. Romilda collapsed on her stomach next to Hermione's feet, and Astoria took the last spot.

"So, basically, our little thing this morning? Well, Snape disappeared before dusk, Fudge, his bitch of an undersecretary, and Malfoy's daddy are all under serious I.C.W. investigation, and Dumbledore's had to quit the I.C.W. as well."

"Crikey," Harry muttered.

“Yeah, it’s because the Ministry has kept secret the fact that the Goblet is illegal for hundreds of years.”

“You were right,” Hermione said absently. She put her right elbow on her right knee, and rested her cheek against her palm. “This does change things. Harry could just make an appeal to the I.C.W. about Sirius.”

“What?” Romilda cried, looking up. “No!”

“Why not?” Harry asked.

“Because then you’ll have no reason to go nuts on the beast, and there’ll be no armour, no fun, and we’ll just end up watching something dull like people transfiguring rocks into wombats or something!”

Romilda jumped to her feet, “I want action, daring, bravery, excitement. I want Harry standing there, with his sword aloft, challenging the world, giving a message to Death Eaters that he won’t allow them to take over, and that he knows that his friends are there for him to help.” She bounced, “I want politicians afraid to work against him, I want the Prophet to know that they’ll be lynched if they lie about him, and I want things in this stinking backwater of a country to get better!

“Harry’s great, he’s powerful, he’s got deep green eyes, and he’ll look awesome in armour. I want Harry to have fun, to be excited, to really go for it, and to embrace that out there, to the people, he’s *The Harry Potter*, while he knows that he can come home and be Harry to us, his friends.” She flopped down and sighed deeply. “It’s just, you know, everyone’s still scared of the Dark Lord, and his Death Eaters, and I’m fed up with it. And now you have a chance, and there’s no reason for you to do it, except to have fun, to be revered, to be everything you can be – you can be The Harry.

“I wish I had your power,” she finished on a sigh, before burying her face in the duvet cover.

Astoria blinked as her best friend finished her rant. She checked Harry’s face, to see him thinking hard. And considering the unfettered bouncing that had just occurred, she was both relieved and hopeful for her own chances in the future – not to mention impressed. She licked her lips slowly. “Erm, Harry?” she said in to the silence.

“Yes?”

“I’m with the gypsy girl.”

“Me too,” Hermione said after a few seconds.

Harry sighed loudly. “Fine,” he groaned. “I’m with the gypsy girl as well.”

Romilda looked up. “Really?”

Harry smiled, a light smile, one Astoria didn't remember ever seeing from him before. "Yeah, I'm convinced. We'll check out the smithy tomorrow, and see if we can get the forge lit."

"Oooo, ooo," Astoria said, bouncing herself from her seated position. "Hermione, there's no way you'll skip classes, right?"

"Absolutely not," Hermione replied immediately.

"But, as Champion, Harry doesn't have to go to classes. So, you can share the learning with him, Romi and I can do the same with the classes we are doing so that he really knows them! If he wasn't trying to hard last year, then a good recap will be great for the future!"

"Yeah," Romilda interrupted, "My left toe knows more about divination than that fraud."

"Anyway," Astoria continued with a wink and a huff. "Harry can then spend his time with that blacksmith House-elf; we'll do all our homework down there and spend time whenever we can, so he's not lonely."

"So Harry can learn a new skill, will be able to survive the tournament, and still be able to keep up with his education?" Hermione asked.

"Yes."

Hermione's face went blank for a few seconds. "I approve."

"Yes!" Romilda yelled, jumping back to her feet, and doing a little dance. Astoria tried really hard not to be jealous as the unfair result of her friend's genetics did some more really distracting bouncing.

"Right, bed," Hermione decided.

"Oh, wait, I almost forgot! Moody, he wasn't the real one; he was being impersonated by someone, while the real one was locked in a trunk!"

"A trunk, poor man; must have been cramped," Harry said.

"Nah, it was one of the expanding ones, with a room in it, like a tent," Astoria replied.

"An expanding trunk?"

"They were all the rage a few years ago, but fell out fashion," Romilda said.

"Why?" Hermione asked. "They sound useful."

"Because at the end of the day, who wants to live in a trunk?" Astoria questioned.

"No one, it'd be like sleeping in a cupboard," Harry chuckled. "Night, all."

“Night,” they chorused, and headed out. “Nox,” Harry called, sending the room into darkness behind them.

---

“Tori, Tori?”

Harry turned, to see Daphne Greengrass heading toward their little group.

“Daph?” his new friend asked her sister.

“Snape’s gone!”

Astoria nodded. “So I’ve heard. It’s good news.”

“So are you coming back to Slytherin?”

Astoria shook her head. “I’m staying with my friends.”

“Oh,” Daphne said, and her face fell.

“That doesn’t mean you’re not welcome to visit your sister,” Harry offered.

Daphne gave him a blinding smile. “Thank you.”

Harry shrugged. “That’s an offer just for you.”

“Okay,” Daphne agreed. She paused, and stood up straight. She then curtsied, “I am very sorry for wearing that ugly badge, Mr Potter.”

Harry blinked. “You are forgiven,” he said softly.

Daphne beamed again as she stood up. “Right, time to go back to being a Slytherin.” The expression dropped off of her face, and she put her nose in the air and separated from them, heading to the Slytherin table.

“Thanks, Harry,” Astoria said.

Harry sat down, and waited for the others to sit as well. “Hermione,” he said in a low voice, “you know that feeling you get when I do something stupid, and you want to protect me?”

“Far too well,” Hermione responded dryly.

Harry flicked his eyes to the older Greengrass. “I have deep suspicion that there is a really nice, sweet, innocent girl over there, and that I need to show her that she has a big brother.”

“She’s older than you are,” Romilda said with a cheeky tone.

Harry didn't look at her. "She might be older by the calendar, but, she's like a puppy playing a role."

Astoria giggled. "My sister wouldn't hurt a fly, and yes, she is a bit naïve, it's why Dad has her playing the role. He was a bit like that at school as well. Only, he made some mistakes because of his naïveté."

"Right, time for something stupid," he decided.

"It has been hours, so you're due," Hermione agreed.

Harry chuckled, and walked around the table, over to the Slytherin side. There were some glares, but Malfoy looked far too distracted to even acknowledge him. Knowing that your father was probably going to lose almost everything that made him a respected member of society would probably do that to a boy like Draco. "Miss Greengrass," He said, crouching before her seated form. "Would you like to join us, properly?"

Her expression didn't change as she stared at him.

"You'll have three sisters and a brother looking out for you, so you can be yourself."

Hope appeared in her eyes. "You don't want to, you know, with me?"

He reached out, finding it easy to deal with a girl he had no interest in shagging, and put his hand on her shoulder. She didn't flinch. "You are a very pretty girl; Daphne, but you are not my type." He didn't think that mentioning that his type at the moment was "female" and "boobs" and after the last day, "his age" would help him achieve his goal.

Suddenly, Daphne smiled as she had earlier. "Okay." She wrinkled her nose. "What was that house thingy again?"

"I, your full name, hereby renounce my claim to Slytherin House," Harry said in a soft voice, "And then you say why."

Daphne nodded eagerly. "I, Daphne Eugenie Greengrass, hereby renounce my claim to Slytherin House because most of the boys smell, most of the girls are bitches, no one ever smiles and all the boys want to get into my knickers."

Harry had to stop himself from laughing, as the colours left Daphne's robes and she stood. She didn't look back as she strode with a happy jaunt to her step toward her sister.

"Hi," she said brightly. "Hi Romi, Tori. And Hermione, we've never really spoken, but it's good to see you."

Hermione slowly smiled. She moved over. "Take a seat," she invited Daphne.

"Oh, this is so much fun," Daphne said as she sat down. "Our own little group." She paused and

looked down, “Although, I’m not as smart as you guys are.”

Harry watched as Hermione’s face went through several expressions, before she smiled and hugged Daphne. “It doesn’t matter, I’ll help,” she promised. “We all will.”

Daphne’s face lit up once again, and once more, Harry thought of an excitable puppy being given the attention it desperately wanted.

The doors to the great hall opened, and the professors walked in. Harry waited for them to sit before approaching the table. Professor Dumbledore looked at him and sighed. “Mr Potter?”

“As per the rules of the Tri-Wizard tournament, I hereby inform you that I will be spending class time up to the first task preparing for it.”

“And your schooling?” Dumbledore asked.

“I have smart friends,” Harry replied.

“Then good luck, Harry,” Dumbledore said with a slight smile. “Actually, Harry, I would like to make a public statement here.” He stood.

“I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, hereby formally apologise to Harry James Potter for not securing the Goblet of Fire properly.

“It took the real Alastor Moody less than five minutes to discover that a Confundus charm had been placed on the Goblet, tricking it to think that there were four schools participating. The magical signature of the charm matched the person who had captured Alastor. Your name was torn from a defence essay you wrote at the start of term. I have also heard testament from the House-elves that you did not go near the Goblet. All of this is more than conclusive proof that you did not enter yourself.

“So, I am very sorry, Harry, that you have to compete in the challenges ahead, as laid out in the rules submitted to the Goblet.”

Harry blinked. “Thank you, Professor Dumbledore,” he said in to the silence. “I accept your apology.”

“I have seen what Hogwarts is becoming, and I feel the guilt that it is happening under my watch. As such, I will be fixing it; I will not go down in history as the headmaster who let Hogwarts fall. Over the next few weeks, an independent team from the I.C.W. will be auditing Hogwarts, and we will be following their recommendations.

“I have also seen that it appears that we condone bullying. We do not. And as it is better late than never, fifty points from every student who wore those badges yesterday morning. Some of these points will be returned if the originator steps forward and accepts his or her culpability.”

Harry slowly smiled, and nodded at the headmaster. He was satisfied with the outcome.

“And finally, Professor Snape has tendered his resignation, with immediate effect. I will be covering his lessons until an I.C.W. approved Potions Master can be found.”

“Ooo, ooh!” Romilda shouted, before dashing up and standing next to Harry. “I can get Gran to do it, if you want? Nadya Vane from P.U.P.P.E.T.”

“If you could approach her, I’d be most grateful, she is notoriously difficult to contact.” Albus said with a thoughtful nod.

Romilda smiled, and together, she and Harry walked back to their small part of the Gryffindor table. Harry could feel a lot of very regretful looks from students, but he ignored them. The worst was the Hufflepuff table, where quite a few members were crying.

As Harry sat down, Cully appeared. He looked at Dumbledore. “You is doing goods,” he decided. “Yous getting better foods now. House-elves dislikes bullies, them remind House-elves of how House-elves treated by some peoples,” he said, with a glare at several pureblood students from various houses. “House-elves free, House-elves work, but House-elves not work for bullies.” He paused. “And smelly students still not getting laundrys done. House-elves have opened student laundry room.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Thank you, Cully. I apologise to you as well, as I should have taken your complaints far more seriously than I did.”

Cully beamed and gave a firm nod. “Cully is pleased that Great Albus Dumbledore is following in Greater Harry Potter’s footsteps. If theys can be honourable to House-elves, then there is no excuse for others.” With another nod, Cully vanished, and food arrived.

“So,” Daphne said cheerfully, “what are you going to be doing instead of classes?”

In a low voice, Harry said, “I’m going to be learning to forge, so I can make some armour.”

“Really?” Daphne gasped.

Harry nodded.

Daphne dived from the table and dashed over to the Slytherin table, where she picked up a bag from under the seat where she’d been sitting, and dashed back. She dropped into her seat, and picked up a notebook. “Plate metal?” she asked in a whisper.

“Bone, we think, basilisk.”

She flicked through the notebook, and then smiled. “A-ha!” She placed it down on the table. Harry blinked, and then looked at Daphne, and then at the drawing.

Romilda whistled slowly.

“Daph,” Astoria said in a shocked voice, “what...how?”

“I’ve had to have a hobby,” Daphne said with a little shrug. “It’s something I picked up while you were with Mum, learning stuff. Dad and I would draw. We went through a phase in the summer where we’d draw armour and weapons. This is one where we thought about dragon armour.”

The picture was incredible. Done in pencil, it showed a tall man in a suit of deep brown armour. He had a helmet with two horns bent at ninety degrees coming out of it. The cuirass had claws on the shoulders to protect the neck, then a hefty chest piece. The gauntlets went up to the elbows, and were made of the same bone. Underneath, it had heavy leather, with iron bands that would offer some protection but still allow movement.

The groin and thighs were covered by bone cuisse, and the boots came to the knees, with the same look as the rest of the armour.

“It’s going to be a lot of work,” Harry said slowly.

“We’ll need to find out how to work leather, as well as bone,” Astoria agreed.

“And maybe some runes to enchant the armour,” Hermione agreed.

“And some potions to help increase Harry’s skill,” Romilda added.

“You’re going to use this?” Daphne asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” Harry said simply. “Absolutely.”

“No, no, no,” Daphne said, grabbing it. “That’s just a silly sketch.”

“Daph,” Astoria started.

“No,” she said firmly. “If you like it, I’ll do one for you properly, not just a sketch.” She smiled. “I’m part of this, so I want to help.”

Astoria smiled and looked proudly at her sister. Daphne’s back straightened, and another smile came over her face.

“Right, eat, then we can explore,” Harry said. He was now eager to see the room where he’d be working. Harry ate more than he usually would, as he expected he’d be working hard today.

When they had all finished, Harry called for Beaty.

The House-elf appeared instantly. “Great Harry Potter sir wants to go?”

“Could we drop the ‘Great’, the ‘Potter’ and the ‘Sir’, and just call me Harry?” Harry asked. “I’ve seen the work you all do, and the effort and pride you put in, and you make my life so much easier. So if anyone is worthy of respect, it is you and your fellow House-elves. And no one I respect so much needs to call me anything other than Harry.”

Beaty's eyes widened. "And if you could get all the other House-elves to do the same, I'd be grateful," Harry continued.

Beaty vanished suddenly, and Harry found himself engulfed in a Hermione hug. "I am so proud of you," she said solemnly.

Harry grinned at her. "Thanks."

"Can I be proud as well?" Daphne asked. "Dad always says that we should try and treat others as we would be treated ourselves."

"Yes," Hermione said with a little laugh. A few seconds later, Harry found himself in a hug from Daphne, and he hugged her back, like he had with Hermione. Daphne pulled away, "You really don't want to do me," she said happily. "It's just like you are with Hermione."

Harry blushed. "I love Hermione," he said in a rush, in as low a voice as he could. "She's always there for me."

Hermione sniggered and blushed at the same time. "Poor boy," she said in a teasing voice. "And what he means, Daphne, is that he could be like that with you."

Daphne nodded eagerly as Beaty returned.

"We are ready," Harry said to the House-elf. Four more House-elves popped in, and they were literally popped out of the Great Hall, and in to a cavernous room that felt like it was in the bowels of Hogwarts.

A series of torches sprang into life, revealing something resembling a round kiln as the centrepiece to the room. A large anvil stood close to it, with a bench to the right of that. In the left corner was what looked like a piece of hide attached to a metal frame. To the right of that was a metal bench table that was coated in dust, and further to the right of that were piles and piles of differently coloured ingots, round bars, square bars and flats of dark metal.

The ceiling was high, with a small skylight to the right of a giant chimney that disappeared through the roof. Finally, to the left, was a series of tables that looked like they had just been moved in.

"Wow," Harry said slowly.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed, looking around.

Astoria and Romilda both took a seat at the new tables. "Nice," Astoria said happily. "We can do all our homework here."

"It is a bit cold," Hermione pointed out.

"Harry," Beaty said, and then cringed.

“Yes, Beaty?”

Beaty relaxed as Harry didn't take offence. “First lesson – you know your wizard letters?”

“Yes.”

“Here be hammer – for each letter you hit this bar, turn it and then hit it again. Do this quicklest you can.”

“Okay,” Harry said, stepping towards the anvil. He picked up the hammer, hefting its weight, and then picked up the rod with his left hand.

“A,” he said with a grunt, hitting the rod and then turning it ninety degrees for another smack.

By the time he got to “O” the rod was smouldering. It was glowing red by “U” and was white and sparkling at “Zed.”

Beaty waved to the forge – “Now light it,” he commanded.

Harry did as asked, thrusting the rod. Nothing happened for a few seconds. “It's coming,” Beaty called excitedly, before there was an audible *whoosh*, and the forge caught alight.

An orange glow appeared in the middle, and a wave of heat washed over him. The smoke from the smith went straight up into the chimney, despite the complete lack of wind in the room.

“Much better,” Hermione announced.

“Agreed,” Daphne said.

“So,” Harry asked, “what do I do first?”

“Knife,” Beaty said. “Knife is being easiest hard thing, use least metal and leather, is cheap, and is good to practice on. The first knives will be useless, but you will learn. Beaty thinks traditional making of hoo first boring and not helping Greatest Harry beat beast.”

Harry smiled. He took off his robes, and dumped them on one of the desks.

“Harry!” Daphne tsked, as she dashed over and folded his robe neatly. She huffed playfully at him.

Harry grinned at her, as he rolled up his sleeves of his shirt. “Right,” he said to the House-elf. He took a deep breath. “Teach me.”

“First things is being right clothing,” Beaty stated.

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“Harry?”

“Come in,” Harry called, as he sat up with a groan.

Daphne entered. She was wearing some silky shorts and a tank-top. She moved over and sat by his feet, curling her legs under herself.

“Hey,” she said with a smile.

“Evening,” he replied, curious to see what she wanted.

“It happened again today,” she sighed. “Chris Warrington.”

“Sixth year, Slytherin Chaser?” Harry asked.

Daphne nodded. “He said he wanted to do me and then he called me a bitch when I said no. The House-elves jumped in and stopped any more from happening. Am I a bitch, Harry?”

“You are definitely not a bitch, Daphne,” Harry said firmly. “And once the first task is out of the way, I’ll have a quick word with Mr Warrington myself.”

Daphne tilted her head to one side. “You could just ask the House-elves nicely?”

Harry shook his head. “This calls for a more personal touch. No one calls my sister a bitch for being true to herself.”

Daphne beamed, before she sighed. “I’m not even sure if I like boys,” she whispered.

“Oh?” Harry asked.

“Well, every boy I’ve met has smelled, or been rough. I don’t like being touched much at the best of times, and sometimes, I find myself looking at other girls and wondering what it would be like to kiss them.”

Harry was quickly realising that this conversation was heading into areas that he had absolutely no experience in. “Well,” he said, trying to work out what, if anything, he could say to her. “From what little I know, it could just be that you’ve not found the right boy yet. Or it could be that you do like girls. I know I like girls.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter.”

“It doesn’t?” she asked.

“Whatever you decide, your family will always stick by you.”

“Promise?” she asked, looking very vulnerable.

“Daph, as long as you are happy, you could date the entire Bulgarian cheerleading squad and nothing would change. Sure, I’d be worried, but what a decent family wants is for you to be happy, and that’s it.”

Daphne exhaled slowly. "I've never told anyone that," she confessed.

Harry smiled at her gently. "You don't have to tell anyone, but if you ever want to talk, I am here."

"And that goes to you as well, Harry. So, why don't you tell me what life was like with those Muggles?"

"It's not a very pretty story."

"I'm strong enough to handle it," she assured him. "You don't have to, but I've always found that talking about what happened lets me let it go."

"Well, okay. Unless you bring in dementors, my earliest memory is a cupboard..."

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It was close to two in the morning, and Harry had walked to the smithy to use the fire.

"Harry," Sirius said, his face appearing. "I've heard the rumours, are they true?"

"Probably, look, Sirius, we have a plan. I'm going to play at being the great Harry Potter, so we can ask why you didn't get a trial, and then get you one."

"Harry," Sirius said, "you don't have to do that!"

"I want to, and it's my life. So, what I need from you is a promise that you will get the hell out of the country, so you are not Kissed before I can ask the questions."

"But..."

"Sirius, everything goes wrong with us. Look at what happened when we had Pettigrew!"

Sirius nodded slowly.

"So please just get out of the country and trust me. Go some warm, look at birds in bikinis, and eat well."

"That's supposed to be my advice to you." He grinned. "And there was this rumour about you and four girls."

"It's not like that. Look, Sirius, for the first time in my life, I feel like I know what I'm doing."

Sirius took a deep breath. "Okay, Harry. I'll be in Bermuda. There's a hotel that your parents stayed in for their honeymoon that they raved about. I always wanted to see it anyway."

Harry smiled massively. "That's great. With you safe, I won't have to worry, and I can

concentrate on what I need to do.”

“You’ve convinced me, Harry. Please, be safe in the stupid tournament.”

“I will be. I have clever friends, and they’re going to help me play *Harry Potter*. It will be great.”

“Okay, I’ll be following the press as closely as I can.”

“See you soon, Sirius.”

“See you soon, Harry.”

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Hermione was sitting with Daphne in all her classes, and to her surprise, didn’t mind that fact one bit. Now that she wasn’t playing the Slytherin, Daphne was a lot of fun to be around. And while not the brightest of witches, she was a hard worker, and that was something that Hermione appreciated.

With the de-housing of the girls, Hermione requested classes with Daphne, and Astoria joined Romilda in her classes. For various reasons, they were all following the Gryffindor schedule.

House points no longer mattered to her. With all the houses in serious negative points, it was going to be a “who is the least worst” as winners. Not something that anyone could be proud of.

The effect of their little revolution had shaken the entire school. Hermione was in awe of the Greengrass Book of History, and hoped to be able to read it one day. Some of the snippets she’d been given had been awesome. Unabridged documentation of behind-the-scene deals and bribes, written down by a family dedicated to gathering all the information that could be had.

The only real issue she had was that people kept asking her if they could see Harry. Unfortunately, the only way to the forge was via House-elf transport. And the House-elves had no interest in helping anyone get to Harry.

The fact that he was working, well, like a House-elf, had the girls delirious with delight. It was the first time that she’d seen her friend actually enjoy something productive. Sure, he loved flying, but that was fun, this was something else.

Whenever she popped down, he was hard at work, wearing a leather apron and his trousers and shoes, melting or hammering on something.

“Hermione!” She looked up, as Hannah Abbot moved in front of her. “Look, I, uh. Oh, this is really hard! You know the badge thing? It wasn’t really my fault, everyone else was... I mean, could you tell me where Harry is, so I can, ah, tell him I’m really, really sorry and I hope he forgives me?”

Hannah was the fourth person in the last two hours to approach her, incoherently and illogically

asking for forgiveness.

“Harry’s in the Hogwarts Smithy,” Hermione said, being both polite and factually correct. “The only way in is via House-elf transport, and Harry has asked the House-elves not to let anyone he doesn’t approve off into it, and that includes professors. I will be asking Harry to join us for dinner soon, so that people will get a chance then.”

Hannah’s face fell, and then lit up, as Hermione recited her response by rote. Unlike Romilda, who wanted them to drop dead, she felt that the more formal approach would be better for Harry’s reputation in the long run if he could accept the apologies and move on.

Admittedly, she was pretty sure that he had already moved on.

Her current class, History of Magic, finished, and even before she could ask, two House-elves popped in, to see if they were ready.

She smiled at them. They did so love to help out and be useful. A second later, she and Daphne were in the forge, near her desk. Daphne sat down next to Tori, who was already there with Romi. The two second years were watching Harry intently. It was obvious that they had not done more than five minutes’ worth of work despite having been there for at least an hour.

For the first time, she realised that both of the younger girls had crushes on her friend. And she also knew that Harry simply didn’t think of either of them like that – not yet. At the moment, they were friends, and until everyone was older, that’s how things would stay.

She watched as Astoria turned and met her eyes, and in them, she could see that she was right, and that both Romilda and Astoria knew it, so were just enjoying the friendship while they enjoyed the shirtless Harry hard at work.

Hermione nodded slowly at Astoria, who smiled lightly, then returned to her Harry watching. Hermione did as well, and had to blink several times herself.

It had only been four days, and yet she could see a difference. His appetite had increased, and all the time he spent hammering away at hot metal was showing in his body. She actually noticed the start of some visible muscles. He’d also burned off all the hair on his left arm.

There were rivulets of sweat pouring down his back, making bright ribbons through the soot. “Oh my,” she murmured.

“Yeah,” Daphne agreed. “If other girls could see him like this, they’d be over him like bees on flowers.”

Hermione giggled. “Poor Harry. He’s such a delicate little flower, they’d tear him to pieces.”

Daphne leaned in closer, and whispered, “You think he’d enjoy it, though?”

Hermione looked at Daphne and smiled and nodded. “He is a teenage boy.”

Harry moved over to a whetstone, and sat, slowly grinding the item he was making. It took him twenty minutes, but when he finished, he handed it to Beaty.

“Harry Potter has done good; this is not rubbish,” Beaty pronounced.

“Alright!” Harry cheered, as he removed his ear protectors. He stood and stretched. “Hey,” he called to them, as he moved over. He placed the knife in front of them. It gleamed darkly on the table, with a leather handle and a thick blade with a curved front and back. “Iron, quicksilver, leather and a refined moonstone,” Harry explained. “It’s my hundred and twenty sixth dagger, and my fifth try with Elven techniques.”

“It looks vicious,” Daphne said.

Harry nodded. “Those spells you and Astoria found, Hermione, have been amazing. I really feel like I understand what is happening when I forge now. And Romi, that potion to help with my forging is amazing. Not to mention the one that lets me keep going all day.”

“It’s just Blisterwort, a glowing mushroom, a sabre cat tooth and some Spriggen sap.”

“I’ve not even heard of the last one,” he said cheerfully.

Daphne pouted, before smiling. She reached into her bag, and pulled out a piece of parchment. On it was a full blown design for armour, with each part blown out in detail.

Harry reached across the table and pulled Daphne over it, to give her a huge hug.

“Harry!” Daphne protested, before she giggled, as Harry kissed her forehead. “You’re all sweaty!”

“That looks brilliant,” he praised.

“Tori helped me research Basilisks, so I knew what the bones would look like.”

“Beaty, what do you think?”

The House-elf wandered over. “Beaty thinks that Beaty likes being asked what Beaty thinks.” The House-elf looked it over, before nodding. “Beaty is thinking that Daphne is being good armour witch.”

Daphne beamed happily.

“So,” Harry said, “who’s up for a trip to the Chamber of Secrets?”

“Harry,” Hermione called, “Seriously, I think you need to make an appearance upstairs.”

“Why?” Harry asked, as he wrinkled his nose.

“Because it’s gotten to the stage where the requests to deliver apologies are getting irritating,”

Hermione said.

“They are very sorry,” Daphne added.

“As much as I think they were idiots, most of them only got caught up,” Romilda said with a sigh.

“Pfft,” Astoria grumbled. “I agree, but only because I’m fed up of the looks.”

“Fine, fine,” Harry said. “I’m over it now. Let’s go.”

“You need a shower, first,” Hermione said firmly. There was no way in hell she was going to be dealing with the social repercussions of a public appearance of a sweaty, top-less Harry.

Harry looked down, “Oh, yeah,” he agreed. “Beaty, you mind taking me to our rooms?”

“Of course,” Beaty said happily, and they vanished.

“That is a beautiful dagger,” Daphne said, picking it up.

Romilda held out her hand, and as Daphne placed the handle in, Romilda hefted the knife and then she began to spin it between her fingers, before thrusting out a few times, and finally slamming it, point first, into the table and then pushing the handle to the side.

“Very good balance, and decent spring,” she stated, and as the other three girls looked at her, she continued, “What? When you were playing with dollies, gypsy girls were learning to fight with knives and daggers. It goes with the eyes and the dark hair, darlings.”

“Scary, Vane, scary,” Astoria said.

“That from a family that makes it a point to always carry stilettos?”

“What?” Hermione asked.

Astoria pulled a thin blade from somewhere, as Daphne fished one out of somewhere else. “Last resorts,” Astoria explained.

“Your mum teach you that?”

“Dad, actually,” Daphne said proudly. “He believes that it’s best to have something non-magical to rely on, just in case.”

“And he’s right,” Astoria agreed.

“You don’t have a stiletto?” Hermione asked Romilda.

Romilda put her left leg on chair, and lifted her skirt. Attached to her thigh with a garter belt were three different knives. She grinned, “You can see why Tori and I are such good friends.”

Hermione laughed.

“You think it’s funny,” Astoria said, “but there were rumours a few years ago about men grabbing girls, and then wiping their memories afterwards.”

Suddenly, Hermione no longer found it funny.

“If that happens to me, I’m taking some of them with me, and I will do enough damage to the survivors that my clan can find them,” Romilda stated.

Astoria and Daphne nodded in agreement. Hermione was about to ask Romilda and Astoria for help, when she paused. “Daph, will you teach me how to use one?”

The smile on Daphne’s face was breath taking. “I’d love to! I’ve still got my practice knives!”

Hermione knew she’d made the right choice. The knives on display vanished, and there were now just three pretty, harmless girls in front of her.

Four House-elves appeared, and they were quickly popped to their rooms, where Harry had was drying his hair. He was wearing a light khaki shirt and a pair of dark khaki trousers, with some brown boots on his feet.

“New clothes?” Astoria asked.

“Yeah, I asked some of the Elves, and they made me some.” He paused and looked at Hermione, “I did try to pay.”

“I know,” she said, with an eye roll. “Come on, it’s dinner time.”

Together, they exited their rooms and went down two flights of steps to get to the Great Hall. There was an audible hush as they entered, and Hermione surmised that some were surprised to see Harry looking fit and healthy.

“Ahh, Mr Potter,” Dumbledore called cheerily, from the Professor’s table.

Harry waved at the headmaster.

“Things are going well, then?”

Harry nodded. “Extremely.”

“Good to hear it.”

Before Harry finished sitting down, the doors opened, and an old woman swept in. She had long, grey hair and was wearing brightly coloured robes.

“Gran!” Romilda cheered.

“Hello, dear,” she said, walking over to their table. “Astoria, Daphne,” she said to the others with a nod. “And this must be Hermione and young Harry.”

“Delighted to meet you, ma’am,” Harry said, standing and walking around the table. “Romilda has told me much about you.” He took her hand, and bowed over it. Hermione hurried after him.

“Outside of class you will call me Nadya,” the woman declared. “I am pleased that you listened when Romilda spoke.”

“So am I, Nadya,” Harry agreed.

Nadya frowned, and peered at his scar. “What is that?”

“A scar?” Harry replied.

“Hmm,” Nadya murmured. “We will talk later.” The old women then looked at Hermione, who suddenly felt like she was completely naked.

“Charmed,” Nadya said with a slight smile, and the feeling vanished.

She nodded to them all, and headed up toward the professors. “Albus,” she said with a nod.

“Nadya,” Albus returned.

“So, my great-granddaughter tells me you’ve finally decided to get some competent tuition in here?”

Albus winced. “Severus...”

“You, girl, what happens when you mix vampire dust with dragon’s tongue?”

The girl in question, a seventh year Hufflepuff blushed and shrugged.

Nadya rolled her eyes, and pointed at one of the Beauxbatons students. “You, boy?”

The student stood. “Mixing an item from the Curative group with another from the Linguistic Improvement group causes a combustible reaction,” the student recited.

“You learnt that when?”

“First year, Ma’am.”

“Excellent,” Nadya said calmly. “First year lessons on basic ingredient interaction, and how different types combine?”

The boy nodded.

“Please give my compliments to your professor.”

“I will,” the boy agreed, as Nadya turned back to Dumbledore.

Albus sighed.

“So yes, I have read your letter,” Nadya confirmed, “and will cover the classes until the end of the year, on the condition that you hire a P.U.P.P.E.T. approved professor after that.”

Albus smiled and nodded. “Welcome to the staff, Madam Vane.”

Nadya sniffed. “I will sit with my great-granddaughter for this evening, and will work from tomorrow.”

She turned, and slowly returned to them, where Harry helped her on to the bench. “So, come out of your work place, then?”

Harry nodded. “My friends pointed out that a few people wanted to apologise, and that it was causing more problems for me to be busy.”

“But you no longer care?”

“It’s in the past, if I keep worrying about it, all that will happen is that I feel bad.”

“Good,” Nadya said, looking around. “And now you don’t know how to deal with it, without sounding the braggart?”

Harry blushed and nodded.

“Excellent,” Nadya approved. “Shows your heart is in the right place, and that you’re not here just to accept apologies so you can feel better.” She turned, “Anyone who wants to apologise can do so later,” she stated. “Anyone who doesn’t want to, that’s fine as well. False apologies make me sick.”

Harry actually chuckled, and Hermione found herself smiling as well, at this blunt old gypsy. “So, food?” Nadya asked.

“Ahh, yes, Romilda’s been working with the House-elves,” Hermione said. “Taft?”

A tall house-elf appeared. He looked around, spotted Nadya, and then bowed. “Mistress is liking some Papricaş?”

“Yes, please.”

The House-elf rubbed his hands together. “Taft has been practising with Romilda,” the House-elf said, and popped out. A few seconds later, six empty bowls of food, with a two much larger bowl, one of pasta and the other of a meat dish appeared in the middle of the table.

Hermione didn’t start, and met Harry’s eyes. He nodded and followed her cue, and waited for the

old gypsy to try it first. She did, and then she smiled at Romilda. “You’ve done well, child.”

“Thanks, Gran,” Romilda said.

Hermione took a bite, and smiled. She could taste the paprika that gave the dish its name, along with the onions, bell peppers, tomato, marjoram and garlic.

“Last time I was in England, House-elves were poor scrawny little things. They seem happier now.”

“They are,” Harry agreed. “Of course, you should ask them.”

Nadya sniggered. “Harry, we’re gonna get on just fine, my lad. So, when do I get to see your work area?”

“Well, as soon as we finish, we have a surprise. We can do the work area after that,” Harry offered.

“Harry,” Daphne said softly, “the apologies?”

“Oh, yeah, forgot,” Harry said with a bashful smile.

“Well, then, let this be a challenge to you, young lad,” Nadya said, “You can be coming up with a speech to say that they are forgiven, without sounding like a braggart.”

Harry paused, and then looked at Astoria. “Help?”

“Smart,” Nadya praised. “If you don’t know how to do it yourself, find someone who does and learn from them.”

Astoria pulled out a notebook and started to scribble.

Hermione concentrated on the wonderfully exotic food.

When they had all finished, Harry took the proffered notebook and stood. There was a hush as everyone looked at him. Harry flushed slightly, and then started to speak. “Quite a few of you have approached my friends asking to give me an apology.

“To be honest, I don’t want one. It wasn’t the wearing of the badges; it was knowing that the entire school was against me that upset me. I do accept that emotions were high, due to my unexpected and unwilling entrance in the Tournament, and it felt like I was usurping Mr Diggory’s position.

“I fully endorse Mr Diggory as the Hogwarts champion. I am an outsider now, through choice and through action, and I am happy with that. So please, do continue to show your support for Mr Diggory, the real Hogwarts champion.

“So, I thank everyone with the same degree of sincerity that you offer your apology, and hope that

in future we can put this behind us, having learned the lessons it has taught all of us.

“Thank you.” Harry nodded briefly, and sat down. “Thanks, Tori,” he added softly.

Hermione joined in the applause that spontaneously started around the hall.

Harry blushed and looked at Nadya. “So,” he said with a little grin, “how would you like to join us on an expedition down to the Chamber of Secrets where we are going to harvest a thousand year old basilisk carcass?”

“Hello.”

Hermione blinked. Standing next to them was Professor Dumbledore. The same professor whom she could have sworn was at his seat less than a second before.

“Professor?” Harry asked, sounding as surprised as she was.

“Hello,” he said again cheerfully. “Apropos nothing, I was just wondering how I would spend my evening, now that Hogwarts has a replacement Potions professor.”

“Professor,” Harry said slowly, “Would you like to join the expedition as well?”

“Why, thank you for offering. I’d be delighted,” Professor Dumbledore beamed, as he conjured a chair, and sat down. Romilda shrugged, and offered him a bowl, that she had magically cleaned.

“No, thank you, my dear,” he replied, “I should not have eaten already, because that does look quite remarkable.”

“I am ignoring old men with ridiculously good hearing,” Nadya murmured, “I’d be delighted to, Harry.”

“Yes, it’s something most old people pick up,” Dumbledore agreed serenely. “I’ve been meaning to ask Harry to take me down there for a while, but I kept being busy, and didn’t want to bring back bad memories.” He sighed. “I also have a disturbing habit of coming to an erroneous conclusion, and not bothering to check my facts.”

“A man whose mind is closed misses out on the wonders of the world,” Astoria said, a little shyly.

“You are quite right, my dear,” Dumbledore admitted. “When you get to my age, it takes something quite dramatic to make you realise you’ve closed your mind.”

“The important thing,” Harry said, “is that it’s happened, and you’ve made some positive changes.”

“Thank you,” Dumbledore replied, looking happy.

“Right,” Harry said decisively. “Ready to go adventuring?”

Daphne hopped to her feet. "Harry needs a hat," she announced. She concentrated hard, her tongue poked out slightly from the side of her mouth, as she waved her wand precisely. A wide brimmed felt hat appeared, in a sable colour.

Harry shrugged and put it on at a jaunty angle.

"Excellent conjuration, Miss Greengrass," Dumbledore said. "Take ten points to..." he trailed off, and then shrugged, "to your group."

Harry grinned. "Come on, I've not been down to the chamber since it happened, and we need to explore."

Nadya and Professor Dumbledore led them out, with Hermione bringing up the rear with Daphne.

"That is a nice hat, one I wouldn't expect a Pure Blood to have seen. And it's definitely a crime that Harry didn't recognise it."

Daphne giggled. "I'll tell if you can keep a secret?"

Hermione nodded.

"Dad and I have been sneaking out to the cinema since I was six! I've always been Daddy's girl, while Tori is definitely Mum's girl."

"I was Daddy's little girl many years ago," Hermione agreed with a slight sigh. She looked around, "Dad would do the same for me, and I'd have to promise not to tell Mum about the popcorn."

Daphne's eyes were bright and happy. "Oh, I'm so pleased to have a real girl friend," she said, and Hermione found herself being hugged.

They arrived in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, where Harry was whispering at a sink. A second later, it seemed to sink into the floor, revealing a tunnel.

"You slid down that?" Romilda asked.

Harry nodded. "It's quite long."

"Does it have stairs?" Hermione asked.

Harry turned to look at her.

"They'd be more practical," she pointed out.

"Hermione," Nadya said softly, "life is not always about practicality. What seems more fun, climbing down endless stairs, or sliding down a giant pipe in the darkness, at speed?"

Hermione pouted. “The slide,” she sighed. “I’ll bet it’s messy.”

“We are witches,” Nadya pointed out.

“And wizards. Right,” Harry said. “I’ll go first, as I’ve done it, and I can set up somewhere soft for you to land. Hasta Mañana.” And with that, he turned and dived into the tunnel.

“As Headmaster, I’m pulling rank,” Dumbledore announced around thirty seconds later as they heard a muffled whump. “Cowabunga!” He dived in after Harry, and they heard his cries of delight.

“Me next,” Nadya declared. “Yippie-ki-yay, motherfucker,” she called, as she did a feet-first dive into the pipe.

Astoria and Romilda burst into laughter, as Hermione found herself giggling with Daphne.

“One small step for a woman, one giant slide for womankind,” Astoria misquoted, as she headed after them.

Romilda shrugged. “Geronimo!” she yelled, diving headfirst into the hole.

Daphne looked at Hermione, and ran one hand slowly through her hair, “Smoke me a kipper, luv, I’ll be back for breakfast.” The light in the bathroom suddenly seemed to bounce off of her teeth, before she too dived in.

Hermione looked around. There was no one else with them, and therefore absolutely no need for her to say anything. “Sod it,” she muttered. She pulled out her wand, and conjured a pair of sunglasses. “Well,” she drawled, “It’s a hundred and six metres to the bottom, we’ve got a full group of crazy students, half a pack of crazy octogenarians, it’s dark, and I’m wearing sunglasses.” She paused. “Hit it!” She dived into the tube, and screamed in pleasure as she swooped down.

It was better than any waterslide she’d even been on, and it seemed like it lasted a good three minutes. She was disappointed when she exploded out of the end, and landed on Harry’s cushioning spell. She jumped to her feet. “You should charge people a fee to ride that, make it a charity event for Hogwarts.”

“An excellent idea, Miss Granger,” Albus said cheerfully. “If we can find a safe way up, we’ll do exactly that.”

Hermione blinked, as she looked at a giant snake skin. “Is that...?”

“An old skin,” Harry agreed cheerfully. “Is it worth anything?”

Nadya poked it a few times. “A fortune,” she said dryly.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Harry called. “Have you ever considered a Lily Potter library wing, full

of Muggle science, art and entertainment?”

“As of about twenty seconds ago, yes,” Dumbledore replied.

Harry pointed to the snake skin.

The headmaster smiled and nodded.

Hermione squealed happily, and hugged Harry hard. “So many new books,” she said, breathing fast. “Movies! Science demonstrations!”

“Come on, Hermione,” Daphne said, taking her hand. “We’ve got more to see yet.”

Hermione nodded, and they headed down a dark tunnel. Harry and Professor Dumbledore worked together to clear a path from fallen masonry. It struck her suddenly how confident Harry was with only a few days of not trying to be normal gone.

They finally walked up to a door that had two snakes intertwined as the décor. Both snakes had emerald eyes.

Nadya jumped to the fore and examined them closely, before she pouted. “They are fake,” she sniffed. “Glass, powder and a few charms.”

Harry opened the doors, and then entered. Hermione followed, and looked around eagerly, before her eyes landed on the basilisk.

Hermione actually felt her mind stop. She looked at the beast that had petrified her, then at Harry, remembering how small he had been two years ago, and then looked at the beast again. Even now, much larger, he was still dwarfed by the snake’s head. “That self-centred, obnoxious, little bitch,” she snarled.

“Hermione!?”

Hermione felt herself blush. “Sorry, Professor Dumbledore, Professor Vane,” she apologised deeply.

“Quite alright,” the headmaster chuckled. “Perhaps you should explain?”

“I was just thinking that Harry took that thing on two years ago to save Ginevra Weasley’s life. How *dare* she spit on Harry like she did over this tournament?”

Romilda rubbed her hands together gleefully. “I could give her such a cursing for that – another betrayal.”

“Just like your mother,” Nadya said fondly. “Any chance for a good curse.”

Romilda nodded proudly. “I’m proud to keep my family heritage alive!”

Harry waved his hand airily. "Not today. Even though Tori wrote the words, I agree with them totally. Look, things happened, it was bad, but people have apologised, and now I'm here with four good friends, everyone's favourite nutty professor, and a new friend in Nadya. So what if Ginny joined in with everyone else? It doesn't matter, and I'd rather be here now, like this, than anywhere else."

Hermione noticed that professor Dumbledore stood a little straighter, and his face showed that he'd just made an important decision.

Harry crouched down. "It was here," he said, his voice a little distant, "that I knew I was going to die. I'd just had one of its fangs go through my arm, I'd defeated the diary that was possessing Ginny, stabbing it with the fang, and I could feel the poison burning inside me, it hurt so much that I wanted to die, before Fawkes cried on my wound."

"A diary that possessed a student?" Nadya asked, "That's some very serious magic to make a book that powerful."

"Yes," Albus agreed.

"And it took basilisk venom to defeat it?"

Harry nodded.

"Albus," Nadya said slowly.

He held up his hands, "Only an inkling, I was going to discuss it later, honest."

"Now," Nadya grunted. "Kneel down," she ordered Harry, who shrugged, and did as he was told, ignoring the mess on the floor.

She moved over and placed her hands on his scar, and her eyes went blank.

Nadya started to giggle a few seconds later. "Horcrux," she stated.

"A what?" Dumbledore gasped in horror. "No!"

"What's a horcrux?" Romilda asked, looking between her giggling Nan and the horrified Dumbledore. Hermione felt unable to decide what to feel either.

"It's a soul container," Dumbledore said softly, "created with the very vilest of acts. It is what allowed Voldemort to survive. He split his soul in to pieces, so that he could evade death."

"Wait," Romilda said, "Harry's got a piece of the Dark Lord's soul trapped in his scar? And Dark Lord is still alive?"

"I am afraid so," Dumbledore intoned solemnly.

Romilda started to giggle as well, closely followed by Astoria. Harry looked confused at the two giggling girls, then at the giggling woman.

“So,” he said slowly, “Professor Dumbledore is horrified, but two gypsies think it’s funny, and Tori, who knows the gypsies really well, think it’s funny as well. Now, I know they are not laughing at me, or my misfortune, because we’re friends, so that means Voldemort did something stupid that Professor Dumbledore just doesn’t understand. And I’ve just remembered what we are going to do to Pettigrew, with just some of his rat-hair, I’m betting that Romilda is already thinking of the cursing we can give Voldemort when we have access to a piece of his very soul?”

Romilda and Astoria looked at each other, cheered, and then pounced on Harry, giving him a huge hug.

“Well done, young man,” Nadya said with a clap of her hands. “With a piece of his soul, there’s not much we *can’t* do to him.”

“Oh,” Professor Dumbledore said slowly. “I didn’t think of that!”

“So we can kill him, properly, right?” Daphne asked hopefully.

“Wait,” Harry said. He pulled out of the hug from the two young girls and started to pace. “I think I’ve been infected with Gypsy,” he muttered, before looking at Nadya. “We could kill Voldemort right now?”

She nodded.

Harry frowned and continued to pace. “No,” he eventually stated.

“What?” Hermione yelled, closely followed by Dumbledore and Daphne.

“Killing him doesn’t fix things, it just pushes the problem away. We need to do more. It needs to be public; we need to humiliate him, make all his followers look like idiots, destroy reputations, get the filth out of our society so that we can all live how we want to live!”

Hermione blinked. “We curse Voldemort to run down the streets naked, and force all his followers to do the same?” she asked slowly.

“Naked, apart from a bright pink tutu and matching tube socks. We get Malfoy to do a song and dance act proclaiming his love for Voldemort’s trouser snake. We get other Death Eaters to think they are invisible, and show their true feelings.”

“Show tunes!” Hermione exclaimed. “There’s nothing more humiliating than being caught singing show tunes,” she continued, getting into the spirit of things.

“We curse Voldemort to demand all of his followers’ money, and then donate it to charity,” Harry went on. “We get him to boast about all the Ministry people he’s corrupted. We break them, in every way, shape and form, and then, only then do we kill him.”

Daphne slid forward and hugged Harry, before dancing him around the room in a strange dance that would have had any competent dance instructor horrified. Astoria and Romilda looked at each other, and then joined in, moving next to the two, and taking their hands so that there were four of them appearing to randomly fling body parts around.

Hermione wondered if this travesty of motion was deliberate or if they were all having some form of seizure.

Nadya moved over, and put one of her arms around Harry, the other around Romilda, and guided them into a circle.

“I used to be so sane,” Hermione groaned, as she joined the circle. She found that whirling in a circle, and crouching and jumping was a lot of fun, and she was truly unsurprised when Dumbledore joined in.

After a minute or two, they all dropped to the floor, dizzy as hell.

“So you approve, then?” Harry asked breathlessly.

“Yes,” Nadya replied primly.

Harry stretched his legs in front of him, and used his arms as support behind him. “That is one big snake.”

Hermione giggled. “It is,” she agreed. They all spent a few minutes looking at it, marvelling at the sheer size of it. The scales alone were enormous.

“Does anyone know how to deal with it?” Daphne asked.

Romilda raised her hand.

“I do as well,” Nadya said. “I think we’ll split tasks now. Hermione, Daphne, and Albus, why don’t you explore? I’ll teach Harry and Astoria the charms, while Romilda starts to work.”

Hermione jumped to her feet. She looked around again, looking at the huge statue, and the gaping hole in its mouth. She paused and looked at the statue again. “Creepy.”

“Yeah, he looks like he should be rubbing his hands and cancelling Christmas,” Daphne agreed.

Albus laughed softly. “His portraits were deemed most flattering by Godric, in a letter Godric sent to Helga after she had retired.”

“You have letters from the founders?” Hermione asked.

“A few are kept in the Headmaster’s office. As they have no real value, apart from curiosity, they tend to be treated as a perk of the job.”

“Can I read them?”

“Of course, just become Headmistress.”

Hermione paused. “Deal,” she agreed cheerfully.

Daphne blinked. “You’re going to work to become Headmistress here?”

Hermione nodded.

Daphne hugged her. “That’s great! Now, how are we going to get into the mouth?”

“We’ll float,” Hermione replied.

Daphne pouted, “I’m not that good.”

“Nonsense,” Hermione replied. She looked at her friend. “I’ve been sitting with you for a few days now, and you are far better than you think. Sure, you’re not your sister, but that doesn’t matter, because you are you. And you are a very hard working individual, doing everything you can with what you have. You work incredibly hard, and it is that effort that is going to allow you to be successful when some more talented but lazy people, like a non-to-be-named ex-friend, will end up achieving nothing but existence.

“Now, you know the spell?”

“*Wingardium Leviosa*,” Daphne said solemnly.

“And you know the wand movements?”

Daphne nodded and mimed them.

“Then put them together, Daph,” Hermione encouraged. “And while I doubt you’ll need it, I will be here to catch you.”

Daphne had a determined look on her face as she concentrated hard, and waved her wand, before saying the words. Slowly, but surely, she started to rise, up the statue, until she alighted daintily at the top.

“Woohoo, way to go Daph!” Harry yelled, “Knew you could do it!” Astoria, Romilda and Nadya were applauding and cheering.

Daphne beamed, before looking down at Hermione, and mouthing “Thank you.”

“I believe,” Dumbledore said slowly, “That you may have just taken your first step to being a Headmistress. Of course, dealing with dedicated students like Miss Greengrass is easy, it is the difficult ones, the ones that do not want to learn that are often the most challenging.”

Hermione nodded slowly. "I have some time to grow up."

"It will be a long and arduous road, Miss Granger."

"But fulfilling?"

The headmaster looked over at Harry, Astoria and Romilda, who were casting spells at the dead basilisk. "Immensely."

Hermione smiled.

"Come on, slow pokes!"

"After you," Albus offered cheerfully.

---

Harry collapsed, looking at the remains of the Basilisk. They had five piles, one of meat, carefully preserved, one of bones, two of scales (one fresh and one from the abandoned skin), and one pile of venom in stoppered bottles. He was utterly exhausted. "Dobby?" he called as he sat with Romi, Tori and Nadya.

The House-elf appeared with his usual enthusiasm, and looked around. "Wow," he said, his eyes huge as he stared at the parts.

Harry chuckled. "Can you get some help, and move the bones and fresh scales to the forge? And then get some House-elves to give us a lift back up? We'll sort out the venom, old scales and the flesh when we know what to do with it."

Dobby nodded eagerly. He paused. "Harry?"

"Yes, Dobby?"

"Some students are refusings to do their own washings, even when theys smells."

Harry nodded. "Use the Black Lake," he suggested.

Dobby tilted his head to the side. "Dobby is not understanding?"

"If they are refusing to clean their clothes, dump them, and their clothes in the Black Lake. One way or another, they need to bathe."

"Dobby is being allowed to do dump students in the lake?"

"I don't want to deal with them smelling."

Dobby smiled. "Harry Potter is greatest," he announced, before popping away.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said slowly, as he joined them with Daphne and Hermione. “Just for my own curiosity, are you responsible for the current happiness of the House-elves?” he asked as he eased himself down. “Oh, just so you know, there wasn’t much to find. Just some old bones of food that the basilisk ate back there. It looks like Salazar had plans, but never had the time to implement them.”

“Pity,” Harry said. “It would have been nice to find something undiscovered for an eon. As for the House-elves, speaking strictly off the record, yes, I am.”

“Can I ask how?”

Harry shrugged. “I just let them take the magic they want from me.”

Dumbledore looked shocked. “Oh,” he said softly.

“You know,” Harry said slowly, “I read this phrase once, in a magazine in a waiting room while Dudley was getting his weight checked.” He paused. “And there was a lot of weight to check. Anyway, it described how people who lived in Ivory Towers often got caught in self-referential spirals.”

“I’m the smartest person I know therefore my advice is always the best,” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “I believe you may be right.”

“Then, you old fool, you can spend this summer traipsing around Europe with us in wagons,” Nadya offered.

“I will have free time for the first time in years,” Albus agreed slowly. “Now that I’m out of the I.C.W. and will be resigning from my ceremonial position as Chief Warlock. And it would get me out of here. Thank you. It sounds scary and wonderful at the same time. I can’t ask for much more than that out of a summer.”

“Oh, speaking of summer,” Harry continued. “I’m going to donate as much blood as is needed to get me out of the Dursleys.”

Albus passed a hand in front of his face. “It was that bad?” he asked softly.

Harry nodded firmly.

“Should I be informing the authorities?”

Harry frowned. Daphne moved next to him, kneeling, so that she could hug him. “Tell them,” she whispered.

“Probably, but is it bad of me that I think the worst punishment is letting them be? They can never be happy, never be content, they will just continue to be horrible people pretending to be something they are not.”

“No, no, no, no, no, Harry,” Romilda said. “You are talking to people who believe in revenge, not just punishment.”

“And letting them go is not just,” Daphne added. “They deserve far worse.”

“In that case,” Romilda said eagerly, “I think you need to practice. You do three simple curses, one to each of them, perhaps that emphasises a particularly bad part of their personalities?”

“My aunt likes to gossip,” Harry said slowly.

“Then the old standard Cassandra curse, Muggle style. She’ll speak the truth for the rest of her life, but *no one* will believe her.”

Harry smiled. “My uncle is an overweight bully. He broke my arm once, and didn’t allow me to get it looked at for a few days.”

Magic exploded out of Dumbledore, and he looked furious. He regained control. “Cully, is there a chance I can have the bottle I keep in my desk?”

The House-elf appeared with it a second later, along with two glasses. Dumbledore poured a measure into each glass, and handed one to Nadya. They clinked glasses before he downed it, and flames came out of his ears.

“Harry,” he said softly, “I swear that I will do everything I can to make up for my mistakes. In my hubris I thought that all I needed to do was protect from outside interference. It was a dangerous and naïve mistake from an old man who did not realise he was too busy and believed his press.”

Harry nodded. “I didn’t say that as a dig at you,” he said to the professor. “I can understand that you thought that family would do the right thing.”

“They should have,” Hermione said strongly. “Or taken you to an orphanage, or called in social services and said that they couldn’t cope. They should not have taken their frustrations in life out on you!”

Harry felt Romilda looking at him for a moment. “So, the curse?” she asked.

He smiled at her, grateful for the distraction.

“Hmm,” Astoria said. “How about a sped up metabolism?”

“Huh?” Daphne asked.

“He eats, he poops. And he barely gets the nutrients he needs, so he loses weight as well.”

Harry grinned. “How fast?”

“Instant?”

Harry chuckled. "You mean that Vernon would have to eat every meal sitting on the toilet?"

"Unless he wants to wear a nappy," Romilda suggested.

"I like that," he agreed. "Dudley is a chip off the old block." Harry looked at Dumbledore, "Not getting at you again, but Dudley's favourite game was Harry Hunting with his gang. It was running from him that I teleported the first time."

"Apparated," Hermione corrected absently. "A lot of kids do it if they are in serious danger."

"Indeed, it keeps our population going," Nadya said.

"And yet I am upset that you needed to do so," Albus said. "I think that I will launch an investigation anyway, not at your family, but at the people around you. Your teachers and medical professionals should have noticed and done something."

"The Dursleys told them I was a troublemaker."

"An educator does not listen to such nonsense," Albus said firmly. "How many other children might be suffering?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Harry admitted. "My problem with cursing Dudley is that he behaved as he was raised, so it's not exactly his fault."

"You are too nice," Astoria said with a smile.

"So we do something simple," Romilda said. "Every time he acts like a bully, he feels like he's been kicked in the balls."

"Can you do that?" Harry asked.

"Gran?"

Nadya nodded. "It is a just little curse," she agreed.

"There we go then, we'll curse them all later."

"Harry," the headmaster said, "Would you like me to use my contacts to try and find some buyers for this?"

"Yes, please," Harry said, "and I want Nadya, Astoria, Romilda, Hermione, you, and Daphne to get five percent of the proceeds each. The rest of the money I want donated to the school, to the Lily Potter Library Wing, and if there is any left, then I'd like a James Potter Quidditch Foundation, to ensure that the school always has good brooms."

There was an explosion of noise, as everyone tried to protest at once. Harry smiled lightly. "This wasn't up for discussion," he said, sliding away from Daphne. "Dobby, take me to the smithy,

please.”

He was immediately whisked away. “It’s been a strange day, Dobby,” Harry announced, as he stripped off his shirt and moved to the forge.

Dobby sat on a table and watched, his legs swinging back and forth.

“But I think I did the right thing.”

“Harry is making good friends into better wizard and witches, and is making school better,” Dobby said. “Not many wizards could do that.”

Harry picked up a couple of thick bars. “There enough money in my account to last me through school,” he said, “When I leave school, I want to work for my own upkeep. I want to be needed. I don’t want to just be rich – and the Basilisk money would take that away.”

“Lots of wizards think that lots isn’t enough.”

“I think it is,” Harry said.

“And that’s why Harry Potter sir is a great and powerful wizard,” Dobby said softly. “Harry Potter wants to be himself first and foremost.”

“And it’s partly thanks to you, Dobby.” Dobby practically fell off the table. “If you hadn’t pointed out what I was doing, we wouldn’t be here.”

“Harry is giving Dobby too much credit. Dobby helped a little with magic relaxing, but what makes Harry Potter the Harry Potter was always there.”

Harry smiled at his small friend. “Do me a favour? I just want to work this evening. Keep the others out?”

Dobby nodded, and continued to watch, moving to the anvil from time to time to hold the tongs when Harry needed both hands to move hammer and tool.

Harry found his silent company quite pleasant.

The smithy rang with the sound of hammer on anvil until well after midnight.

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 3

“I shouldn’t get any money,” Daphne objected, managing to be the loudest, and getting the others to shut up. “I didn’t do anything, except explore an empty cave!”

“I didn’t do that much,” Astoria agreed. “Just a few charms, that’s not worth thousands of galleons!”

“That boy,” Hermione groaned. “Headmaster, I’d like to make a donation to the Lily Potter Wing of the library.”

“Ooh, I’d like to donate to the James Potter Quidditch Foundation,” Romilda said.

“Library,” Astoria added with a grin.

Daphne frowned. “I don’t like libraries that much, or Quidditch. Could I donate toward a James and Lily Potter Art Room?”

“I’ll donate my part to Daphne’s idea,” Nadya added.

Albus chuckled. “Did you know that James Potter once charmed my favourite socks to run away from me?”

Everyone looked at him.

“So I think I’ll get some belated revenge on James, and donate some of my share to the James Potter Award for the Best Prefect, and the rest to the new art room.”

There were some giggles, as the Headmaster beamed.

“Revenge, a dish best served cold,” Nadya said approvingly.

“Professor Dumbledore?” Hermione called, sounding like she’d just remembered something. “How are points awarded and deducted?”

“You are asking why Severus’s points were not removed?”

Hermione nodded.

“I would love to say that it was a complicated school-wide charm, but that would be a lie. The House-elves take care of it.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped, before she started to giggle. “It’s probably a good thing that Harry isn’t part of a house anymore.”

“Yeah,” Astoria agreed. “I can see House-elves accidentally mishearing, and giving Harry points left, right and centre.”

“I’d never even talked to a House-elf before, we never had them. Mum and Dad didn’t like the idea of forcing people to work for us,” Daphne said. She frowned. “Some people were really quite rude about it as well.”

“The good thing is, Daph, that all those families are now screwed. They don’t know how to cook. The Parkinsons tried hiring some wizards and witches to do it, only, they treated the employees like House-elves, and they all quit. So they’re living on bread and butter, because they don’t even know where their kitchen is, never mind knowing the spells to work their oven,” Astoria said cheerfully.

“Poor Parkinsons,” Hermione said with a giggle. She stretched. “Right, I’m about as knackered as I can ever remember. Can we please have some transportation?”

The eager House-elves appeared.

“Can you take Nadya and me to my office please?” Albus asked.

“And the rest of us to our rooms?” Hermione added.

---

The two weeks until the task flew by, as Harry spent every day working at the forge. Every evening he joined his friends for dinner, afterwards he’d spend some time making sure he was learning what the others were in class.

Even Hermione had admitted that standard education didn’t suit him, and this custom education did.

What he had been most amazed with was the patience of Astoria and Romilda. He knew that two years ago, he wouldn’t have had the patience to watch someone work on a forge as they had. But he appreciated their company immensely.

The two girls were good friends, they worked with him, supported him, chatted to him, and all they wanted in return was his friendship.

He never felt like he was treading on egg shells, despite the fact that Astoria’s family was rich, and that Romilda’s was comparatively poor

In a strange way, he was closer to Daphne even than to Hermione. Hermione was his best friend, but Daphne had so desperately wanted a big brother, someone to talk to, to protect her, to be her best friend, and everything else except a lover, and Harry honestly couldn’t find a single reason not to be that person for her.

It was weird, slightly, as Daphne would often come and talk to him late at night, sitting on his bed,

wearing only the uniform that all girls seemed to sleep in, and not once was he tempted to try and kiss her.

He supposed it meant that Daphne really wasn't his type, and that it was possible to have a female platonic friend like that.

He'd had to spend a few seconds looking at the French Champion's bum, just to reassure himself that he was still straight.

And he was.

He'd missed part of the opening ceremony, a weighing of the wands. He'd been in the middle of a new sword at the time, and his work would have been completely wasted if he'd paused. With hot steel, some things just couldn't be interrupted. So he'd simply sent Dobby with his wand.

The next day, a giggling Hermione had shown him the front page of the Daily Prophet, where it had a large blank section. It turned out that some House-elves hadn't liked the lies a reporter had written, so the House-elves had taken steps to ensure they weren't printed.

Harry had made sure to thank Dobby, asking him to relay the thanks as appropriate.

And so, today was the day. He was going to put his faith in his friends, and in himself. They had found the spells to give him the experience he needed, they had found runes to help him strengthen his armour, and they had made him potions to increase his strength and stamina, and increase his smithing ability.

They'd found out how to enchant dummies, so that he could learn how to wield his sword. He'd spent hours every night learning how to swing the sword, and found it great fun – if tiring.

And Daphne had redesigned his basilisk bone armour, now that she had seen the real bones.

He looked up at the dummy that was wearing his new armour, and felt a huge surge of pride. *He* had made that, and it looked amazing.

Dobby popped in. "Is time, Harry."

Harry took a deep breath.

"Dobby has all his wages with bookmakers on Harry Potter," the House-elf said. "Dobby knows Harry Potter is great and powerful."

"I won't let you down, Dobby."

Dobby smiled. "Dobby knows. Now, Harry Potter needs to go and kick booty!"

Harry laughed as Dobby hopped over, and he was popped out and in front of a large tent. He entered.

“Ahh, Mr Potter,” Ludo Bagman said eagerly. “Welcome, welcome. Bang on time.”

Harry nodded.

“Your first task will be to recover a golden egg from a dragon! You will need it, as it is a clue to the next task.”

“You all knew?” Harry asked, noticing the lack of surprise on Diggory, Krum and Delacour’s faces. “Well, I’m relieved.”

“Relieved?” Diggory asked.

Harry grinned, “Yeah, we thought it was going to be a nundu, so we’ve been preparing for that.”

“That isn’t reassuring,” Diggory mumbled.

“Anyway,” Bagman said, “we’ll go in order of the dragons picked from this bag.” Harry was last, and pulled out Hungarian Horntail.

“Anyone know how big these things are?” Harry asked absently.

“About 30 feet long,” Krum grunted. “Snout to tail. Stand about 12 feet high.”

Harry made some mental calculations. “Awesome,” he cheered. “We do get to keep it, after we’ve killed it, right?”

“Kill it?” Ludo chuckled. “Oh, you won’t be able to do that, it takes many wizards to even stun one!”

“Of course,” Harry agreed politely. “But, just imagining that I could kill the dragon, would I be able to keep it?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Anyway, Mr Diggory, you’re up.”

Harry walked over to a chair and sat down in it. He pulled a small book out of his pocket and read through some past forging notes, to help pass the time.

Every twenty to thirty minutes, there was a roar from a crowd, some angry bellowing, followed by some more cheers, then another contestant was called.

Harry found that he was only slightly nervous. Compared to a nundu, a dragon really was preferable.

Eventually he was called, and he walked out of the tent and into an arena. The four judges were sat at a long table in front of a large stand. The stand stood facing over the arena itself, a rocky patch of grass, with the large dragon at the far end.

Even from here, he could see that that the dragon was not pleased to be there, and was giving him an evil stare. A stare that was suddenly switched to the handlers and then the judges.

Harry saluted the beast casually, before turning and looking to see if he could see his friends. A banner caught his eye, and he grinned. ‘ *Go Team Darkest Knight* ,’ it endorsed. Daphne and Romilda were each holding up one end, with Hermione and Astoria sitting between them.

He went back to staring at the dragon, as Bagman blathered on and on. Finally, the word he was waiting for. “Begin,” Ludo Bagman’s voice echoed around the stadium, and the cheers started.

Time for the first charm. He stood, with his legs shoulder-width apart, and his arms out wide. “Armour on!” he yelled.

Out of the grass, black liquid metal swelled and puddled over his feet, and then climbed up over his shins, to his thighs and hips. As it stopped, it formed the light brown greaves and boots of his armour. At the same time, more metal poured up to his hands and formed the gloves, then the basilisk leather under-armour, before forming into a cuirass. His helmet formed, with his visor open, the same time as his chest plate. The last bits of liquid formed a shield on his left arm, and a sheathed broadsword on his left hip.

There was a stunned silence, apart from Romilda declaiming, “That was the coolest thing I have ever seen!”

He smiled, and pulled out his sword, his finest work so far, basilisk bone, iron, and the heart of a wildcat. It even had small grooves where he could release some basilisk venom.

“Oh, my,” Ludo Bagman’s enhanced voice whispered.

Harry walked to the dragon, who snarled at him, moving this way and that against the chain that held it in place. With a roar, the dragon reared back against the chain, twisted, and reared back again. It took to the sky, fighting the chain, before, with a huge wrench, the chain snapped.

Harry actually smiled, and knocked down his visor. His one reservation, of not wanting to fight a chained beast, was now gone. It was just him and the dragon. And he was ready.

The dragon circled him, before launching a stream of fire straight at him. Harry crouched, holding his shield in front of him to divert the fire.

His shield heated up a little, and he was glad he was wearing magical padding, as the last thing he wanted was to be steam roasted inside his own armour. The runes quickly dissipated the heat. As the dragon screamed in protest, he could hear the screams from the crowd.

Spotting the dragon still circling, he turned, “The tournament rules mean that this is my fight, so let me compete,” he yelled at the dragon handlers, who had started to rush into the arena.

He saw Dumbledore wince, before he talked to the dragon handlers, who then worked together to throw up a shield to protect the crowd.

The dragon flew by, attacking again. The fire seemed hotter this time, and Harry had to bite down a yelp; he resolved to work on his shield design. He needed better shielding to reflect the heat and not pass it through to his arm.

While he was wishing, he also wished he had a bow and arrow to shoot the damn thing down.

With an earth shaking thud, the dragon landed about twenty feet away from him. He moved forward as fast as he could, before dodging to the side and getting his first strike in at the dragon.

The sword crashed against the dragon's neck. It roared in pain, and swiped at him. He ducked, and thrust hard into the dragon's unprotected belly. The sharp blade, with its basilisk poison struck deeply, leaving a trail of blood as Harry pulled it out with a corkscrew motion.

The Horntail screamed and launched itself into the air, flying around and launching another burst of fire.

Harry rolled to the right, avoiding the flame this time, and dropped his shield, before taking a ready stance, his sword in both hands, waist high, the blade pointing past his shoulder.

The dragon landed once more. Harry ran as fast as he could toward it, before ducking a blast of heat that he felt singed his hair through his helmet.

The dragon struck at him, and he jumped to the side to dodge, before passing its head, and with the hardest stroke he'd swung, he cleaved deeply into the wing. The dragon roared, and tried to take his head off with its tail.

Harry stepped back, allowing it to bypass him, before raising his sword above his head and bringing it down in a chop, right at the tail.

The dragon howled again, and turned, they stood, about two metres apart, glaring at each other. The dragon wanted him dead, and the feeling was completely mutual.

"Bring it," he roared, before darting forward and launching a two handed strike straight into the dragon's gaping maw. The dragon retaliated by trying to fry him. Harry ignored the burning pain as his armour overheated, as he struck again and again, exchanging finesse for wide brutal strokes.

The pain was incredible, but he gritted his teeth, jumped to the side, and twirled the blade to gain momentum, before landing it directly behind the dragon's neck, with the grain of its scales. The blade bit in deeply, and Harry pulled back, and struck again, jumping as he did, so that all his strength, all his weight, and all his momentum, was behind the single stroke.

There was a soft thump, as the dragon's head hit the ground, followed by a larger thump as the body did the same thing.

Harry panted hard, as he wiped his sword down with a rag he fetched from inside his armour and sheathed it in the scabbard on his hip. Ignoring the pain, he walked over to the nest and picked up the golden egg. He looked at the others, and was relieved that they were not genuine dragon eggs.

It was somewhat reassuring to know that the people running the tournament were not complete idiots.

He turned to find that every single person in the crowd was staring at him in silence. He looked at his friends, just as Romilda let loose an ululating cheer as she jumped to her feet. Almost in the same movement, Astoria, Hermione and Daphne started to cheer as well.

The cheer was quickly taken up by others.

Harry grinned and knocked back his visor, before walking toward the judges. The dragon handlers let down the shield, and either gaped or shot death glares at him.

“Just so we’re clear, I claim the dragon carcass,” he stated loudly, to the judges and handlers. “Dobby, can you and some House-elves take it down to the Chamber?”

An excited Dobby appeared, with about fifty other House-elves, and they all popped out with the dragon, as well as the blood-drenched soil surrounding the carcass. Dobby popped back, and Harry handed him the golden egg, before he moved over to the judges. He unsheathed his sword, before standing at ease, with his hands over this sword’s pommel, and the tip resting on the ground.

Ludo Bagman reached up and lightly slapped himself in the face. “The scores,” he croaked. The crowd hushed.

Dumbledore nodded proudly at Harry, before his wand twitched, and a ten appeared in silver ribbon. There was a roar from the crowd. The French headmistress was next. She shook her head in disbelief, before raising her wand, and another ten appeared. Another roar.

Karkaroff was next, and he snarled, before shooting up a four. Boos and catcalls immediately started.

“Objection, biased judging,” Harry snapped immediately. “I call on the Goblet to judge.”

Karkaroff jumped out of his seat. “What is happening?” he yelled. “It hurts!”

“You swore to judge fairly,” Harry pointed out. “You are part of this tournament as well. The Goblet of Fire is judging your judging.”

Karkaroff sent up another ribbon, this one a nine, and he was able to sink into his chair, and glare at Harry.

“Don’t glare at me,” Harry said icily. “You are the one who just admitted to trying to cheat for your champion.”

Ludo Bagman was last, and he sent up another ten. Harry nodded and turned, heading to the side. The cheering was immense as he walked to the tent. He nodded politely to McGonagall and headed straight in. He was relieved to see Madam Pomfrey there, with what looked like most of the infirmary.

“Finally,” she praised, “a student who took it seriously. How bad is it, Harry?”

“Some burns, I think,” Harry said. He took a deep breath. “Armour off.”

He felt some slight tearing as the armour retracted taking some of his skin with it before transforming the padded underwear into shorts and trousers. “Ouch,” he muttered, as he took his undershirt off.

“Well, you’re quite burnt in places, but nothing we can’t fix easily. Considering you were forced to take on a dragon, you did outstandingly well. Did you make the armour yourself?”

“Yes,” Harry said, sighing in relief as the nurse started to paste some sticky green stuff on his back and chest.

“And your appetite has gone up?”

“I’m eating like a pig, at times,” Harry admitted, feeling embarrassed.

“Excellent, because I have been worried about you for a while. You had no serious nutritional damage in the tests I did when you first arrived, but I did think you were just a bit scrawny. I figured you’d just end up short. However, all this exercise and food seems to have kick-started your puberty. Could you write me up what you’ve been doing and food you’ve been eating? I think I could write a paper on you for St Mungo’s Journal.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed.

With a wave of her wand, the green stuff vanished, and Harry felt a lot better.

“Here,” Poppy said, handing him his shirt, after repairing it. “Now, get out of here, I have real patients to treat.”

“Diggory?” Harry asked, looking at the boy. Half his face was covered in the same gunk.

“I’m fine, Potter,” Diggory replied. “Major burns to the face, but nothing else. And it’s Cedric, by the way. Nice one. Did you kill it, then?”

“Yeah,” Harry said cheerfully. “Now I can make even better armour with dragon scale and bones.”

Cedric, who had half his face covered in goo, chuckled. “Well done, anyway.”

“Thanks. Catch you later.”

Harry stood and walked out, ignoring the other two champions. As soon as he set foot outside, he was mobbed into a hug with excited and cheering Astoria and Romilda. He hugged them back, before Hermione and Daphne took their places. Both girls were almost incoherently scolding him.

“That was awesome,” Romilda said, as Hermione and Daphne stepped back.

“Brilliant,” Astoria added. “Just like Romilda said, Harry Potter swung his broadsword, and the mightiest of dragons did quail before you.” She paused. “Oh, sorry, Harry, this is Mum and Dad.”

Harry looked up, to see a very good-looking older woman, whom he could see was the original that Astoria was practically a young clone of; Harry looked at the man next to her. “Gah,” he muttered, “I thought I had problems with my sexuality when Daph sat on my bed and I wasn’t interested in her. Damn, you’re pretty.”

The man laughed, showing perfect teeth. “I hear that Daphne has adopted you as a brother. Welcome to the family, Harry,” he said with a teasing grin. “I’m Derek, and this is Cressida, she’s the brains of the outfit.”

Cressida elbowed him firmly.

“She hates it when I say that,” he continued. “So, I have permission slips from the Headmaster for you Harry, and from your parents, Hermione, to take you all out to dinner, interested?”

“Yes,” Harry said instantly, as he saw the amount of people gathered beyond their group. He wanted to get away, quick. “Where are we going?”

“Our house, I’ve got some ox-cheek I’ve had braising for six hours.”

“Dobby, can we get transportation to the Greengrass place?” Harry called. Over the Greengrass’ shoulder, he could see the scrum of people heading for him. A second later they were all popped in front of a Georgian manor house.

“Wow,” Derek said, “That’s better than Apparation. And, you don’t hang around, do you?”

“Hermione,” Cressida said, looking at the girl, “When we talked to Albus about this, he asked your parents if he could give us your address. When they said yes, we popped around to ask permission to bring you here.”

“Daph, did you know that Hermione’s parents are teeth doctors? They do incredible work making sure people have good and healthy teeth!”

“Really?” Daphne asked. “That’s great.”

“It is, isn’t it,” Derek agreed. “Right, Tori, Daph, show our guests around while Cress and I finish dinner. We’ll eat in the dull room.”

“That’s ‘formal room’,” Cressida pointed out fondly.

“Dad’s name is better,” Astoria grinned.

Derek blinked, and then smiled at Astoria. “Off you trot.” Harry followed Astoria and Daphne up the stone steps and into the building.

The entrance hall had a mainly white tiled floor, with small black squares arranged in a geometric pattern. Huge wooden stairs to the second floor dominated the left of the hall, following the wall around ninety degrees, to a large double door at the top. The banister was supported by hugely ornate wrought iron.

Harry stepped forward to have a good look at it, and nodded slowly. He could do that, if he took the time, but it seemed too much like work to seriously entertain the notion.

Underneath the door, and the stairs, was another black door. Dotted around the remaining spaces were hard wooden chairs with ornate finishes, and no cushions.

They traipsed up the stairs, and through the doors. They entered a long hallway, with wooden flooring, and a slightly faded red and gold runner that followed the entire length of the hallway, and covered three quarters of the width.

Astoria led them down the corridor, opening the first door. "All the guest bedrooms are the same, just with different paintings."

Harry stepped in, and looked around. The walls were painted in an old magnolia colour. The furniture was all old wooden mahogany. Each had a four poster bed, with white and pink bedspreads. The curtains, naturally, matched the bedspread, and the floor was wooden and stained dark brown, apart from the matching rug, that was bigger than the entire floor plan of the Dursley's house.

The furniture was flowery, and very upright.

"It's practically untouched and in its original state," Astoria said.

Hermione was stroking the ornate desk. She looked at it closely, "Tori, is this genuine SwieteniaMahogani?"

Astoria smiled and nodded.

"What's that?" Romilda asked.

"A form of mahogany that's extinct now. And, I ask, because, at a rough guess, judging by the make, the fact it's original, and in perfect state, I would say that the furniture in this room is worth close to four hundred thousand galleons, at the current exchange rate of five pounds to the galleon. I saw it on an episode of the Antiques Roadshow."

Romilda and Harry both jumped away from the furniture.

"Really?" Astoria asked, looking surprised.

"Tori, you have genuine 18th century furniture, in styles that appeared in The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Directory. Even if they weren't made by Chippendale himself, they are close enough that Muggles won't care."

“Oh,” Tori said. “And if we still have the receipt, signed by Thomas Chippendale for all the furniture in the house?”

Hermione sat on the floor abruptly. “I’ve heard of a desk that was just done at the time, in the style of a Chippendale, sell for a hundred and fifty thousand galleons. Genuine Chippendale furniture.” She sighed and shook her head.

“All the other guest rooms have the same furniture,” Astoria admitted. “Good to know that if we’re ever broke, we can sell this stuff. And it’s good to know that our great, great, great Granddad had really good taste in furniture.”

“The best,” Hermione agreed.

“Right, enough of the formal rooms, let’s see my room!” Daphne said eagerly, as she hauled Hermione to her feet and pulled her down the hall to the far room.

Daphne’s room was far warmer, while still maintaining the special feel of the guest rooms. The walls were painted a rich, dark green, the furniture was lighter and looked far more used, and the canopy of the bed was cream.

“I like it,” Harry said, as he wandered over and sat on Daphne’s bed. Daphne beamed and sat next to him. Her desk was covered in pencils, and other art materials neatly arranged by type.

“I’ve not been in here for years,” Astoria mumbled. “I think that was a mistake.”

“We were both busy, Tori,” Daphne said gently. “Harry can use my bathroom to shower and freshen up, you can take Hermione and Romi to yours so they can clean up before dinner?”

“Good idea.”

As soon as they left, Daphne hugged him hard, and buried her face against his chest. “I was so scared,” she whispered.

“It’s okay, we all put the work in, and it worked properly.”

“I know, but when that nasty creature broke free, I thought it was going to eat you.”

Harry patted her back softly. “I wasn’t going to be beaten by that overgrown worm.”

Daphne giggled as she pulled back. “Right, go and wash up, have a shower— you’re kindabrimstoney at the moment, I’ll get your clothes cleaned.”

“Someday,” Harry said seriously, “you are going to make the bravest man or woman in the world the luckiest person, by marrying them.”

“Bravest?” Daphne asked.

“Sure, they have to convince me they are worthy of you.”

Daphne giggled. “Go, shower.”

Harry turned and entered the bathroom. Unlike the rest of the house, it was actually very modern. There was a hanging basket next to the shower, with more bottles than he’d seen outside of a store before.

He poked his head out of the door. "Daph?"

“What?”

“Could you get me something that’s not too, well, girly-smelling?”

“Oh, of course!” She dashed out of the room, and returned thirty seconds later with a bottle that was a more masculine dark brown in colour.

“Thanks,” he said with a grin, and shut the door, before climbing into the shower.

The water was lovely and hot, and it felt good to sluice away the smell of his armour and the undercurrent of sined Harry that he’d carried.

When he stepped out of the shower, his clothes were gone, and a dressing gown was next to the towels. He dried, trying not to make a mess, and put on the gown. In the bedroom was a new pair of jeans and a tight blue t-shirt. Not seeing any shoes or socks, he walked barefoot out of Daphne’s room.

“Down here,” Astoria called. She was sat on a hard-backed chair, reading from a book. He walked over to her and she led him downstairs, into a gorgeous large room. The walls were painted eggshell blue, and the large mirrors and paintings were all framed in highly ornate silver. The large table in the centre was mahogany again, with a white table cloth.

“Hideous, isn’t it,” Derek remarked mournfully. He was lounging at the head of the table, in a slightly indolent manner that was out of place in the surroundings. Everyone else, bar Cressida, was already sitting down.

“I’m British, I love this stuff,” Harry said dryly. “But I’ve only visited a place like this once, so it’s still remarkable for me.”

“I always feel like I’m drowning in my ancestral heritage. And what’s worse, is that most of them were so ugly in looks and personality that they needed to buy wives with wealth.”

“You bucked the trend then.”

“My father paid a veritable fortune for my mother,” he sighed. “She was a looker. Sadly, her intellect was somewhat lacking. Her appetites, on the other hand...”

“Dad,” Astoria scolded. “Family matters, remember?”

“Nonsense, Daphne’s adopted Harry as her big brother, that makes him part of the family. Romi’s spent as much time here as you have, and Hermione’s parents are incredibly successful at fixing teeth issues, and that’s one of the most important jobs in the world, so if she’s not family, she should be.”

“Dad hates bad teeth,” Daphne said with a giggle.

“Yes, just look at great uncle smash-mouth over there; it looks like he was hit in the face with a cricket ball.”

Harry looked at the portrait and laughed. The man did appear to only have three teeth, each of which appeared to point in a different direction.

“So how did you meet Cressida?” Harry asked, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“Well, it was after I’d left Hogwarts, and I was wondering what to do with myself. I was pretty sure that there was a lot more to life than being really, really, ridiculously good looking. And I planned on finding out what that is.

“I did some modelling for a bit. I had this look – blue steel – that was all the rage. But I was never really comfortable. And then, one day, I met Cress. She was beautiful, and more, she was smarter than I’m good looking, and I’m really, really good looking.” Harry noticed that all the boasting was actually said with Derek’s tongue firmly in his cheek, which gave the story a degree of humour that Harry appreciated.

“And so, rather than dedicate my life to being professionally good looking, I dedicated my life to my dear Cressida, and helping her in any way I could.”

“And he does, a lot,” Cressida said as she entered, a series of plates floating behind her. “And all I have to do is continually hit him until he realises that he does have a decent brain, and that he just likes to play the village idiot.”

“The ridiculously handsome idiot,” Derek correct serenely.

“So, Cressida, should I be telling him that someone in his family has been working really hard, and has been pulling off feats of magic that she thought she couldn’t do?”

“Tori’s always been great,” Derek said with a fond look.

“No argument there, but I was talking about Daphne,” Harry corrected.

“Really?” Cressida asked, as Derek did an elaborate triple-take-and-pout as he looked at his elder daughter.

Daphne blushed, “Harry,” she complained. “Look, I’m sitting next to someone who is as clever as Mum and Tori, of course I’m doing better!”

“Oh, no,” Hermione corrected, “You are working hard and studying properly; you are doing the work, you get the credit.”

“Yeah, well, Tori’s been wearing make-up,” Daphne blurted.

“Daph!” Astoria complained.

“Girls,” Cressida warned.

“Sorry, Astoria,” Daphne said, looking down at her plate.

“It’s okay,” Astoria said softly. “And yes, I have used some make-up. I am a girl.”

“A very pretty one,” Derek said firmly.

“In fact, Harry, we’re very lucky to be men here, surrounded by such looks.”

“Oh, I know,” Harry agreed.

“Hermione has the most amazing cheekbones, and that hair, it adds such character. I’ll bet that when she wants to make an effort and smooths it down, she’ll be as pretty as Daph and Tori, and as for Romi, why, those dark swirly eyes and mysterious smile, and that inner heat, wowzer.”

“And of course, Cressida,” Harry agreed, “If Daph and Tori grow up to be half as pretty she is, they’ll be lucky.” He paused, “And of course, there’s Derek, who wouldn’t have needed to use armour on the dragon, he’d just have smiled at her, and the dragon would have handed over the egg neatly.”

Derek blinked, opened his mouth, and shut it again, as Cressida started to laugh. “My husband, out-flirted by a teenager. Now, act normal.”

Derek pouted, before he sat up straighter. “Sorry, everyone,” he said casually.

“Hermione, Harry,” Daphne said, “Dad does enjoy playing the ridiculously good looking air-head.”

“I do,” he agreed. “Anyway, eat.”

And they did, and it was fabulous. Harry didn’t even feel guilty that he ate three platesful.

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Albus put his feet up on the desk and whistled cheerfully to himself. He was idly reading through the *Quibbler*, when the charm on the door told him that Minerva was entering.

He sighed and placed the newspaper down, and his feet on the floor. The door opened. “Good evening, Minerva,” he said.

“Albus,” she greeted him, before setting down. “Do you remember the first piece of advice you gave me, when I took the job as Deputy Headmistress?”

“Do consider handing Gryffindor house to someone else,” Albus said instantly.

“I refused, of course. It is only as I look back that I realise what good advice it was. Albus, I’m sorry, but I really have to resign as head of Gryffindor. I cannot do that job properly.”

Albus sighed. “What happened?”

Minerva sighed and looked at her hands. “After the first task, Harry nodded at me, as if I was just another adult that had let him down. One of my own didn’t really recognise me, and worse, had no reason to.”

“Ahh,” Albus said softly.

“I should have done any number of things, but I didn’t. I couldn’t even apologise. Did you know that the House-elves will not take anyone to his forge without his direct permission?”

“I do,” Albus agreed. “I asked to be taken myself, and was told quite firmly no.”

“You know what makes it worse? The fact that I should be so proud right now. Did you see that armour?”

“I did indeed. All of it he forged himself. He had help, of course.”

“Of course, but he was the one putting hammer to metal. And the spell where it came out of the ground and cocooned him? I had goosebumps, Albus.”

“As did I. I can’t help but think that the results of Barty Crouch Junior putting Harry into the tournament have been mostly in our favour.”

Minerva smiled faintly. “Mostly. It could have been more, if I’d actually done my job.”

“The fault is not just yours.”

“You are the Headmaster; I am his Head of House. I act in *loco parentis* to all the Gryffindors. As I had the highest direct responsibility, I had the highest failure.”

“Do you have a recommendation for your successor?”

“Not at the moment.”

Albus sighed softly. He picked up a piece of parchment and placed it in front of her. She looked at

it, and then at him in horror. “Yes,” he said grimly. “Something I should have dealt with years ago, rather than pfaftering around with the Wizengamot and the I.C.W. I cannot tell you how embarrassed I was to sit here and have the investigators deliver the preliminary report.

“Minerva, we have students taking pillows into a lesson!”

“What have we done, Albus?” Minerva asked.

“We put ourselves in a position where we saved money that should have been spent, and we thought we could do everything, because we have magic.” Albus sighed. “We failed a generation of kids. Fortunately, despite everything, Severus has turned out a number of good Potions experts. Sadly, the vast majority of the rest of the students hate Potions with a passion.”

“Well, at least he is gone.”

“I’ve not heard from him since he left.” Albus shook himself. “So, would you like some good news?”

“Yes, please.”

“I have over three hundred thousand galleons to add a new wing to the library, fund a class for a decade, and provide new brooms for all the houses.”

“What! How?”

“Harry donated practically all the basilisk proceeds that I sold through the I.C.W. to the James and Lily Potter foundation. Basilisk venom sells at ten gallons a millilitre, and we had close to two litres of it. The South African ministry paid fifty thousand for the flesh; they have some historical potions that need it badly, and of course, all the scales and such like have gone to ministries across the world for a tidy sum.

“Harry did give some money to his friends, and to myself and Nadya, but we all donated to the school improvement fund as well.” Albus smiled, “I did siphon off a little, for a personal project.”

“Oh?”

“The James Potter Award for Excellence in Prefecturing.”

“Did you just invent that word?”

“Possibly.”

“I love it,” Minerva said with a smile. “James will be banging his head in heaven.”

“I suspect that James wouldn’t ever come close to caring. He’d be far too busy reminding everyone that his son took down a dragon on his own!”

Minerva chuckled and nodded. “It was, by such a long way, a victory for him. He made the others look like children. Did you hear how happy Poppy was?”

“She made sure to tell me as well. So, Minerva, with you having more time, how would you like to oversee the changes?”

Minerva started to nod, and then paused. “Albus,” she said softly, “I can’t, unless I give up teaching Transfiguration as well.”

“I hoped you’d say that,” Albus said happily. “Learning from our mistakes is important. Seriously, though, it is your choice. I am happy to hire someone for a year or two, if you would like to oversee this project, on top of your duties as Deputy Headmistress.”

“Do I have to answer now?”

“Please, have a few days to think about it.”

Minerva smiled once more. “Now, get that bottle you think no one knows about, and let’s talk about the task a bit more.”

“Before we do, there is one other thing. I expect that someone will find Barty Crouch Senior dead soon.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, he was supposed to be the fifth judge today, and the Goblet does not like it when people don’t follow the rules.”

“Oh dear.”

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The un-formal room, as Derek had called it, had a huge roaring wood fire, numerous comfy chairs and couches arranged around it, and was fully carpeted and insulated. Above the fire was an old-looking painting of a pond, with trees either side – which in Harry’s humble opinion, was pretty poor.

Harry was guided into one of the two arm chairs, where he sat with his feet up on a foot stool.

The room was lovely and toasty, which, when combined with the food, had Harry feeling about as relaxed as he could ever remember feeling.

“Mum, we need to light a new fire,” Astoria said into the comfortable silence. “It turns out that Sirius Black didn’t have a trial, and is actually innocent.”

Cressida leaned forward. “No trial?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “It was one of the reasons we decided to go for the heroic direction to the

task. We wanted to let people know that Harry Potter was also around, and that if he asks questions, people should be falling over themselves to answer them.”

“Smart,” Cressida murmured. “Well, there’s only one thing for it. In the morning, we’ll go the Prophet and speak to the editor-in-chief directly. He’ll love the fact that he’ll get a chance to launch a campaign against the Ministry. He’s due to retire next year, so one last kick at them will make him happy.”

“Sounds good,” Harry yawned. “So warm, comfy.” He closed his eyes for a second. And when he opened them, he was flat on his stomach, in a large four poster bed, in one of the guest rooms. “Oh,” he muttered. “Whoops.”

He rolled out of bed, and found that he was in some pale blue pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt. His clothes were on a dresser, so he dressed and headed out. There was no one around, so he walked downstairs to the kitchen.

“Harry,” Derek said delightedly. “Feel better?”

“Sorry about last night.”

“Nonsense, you did fight a dragon yesterday, and managed to look pretty damn smart doing so. I hope you don’t mind that I called your House-elf and we put you to bed?”

“Not at all. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now sit, while I cook you something nice and filling. After that, do you want to join me in the gym? You don’t get to stay as ridiculously good looking as we two are without a bit of work.”

“You should come to my smithy,” Harry said with a laugh. “I swear that working out in the heat is best workout in the world.”

“And the sweating would act like a sauna,” Derek mused. “Romi showed me one of the daggers you did. Very impressive.”

“Thanks.”

“So yes, I would like to see the smithy,” Derek added.

“And I’d like to see the gym,” Harry replied.

“Excellent, then we can eat what we want for breakfast,” Derek cheered. “The girls will probably be up later, and will happily eat their rabbit food while inhaling coffee.”

Harry chuckled, and wolfed down the sausage, bacon, eggs, beans, hash browns, black pudding, and fried mushrooms, along with several cups of English breakfast tea.

Derek waved his wand as they finished, and the pots, pans and dishes started to wash themselves. About thirty minutes after they had finished, they headed to the gym, which was in the basement of the house, and seemed to contain every piece of exercise equipment known to man.

After some cardio, they headed to the weights.

“I have to try some Blacksmithing,” Derek said in disbelief. “Have you even lifted before?”

“No,” Harry grunted, as he lowered the bar to his chest, and pushed up.

Derek grumbled to himself, and let Harry finish his reps, before he took over.

“I’m twenty years older than you, and have been doing this all my life.”

“I have five anvils and one anvil stand. My double bick anvil is over a hundred kilos,” Harry said, as he kept an eye on Derek. “And I have several others that I use for different things, so I lug those around a lot. I also have a five kilo short pattern hammer that I tend to use as the blunt tool.”

“You don’t use magic?”

“Nah, it’s a good way to get stronger, and it’s part of the job, it makes me feel closer to what I’m working on.”

Derek raised his arms, and placed the bar back on the rack. He sat up, breathing heavily, and rubbed his face with a towel. “Done?”

Harry nodded. The clock on the wall said that it was ten in the morning.

“A quick stretch and a shower, then and we can join the ladies.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Harry agreed, as they headed through a low arch to cushioned area.

Dressed again, they headed up stairs in to the house. Astoria, Romilda, Daphne, Hermione and Cressida were sat around the kitchen table.

“Good workout?” Cressida asked.

“Yes,” Derek said cheerfully. “These good looks will not fade for at least another day. After you’ve taken Harry to start your fire, Harry’s invited me to his smithy.”

Cressida nodded. “Why not take the girls shopping, while I’m with Harry?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Harry, are you ready?” Cressida asked.

Harry nodded.

“Then shall we go?”

“Dobby, transportation for two to the Daily Prophet, please.” Two House-elves appeared, and they were popped away. “Thank you,” Harry said, as they arrived in a corridor.

The House-elves both beamed. “We is delighted to be helpings Harry,” the one on the left said. “Today is our day to do it, so please ask for lots!”

Harry chuckled. “I’m sure there will be, and the girls and Derek will want transportation soon.”

The House-elves popped away, as Cressida shook her head. She opened her door, and Harry followed her into the office. “Cressida,” an old balding man who was smoking a pipe said. He then glanced at Harry, and did a classic double take. “Is this going to be fun?” he asked, a spark of hope lighting his eyes.

“More fun than a blank front page,” Cressida replied.

“Benedict Crowther, Editor-in-chief for another four months, before my editor Barnabas Cuffe is going to take over, kid,” the man introduced himself, before handing Harry a piece of paper.

Harry read it, and blinked. “Point four,” he read aloud, “Rita Skeeter shall suffer no editorial restrictions, and shall be the sole authority on her own words.”

“Check the bottom.”

“Signed on behalf of the Board, by the Chairman SilusSilus the third.” He looked up at Cressida. “The ‘the third’ is actually spelt out.”

“So,” Benedict said, “my point in showing you that is that I have no control what the witch prints. The owners simply saw the money she can bring in, and allowed her to set her own terms.”

Harry nodded.

“Which was why I was utterly delighted when our presses failed to print her column about you. It was a hatchet job with no fact.”

Harry smiled slowly. “Dobby?”

The House-elf popped in.

“Do you think you could have some House-elves follow Rita Skeeter around, and ensure that she’s not allowed to lie about anyone?”

Dobby rubbed his hands together eagerly. “Dobby can be arranging that,” he said cheerfully. “Even when Skeeter turns into beetle, we cans be following her.”

Cressida raised her eyebrows. “Skeeter’s an Animagus? Oh dear, Ben.”

Benedict started to chuckle. “I don’t know which way to go,” he said. “Actually, I do. Could you replace her lies with the words, “Printing lies is bad?” he asked Dobby.

“House-elves can be doing that, leader-editor.”

“Excellent. We’ll do that, and then after she’s learnt her lesson and her reputation has gone, we’ll hand her over to justice.”

Cressida nodded. “She is a poisonous witch, but she’s always been careful not to cross the line with the people in power, Harry.”

“Ah, okay,” Harry agreed.

“So, what’s the Boy-Who-Lived and the first person since St George to actually fight a dragon single-handed – fight a dragon and *win* – doing in my office?”

“Sirius Black is innocent, and was never given a trial,” Harry stated.

“I knew about the trial, there were a few people in those days who were just carted off,” Benedict said absently, as his brow furrowed. “However, with Crouch being involved in this Tri-Wizard fiasco, well, maybe it’s a time for a complete check of everyone who was just locked up.”

“I think,” Cressida interjected, “that we need to ensure a law change so that it can’t happen again. Indefinite detention without trial from a state is about the worst abrogation of human rights known to man. And frankly, as a solicitor, the idea of people being incarcerated with no trial is against everything I stand for.”

“The I.C.W. will slaughter the government,” Benedict said happily. “Well, I was planning on serving my time as easily as possible, but I think I have the energy for one more crusade.”

“Good,” Harry said with a hard smile. “Sirius is my godfather, and I’d much rather live with him, than my Muggle relatives. I’m quite willing to use Harry Potter to help this,” Harry added.

Benedict bounced up, and headed to his door. He stuck his head out. “Smudgley, get your arse and quill in here,” he yelled, before returning to his seat behind his large desk.

“You yelled,” A tall and almost obscenely thin man tottered in, eyes dark and sunk into his pale face. “Greengrass, Potter,” he said with a nod.

“Black is innocent. We’re going to launch a campaign to get all those who didn’t have a trial, one before the summer. And Harry here is going to throw Harry Potter behind it.”

“The same Harry Potter who donated three hundred thousand galleons to Hogwarts recently,” Cressida added.

Harry blinked. “That much?”

“I flooded Albus this morning and asked him,” Cressida explained.

“Right,” Benedict nodded. “So we are going to want a three-part front page. More on your victory yesterday, a new one about your donation to charity, and the banner headline of Potter demands Justice – why was his Godfather not found guilty in a court of law?”

---

Cornelius Fudge knew when he had been manoeuvred into a corner. On one side, he had the I.C.W. asking all sorts of questions that he didn't want to answer but had been forced to, and on the other, he had the current hero, the Boy Who Lived and Chopped A Dragon's Head Off asking more questions.

The head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement entered and sat down.

“How many?” he asked.

“Five.”

“Guilty?”

“I would have said all of them this morning,” Amelia sighed. “However, I'm willing to bet my meagre pension that Potter has evidence that Black is innocent. No one asks for a trial when someone is already being punished.”

“We're going to have to have a trial,” Fudge said. “I don't suppose Black could have an accident?”

“If he's innocent, or more accurately, if Potter thinks that he's innocent, he'll use everything he has to destroy the Ministry. And even if you were willing to risk that, he would destroy you and destroy *me*. And let me remind you that he can make armour and a shield form from the ground.”

“That's what I thought,” Fudge sighed. “Who the hell donates three hundred thousand galleons to his own school?”

“Does it matter?” Amelia asked. “The very fact that he's improving things has got even more of the public on his side. Combine that with the I.C.W. investigations, and the fact he killed a dragon while dressed in magical armour? Frankly, he could demand that we all resign, and the public would agree.”

“Things have really gone wrong this year,” Fudge groaned. “We need some positive spin for the Ministry.”

“We'll start with the trials,” Amelia suggested, “and throw Bagnold, Crouch, and everyone else we can find under the wheels of justice. We'll also make a fuss of signing into law some safeguards so that this can't happen again.”

“Excellent,” Fudge agreed. “Now, what about Potter? I was thinking about giving him a reward,

but anyone who donates that sort of cash without upfront publicity isn't someone who needs it."

"No," Amelia agreed. "My niece is at Hogwarts. Until earlier this year, she kept a distant eye on Potter. Most of the time, he just wants to be left alone. So, maybe, we could try that?"

"Leaving him alone, and seeing if he does the same to us?"

Amelia nodded.

"It's certainly the cheapest way forward," Fudge said with a bit of a chuckle. "Any luck with the House-elves?"

"I did manage to talk to one, and all the rumours are true. They have found a supply of magic that means they don't have to borrow from us. And of course, without that, they have no reason to serve us."

"I didn't even know that was what the bond was. I'm not sure that many others did, either."

"I didn't," Amelia said.

"A lot of Pure-bloods are very upset. Fortunately, they aren't blaming me. They are blaming Potter, though, as everyone knows the House-elves are still working with him, and at Hogwarts."

"You may have to make a decision, Cornelius, the Pure-Bloods, or Potter."

"One group bitches and screams and expects money to get them everywhere, the other forges magical armour, kills giant dragons, and gives the biggest donation in Hogwarts's history to the school. I know which way the wind is blowing."

"I'd decided the same thing," Amelia agreed.

"Do you want my job?" Cornelius asked Amelia after a few seconds of silence.

"Why?"

"Because the I.C.W. are going to suggest I retire. So I may as well make myself legendary by pissing off the so-called elite and putting some reforms in place while I can."

Amelia chuckled and stood. "I'll arrange for an emergency trial, and put out a press release guaranteeing Black's safety," she said.

"I'll do a wireless interview, agreeing that justice must be done, and showing our willingness to cooperate."

"Do come over for dinner tonight, I've got one of my mum's old dishes on the go."

"Thank you, I'd be delighted."

“That’s it, I’ve had enough,” Romilda said firmly. “I’ve not helped curse anyone in months, months! Someone needs a good cursing, and it needs to happen now.”

Harry had to physically stop himself from picking up his hammer and starting to work. He’d just finished showing Derek around, before he’d left with the Elves to go back home.

Harry looked at Astoria, who had a little grin on her face, Hermione, who had another little grin, and Daphne, who was nodding eagerly.

“Lucius Malfoy?” he suggested. “He’s a good a target as anyone.”

The grins turned positively evil.

---

Lucius Malfoy was enjoying what was hopefully not going to be the last meal with his wife for a very long time. It was taking everything he had, including bribing and corrupting others to take the fall for him. There was a slim chance he’d be able to escape.

He smiled at Narcissa. He’d really lucked out with her, as she was beautiful, and most arranged marriages sometimes appeared to be betwixt man and beast.

The faint tattoo on his arm pulsed, but he ignored it with long practice, and went back to looking at his pretty wife. In fact, she was so pretty; he just had to sing her a song.

He climbed onto the table and looked around the restaurant. Everyone was staring at him, which was good. In a surprisingly high voice, he started to sing.

“When I was just a little wizard,  
I asked my mother, what will I be  
Will I kill Muggles, will I be rich  
Here’s what she said to me

Que sera sera  
Whatever will be, will be  
You’ll rule the world, you see  
Que sera sera  
What will be, will be

When I was young, I fell in love  
I asked Voldemort what lies ahead  
Will we kill Muggles, day after day  
This is what Voldemort said to me.  
Que sera sera

Whatever will be, will be

Bend over, my friend, you see  
Que sera sera  
What will be, will be

Now I have a child of my own  
He asks his father, what will I be  
Will I kill Muggles, will I buy freedom  
I tell him tenderly

Que sera sera  
Whatever will be, will be  
You'll worship Voldemort, you see  
Que sera sera  
What will be, will be"

Lucius finished, and sat down happily.

"You slept with the Dark Lord?" Narcissa shrieked. "Do not ever come near me again, you disgusting freak! You'll hear from my divorce solicitor as soon as possible." She stormed out. Lucius got to his feet, but he was dropped by a stunner before he could move.

Two off-duty Aurors, who had been enjoying an evening's meal, decided that there was enough in the song that it warranted investigation, even if the circumstances of it being sung had been a tad bit suspicious.

---

Daphne made her way to breakfast alone. Hermione was having a lie-in, and Romilda and Astoria hadn't been seen yet. She was pretty sure that Harry was having a good look at the remains of the dragon.

She entered the great hall, about as happy as she could remember, when a familiar voice pulled her down.

"Where's Potter?"

Daphne tilted her head at Malfoy. "Tell me, are you still following your father?"

"My father is a great man," Malfoy responded angrily. "I will be just like him!"

"My condolences," she said to Pansy, who, as always, was hovering around Draco like some sort of pug-nosed moth near a particularly dim torch.

"Huh?" Malfoy demanded.

"You've not read the Prophet yet?" Daphne asked in surprise. "Oh well, makes it all the more fun for you. My mum and your mum were talking most of the night."

“What?”

Daphne turned and sat at her spot at the bottom of the Gryffindor table, leaving Malfoy standing there. He pulled out his wand.

“Draco Malfoy!” McGonagall thundered. “How dare you draw your wand on a schoolmate? That will be detention, with me, for the next two weeks. Additionally, one hundred points from Slytherin, and you are banned from Hogsmeade visits.”

“What?” Malfoy shouted. “When my father hears about this...”

“He will do nothing, as I am the Deputy Headmistress of the school, and he is merely a parent. He can, of course, pull you out of Hogwarts, but there will be no refund and he has paid your entire tuition up front. Now sit down, and be quiet!”

Cowed, Malfoy retreated to his seat. Daphne smiled, as the Daily Prophet arrived. As well as information about Sirius Black’s lack of trial, it had a picture of Lucius, along with the words, “He Who Must Not Be Named’s Boy-toy?”

Further in the story, it mentioned that Narcissa Malfoy had retained Cressida Greengrass as her divorce solicitor.

Daphne looked up at the pale and almost hyperventilating Malfoy. “Just like your father?” she mouthed.

He actually looked sick.

Daphne smiled to herself. Romilda was right. Revenge was good for the soul. With that decided, she put together a tray and decided to surprise Hermione with breakfast in bed.

---

Harry stood in the shadows, watching the Great Hall. After a few moments, his target exited, with two other boys. As they walked down a corridor, he pulled out his wand. Two quick stunners and the boys were on the floor.

“Armour on,” he called, as he stepped forward, and grabbed Worthington by the collar. “So we are very clear, my sister, Daphne, is not a bitch. She is not to be called a bitch. She is not to be treated in any way other than with the greatest respect. Is that in any way unclear?”

“N-n-no,” Worthington stuttered.

“I am going to let you go now. I do hope you try and curse me, because it will give me the excuse I need to remove your hands at the wrist.” He dropped the boy, and turned his back. He walked off, really, truly hoping that Worthington would give him an excuse.

The boy didn’t, and Harry allowed his armour to vanish, as he was popped away to the Chamber of

“Morning, rich-girl,” Romilda said cheerfully, as she sat on her friend’s bed.

“Grmmeornorf,” Astoria mumbled.

“Yeah, but I think I’m a bit young to be licking spray cream off of his chest.”

Astoria’s eyes opened.

“My parents are fully human,” she added with a grin.

“Damn gypsies,” Astoria muttered.

“Slightly,” Romilda agreed. “Now, sit up, I’ve got you some coffee.”

Astoria did, and took the cup. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Today, I just want to spend the day with you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, everything’s been going on at the speed of light recently.”

“Oh, I know, it’s insane, one moment we’re just two second years with a crush, and then next we’re his friends, watching Harry in armour beat a dragon, and knowing it was us that got him there!”

Romilda giggled. “Yeah, it was just, you know, amazing. But, what happens now?”

Astoria shrugged. “Hermione knows we both have a crush on him.”

Romilda wrinkled her nose.

“And the fact that while he likes us both, he doesn’t like us *like that* .”

Romilda pouted.

“Because we’re twelve,” she finished.

Romilda sighed.

“So we are friends for two years, and then we fight?”

Romilda took a deep breath. “Yes, but no. We fight for him, but not each other.”

Astoria tilted her head.

“We always laughed and said we’d never be friends for ever, because we’re both too alike and too different.”

Astoria nodded slowly.

“I don’t want that anymore. I want to relax with your mum and dad, and I want you to stay with my mum and dad and wander around Europe with us.”

“But what if one of us wins?” Astoria asked.

Romilda took a deep breath. “I asked Gran, and you know what she said?”

Astoria shook her head hard.

“That love, even real love, can’t survive on its own. It needs something to keep it going, and that if one of us loses, then it will be hard, it will be devastating, but it won’t be forever. And if we’re strong, if we believe in our friendship, we’ll get through it.”

“And if we both lose?”

“Then we’ll curse the bitch who wins,” Romilda said lightly, before finding herself being hugged by her friend.

“Yes, definitely yes. I’ve been so worried about us, because I know you, you’d do a curse without thinking about it on me.”

Romilda winced.

“And without me, you’d do something stupid to impress someone, and would ruin it, and then Mum would get some revenge as well, subtly, of course, and we’d both end up miserable!”

“Of course,” Romilda sniggered. “So, friends forever?”

“Forever!” Astoria took a deep breath, and as she pulled back, Romilda could see that she’d cried. “Let’s make a simple plan,” she said. “We’ve got eight weeks in the summer, right?”

“Right.”

“So, two weeks for Harry to spend alone with Sirius, settling in, and for us to spend time with our families alone, then a week where we all join him, then a week at my place for everyone, and then we join your family for the rest of the summer.”

“Ooh, ooh, ooh! We can start in Dublin, then head down to Lisbon, and across to Madrid, then Barcelona, Marseille and Milan, then head in to Zagreb, Budapest then down to Bucharest, and then head up to Moldova and finish in Minsk!”

“Let’s go check with Hermione and Daph?”

“Good plan,” Romilda agreed, pulling Astoria out of bed, and running, with her friend’s hand in hers, to Hermione’s bedroom.

Hermione and Daphne were sat on Hermione’s bed, chatting, as they burst in. Romilda dived onto the bed. “We’ve got a plan!”

“Oh?”

Romilda quickly outlined the time scale they’d come up with, and the things they’d do.

“So many countries, so much culture,” Hermione whimpered, her eyes glazed. “Yes,” she said thirty seconds later. “Yes.”

Romilda cheered, aware that Astoria was doing the same.

“Right, Romi, you talk to Nadya, I’ll talk to Mum and Dad, and then we can all go and talk to Harry,” Astoria said.

Romilda turned and bolted out the room. She flew as fast as she could down the corridors, until she got to the potions dungeon. Panting, she let herself in. As expected, her Nan was hard at work. “Gran, can we organise a mini grand-tour for Harry?”

Nadya raised an eyebrow. “Explain in detail, dear.”

Romilda did.

Nadya smiled slowly. “You do of course know that most of your male cousins will be after lessons in smithing from Harry?”

She nodded.

“And that some of your female cousins may be more personally interested.”

Romilda automatically reached under her skirt, and pulled out the dagger Harry had made. “Tori and I have an agreement that we get first shot when he thinks we’re *old enough*,” she said. “I’ll fight to keep it that way!”

“And the fact that a traditional fight is done at night, in front of a fire, with both topless has nothing to do with it?”

Romilda blushed. “He might think we’re ready a bit earlier,” she mumbled.

Nadya giggled. “Give it time, child, I will inform the girls that he is off limits. Unless, of course, he approaches them.”

Romilda pouted, but she didn't say anything. She couldn't control Harry, as much as she might want too at times. She'd been told numerous times by relatives that controlling people only lead to misery. She wasn't convinced, but she trusted her family.

"But yes, it's an excellent idea. I'll arrange for the clan to gather in Dublin, and we'll attach the pegasi to the caravans, and fly everywhere. The clan was planning to visit a few of these countries anywhere, so no one will mind a schedule change."

"Woohoo," Romilda cheered, and hugged Nadya hard. "See you later, Nan," she called, and sprinted out.

With Harry working on the dragon, Romilda and Astoria headed out to walk around the Black Lake and have fun together.

Around a quarter of the way around the lake, Astoria turned to her. "Romi?"

"Yeah?"

"Do your boobs hurt?"

"Oh, Merlin, yes, all the time! But it's the itching that does me. Half the time I'm in lessons I just want to scratch them!"

Astoria looked relieved. "Not just me, then," she sighed in relief. "I just can't ask anyone about it," she confessed.

"I had to ask my sister. I was so embarrassed. It was early last year, and yeah, I was happy they were growing, but my first period, I punched my cousin, burst into tears, and then spent a day in bed hugging a warming charm. I thought I was going to die."

"My monthlies haven't been that bad."

"'Monthlies'," Romilda said, rolling her eyes. "Your breeding is showing."

"What do you call it, visit from Aunt Flo?"

"I tend to call it my period," Romilda said dryly. "I'm a gypsy, I don't need pretty euphemisms. It just means my body is ready for the right boy to bend me over and go to town!"

"Romilda Vane!" Astoria shrieked.

Romilda laughed at the response.

"One, you are no way ready for that," Astoria stated, and Romilda didn't correct her. "Secondly, you said you didn't need pretty euphemisms, so surely that's 'fuck you'."

Romilda felt her jaw drop as she stared at her normally prim friend.

“That’s one back for me,” Astoria said smugly. Romilda pounced on her, knocking her over. “Romi!” Astoria complained.

They play wrestled for a bit, before Romilda got to her feet and helped Astoria up. “I can’t believe little miss Pure-blood Princess just swore like that!”

“I can’t believe you said that either, gypsy girl.”

They resumed their walk around the lake. “Susan Bones has huge boobs.”

“Yeah,” Astoria agreed. “They must be the biggest in the school.”

“Technically, that’s Bulstrode.”

“True,” Astoria said, wrinkling her nose. “She could crush boulders with them.”

“First she turns them to stone with that hair, then crushes them. She’d do well in Roman mythology.”

“Greek,” Astoria corrected, her tone light.

“Yeah, that too.” Romilda giggled. “I got a note from my sister, she’s got a new memory for us.”

“Of what?” Astoria asked eagerly.

“New Kids On The Block, she saw them in concert in Barcelona.”

“Awesome!” Astoria cheered. “Donnie is so hot!”

“I like Jordan,” Romilda said, as she grabbed her heart. “Hopefully it will be here tonight, and we can watch it in bed.”

“Yeah. Mum’s ordered the new John Grisham, she’s gonna send it to me as soon as she’s finished.”

“Cool. It always makes me laugh that your mum reads trashy lawyer novels.”

“I know. She likes to laugh at them, and thinks it’s all so Americanised.”

“I wanna go there.”

“America? Me too. I want to see the Grand Canyon.”

“Vegas, baby!”

“We’ll just have to work for it!”

“Damn right.”

“We’ll hit the town so hard it won’t even remain standing!”

Astoria giggled. Romilda felt her hand be grabbed. “Come on, let’s go listen to some cheesy boy band music and make up dance routines.”

“Cheesy?” Romilda protested playfully, as she allowed herself to be dragged.

It felt good to act her age for a bit.

---

Harry finished dealing with the carcass of the dragon, and paused. A second later, Dobby popped Professor Dumbledore in.

“Ah, Harry,” Dumbledore greeted him.

“Professor.”

“You wouldn’t know anything about Lucius Malfoy admitting that he was in love with Voldemort, would you?”

“The first curse we did on Voldemort,” Harry said with a grin. “We’ve got another planned for tomorrow afternoon.”

“The day before Sirius’s belated trial?”

Harry nodded and grinned. “It should help.”

The professor looked thoughtful, “Say I were to go out for a long walk tomorrow afternoon, should there be a place I should definitely avoid, so that I would not be interrupted by such a curse?”

“I would definitely avoid Diagon Alley at two-fifteen if you value your sanity.”

“Sadly, Harry, I’m afraid that my sanity went for a long walk quite some time ago.”

Harry chuckled. “So, I’m sure it’s not worth as much as a basilisk, but is the rest of the dragon worth anything?”

“Dragons do not usually die of anything but old age. I’ve already been asked by a few people if they can buy bits. I reckon we could get as much as fifty thousand galleons for the bits you have there. The intact eyes are the most valuable part. The heart is valuable as well.”

“Unfortunately, I need that.”

“Of course,” Albus agreed.

“So how about we spend this money on re-fitting all the Common Rooms?”

Albus sighed softly. “Contrary to belief, Harry, Hogwarts has been operating at a profit for a long time.”

“Really?”

Dumbledore nodded. “The problem is that all the senior staff felt that we could do everything ourselves, and as a result spread ourselves too thin. The arrogance of magic, if you will.”

“Well, you’d know better than I would. I guess St Mungo’s could do with a donation?”

Albus smiled widely. “An excellent suggestion.” He paused. “There is going to be a Yule Ball this year. All fourth years and above can attend, third years if they are invited. As a champion, you will be expected to open the dancing.”

Harry opened his mouth, and then shut it. He grinned at Dumbledore. “What do you expect me to say?”

“That you are not a champion, and that you would not go to a ball and leave two close friends sitting on the outside?”

Harry smiled and nodded.

“And as I thought you’d say that, my counteroffer is that you can invite Miss Vane and the younger Miss Greengrass, and attend as a normal person.”

“Thank you, Professor, I’d be delighted to attend.”

“Excellent,” Albus said. “Now, what’s this about you allowing Derek to see the forge, and not me?”

“Would you like to see the smithy, Professor?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 4

Harry entered their little common room to see Hermione and Daphne studying together on one couch, and Romilda and Astoria on another couch, poring over a map.

Harry took the large chair between them. “There’s going to be a Yule Ball,” he called. The other four looked up. “Fourth years and above, third years if invited.”

Astoria and Romilda both looked upset. “Unless you’re Harry Potter,” he continued, “then you’re allowed to ask a couple of cheeky second years if they want to come as well?”

“Yes,” they replied instantly.

“And thanks for not forgetting us,” Astoria added with a little smile.

“Yeah,” Romilda agreed.

“What are you planning, Harry, that we go as a group?”

Harry nodded. “That’s what I was thinking, but if you want a partner, that’s fine too,” he added.

“I have no wish to spend an evening with some moron trying to paw my boobs like a dog trying to open a door,” Daphne said with a sniff. “Going with my friends sounds like fun.”

Hermione shrugged. “I don’t actually know many people outside of our group, and honestly, I have no wish to either.”

“Other boys smell,” Romilda pointed out.

“I agree,” Astoria finished.

“You know what this means?” Daphne asked excitedly.

“No?”

“Dance practise!”

“Yeah!” Romilda cheered.

“No,” Astoria groaned. “I hate dancing.”

Romilda leant over and whispered something in her ear. “But I’m willing to take one for the team,” Astoria quickly added.

“Seeing as the only time I’ve danced was when we were in the Chamber, it’s probably a good plan.

So, how about we look at this egg for a bit, and then start?" Harry asked.

"Good plan," Hermione approved.

Dobby popped in and gave the egg to Harry. He was about to pop out, when Harry said, "Please stay, Dobby, you might be able to help."

"Dobby will try," he agreed, looking delighted. Harry created a small chair for him, and Dobby sat with pride.

After looking, tapping, shaking and generally examining the egg for a few minutes, Harry opened it. A caterwauling immediately filled the small room. Harry shuddered, and quickly closed it.

Hermione shuddered. "It sounded like a hundred cats being tortured, as a rooster was squished by a hippogriff."

Harry laughed. "Yeah," he agreed. "Anyone?"

Daphne, Astoria and Romilda all shook their heads.

"Dobby ask," the House-elf declared, and popped away. He returned with Cully. "Cully is thinking he is recognising description."

"Can you be making sound again?" Cully asked.

Harry opened the egg, as the girls all hurriedly put their fingers in their ears. He gave it a quick blast, before shutting it again.

Cully shuddered. "Sounds like noise when Headmaster is talking to man-fishes when they is being above water. Different in water."

"Wizards are so stupid," Daphne announced. "For years, we've ignored a great resource under our noses."

Both House-elves blushed and looked pleased.

"Thank you, Cully, Dobby," Harry said. He put the egg down, and rolled it into a corner. "So, I'm presuming you can teach us to dance, Daph?"

Daphne beamed. "I can't, so it would be far better if we just asked one of the wonderful House-elves to get dad here."

Harry blinked. "Good point," he agreed. He didn't even have to ask, as Dobby and Cully popped away, and less than two minutes later, Derek and Cressida appeared, each with a small box in their hands.

"So, I hear you need a ridiculously good looking dance instructor?" Derek beamed, as he turned

his head slightly to one side, and gave a small pout.

Harry gulped, and then had to blink repeatedly.

“And that’s the power of Blue Steel,” Daphne cheered.

“Intense,” Hermione agreed with her cheeks flushed, and her lips freshly moistened.

Cressida elbowed her husband. “Right, you and Daphne can help with the girls, I’ll take Harry.”

“Wonderful,” Derek said.

“Come on, Harry,” Cressida called. “I’m sure you have somewhere with enough room?”

“My bedroom’s probably large enough.”

“Splendid.” Harry followed the older woman into his bedroom.

“Shut the door,” Derek called, “it’s far better to embarrass yourself in private.”

“If you say so,” Harry replied. He shut the door, to find that Cressida had put the box on his bedside table, and removed her shoes.

“Take yours off, Harry, to start with, you will be treading on my toes a lot, and it’s easier to tell you are doing so with the feet protection charms if you aren’t wearing shoes.”

Harry did as he was told, and then added a freshening charm, just in case.

He stood, and looked at the older witch. She smiled warmly at him. “You are going to have to call me Cressida,” she said, “or Cress, I don’t mind. But we’re going to be spending a lot of time together, so you may as well get used to it.”

“A lot of time?”

“Probably every night until the ball. Dancing isn’t easy, and practice makes perfect.”

“Won’t this get in the way of your private time?”

“We’re not newlyweds, Harry. A couple of hours a night where we either spend it with Daph, Tori, Romi and Hermione, or you? That’s not a bad thing, Harry. We have the rest of the days for private time.”

“In that case, instruct me!”

---

Albus purchased an ice cream cone, in his favourite TuttiFrutti flavour, and sat comfortably outside Fortescue’s ice cream parlour.

It was remarkably pleasant to just sit there and not be busy. He had a notice-me-not charm covering him. He was nearing the end of his treat, when he heard screaming.

Peter Pettigrew ran through the crowd, and jumped onto a table near him.

Albus quickly finished his ice cream, and then picked up his camera.

“The Dark Lord is going to kill you all!” Pettigrew yelled. “Now, fear the Dark Lord’s Mighty Basilisk!” He dropped his robes, and then his trousers, and humped his hips forward.

The screams abruptly stopped. There was some sniggering from the crowd.

“It’s working; My Lord’s Basilisk is turning you to stone!” He moved his hips back and forth, and to the side, before he abruptly pulled his trousers up, and Apparated away.

“That was Peter Pettigrew,” someone in the crowd shouted. “If he’s alive and working for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, then Black must be innocent!”

Albus smiled, as other members in the crowd started the same conclusion. What was the icing on the cake, was when someone muttered, “You have to wonder if the Inner Circle were all the people that the Dark Lord liked to bugger.”

Albus Apparated straight to the Daily Prophet offices. After all, such a performance of the Dark Lord’s Mighty Basilisk needed front page status.

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“Would a House-elf be so kind as to ask Harry to be here in ten minutes?” Albus asked the empty air. “I’m sure he’ll want to see Sirius’s trial.”

Cully popped in a few seconds later. “Harry is told, Professor. He will be ready.”

“Thank you, Cully. Tell me, is the drain on Harry’s magic significant?”

“Not for such a great and powerful wizard,” Cully said.

Dumbledore nodded.

“We now has permission to work on proper solution, but we has centuries yet.”

“I’d be delighted to help, if you want to run some ideas past me.”

Cully beamed and nodded eagerly. “Wes be doing that,” he agreed.

“Fawkes, would you mind retrieving Sirius from his holiday abode?”

His phoenix squawked, and vanished in a puff of fire. A minute later, the tanned, clean shaven form of Sirius Black appeared in front of him. He was wearing a suit and tie, with the gold chain

of a pocket watch poking out of his waist pocket.

“Albus,” Sirius greeted him.

“You are looking good, Sirius.”

“I couldn’t sleep, and I was complaining to a bar tender. He suggested I try a psychologist. Turns out, that was a great idea. I’m going to need a lot of therapy, but I feel like I’m on the right track to get my life together, and once I am together I can have Harry live with me.”

“I can’t tell you how happy I am to hear that. Now, have you heard about the prank that your godson has pulled off?”

“No?”

Albus quickly explained about the Horcrux, and what it meant for their ability to use that to target anyone with a Dark Mark, and then what they had done to Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew.

By the end of the story, Albus didn’t think that he’d ever seen Sirius look so carefree and happy. Especially when he passed him the latest edition of the Prophet. Sirius started to laugh so hard, he was crying.

“Come in, Harry,” Albus called, as the wards on the door registered Harry’s magical signature.

Harry entered; he was dressed in a smart suit as well. “Harry,” Sirius cried, and pulled him into a bear hug.

“Sirius,” Harry cried, and slapped his Godfather on the back a few times.

“Hey, ease up, you could break a rib like that,” Sirius chuckled. He pushed Harry back so he could look at him fully. “You’ve grown several inches,” Sirius declared, “and if I’d known that smithing could help put on muscles like that, I’d’ve been doing it when I was at school. You must be pulling the birds like no one’s business.”

Harry smiled and ignored the half-question. “So, let’s go,” he said. “Let’s get you cleared.”

“Thanks to you, yes. And then we can plan the summer!”

“Oh, I have a plan, if it’s okay with you?” Harry said.

“I’m listening.” Harry quickly explained, and Sirius smiled, “Sounds great.”

“I checked with Nadya, and you can come.”

“You couldn’t keep me away,” Sirius promised. “Four weeks traipsing through Europe sounds heavenly.” He paused. “Would you mind if I missed Christmas?” he asked Harry.

Harry tilted his head.

“I’m undergoing therapy on the island, and I think I should finish it, and I’m scared that if I spend Christmas with you, I’ll convince myself I’m fixed, and not go back.”

Harry smiled and hugged Sirius tightly. “That’s the best reason,” he reassured him. “It will make summer all the better.”

“It will, which is why I’m going as well on the summer trip,” Dumbledore said cheerily.

“That’s great, Professor,” Harry said with a huge smile.

“Anyway, let us be off!” Albus held out an old copy of the Beano. And as they all touched it, he felt the familiar feel of his spine being pulled through his navel.

They arrived in the middle of a scrum of people, outside a courtroom. The noise was deafening.

“Quiet,” Harry yelled. Albus suspected a bit of accidental magic helped him. “Thank you. Right now, we are concentrating on the trial, and allowing my godfather a chance to tell his side of the story, twelve years late. Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

Harry marched forward and the crowds parted before him. Sirius followed him, and Albus trailed after, highly amused by the whole thing.

As they entered the court room, they were met by Amelia Bones. “Mr Black, if you’ll accompany me?”

“Catch you later, Harry.”

“I’d say good luck, but all you need is the truth,” Harry replied. Albus followed Harry up to the stands, where they took two seats near the front.

Albus surreptitiously cast some comfort charms, and relaxed. “Normally, I’d be in the Wizengamot, but as I am retiring soon, I’ve been asked to sit this one out.”

Harry nodded, and looked up at the empty balcony ahead of them.

“All rise,” a clerk called. Albus got to his feet as Amelia Bones, Dolores Umbridge, and Cornelius Fudge entered.

Fifty wizards in red robes traipsed in.

Finally, Sirius entered and sat down on a solitary chair in front of them.

Albus frowned as after four decades on the Wizengamot he finally realised what this looked like from the other side. It was highly intimidating.

“Ah-hem-hem,” Umbridge coughed. Dumbledore kicked himself for not having destroyed her years ago. She was a symptom of everything that was wrong with their world at the moment. He consoled himself with the thought that at least the I.C.W. was very close to arresting her.

“We are here to listen to Sirius Black’s appeal...”

“Objection,” Sirius interrupted. “As I have never had a trial, nor been found guilty by my peers, I am legally completely innocent. Referring to me in anything other than those terms is slander against the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, and will be treated as such.” His voice was cool and calm, with an underlying fury that was almost palpable. “And let me remind you that while years of unjust imprisonment have left me currently unfit to duel anyone, the Black fortune is more than adequate to retain barristers for any number of lawsuits.”

For the first time since they had arrived, Harry relaxed.

“Excuse me?” Umbridge started.

“No, I won’t. Your deliberate attempt to undermine me in these proceedings has been noted and will be dealt with officially later. Now, I suggest we clear up this misunderstanding as quickly as possible. I am fully willing to have the truth charm cast at me, as well as take Veritaserum at the same time. I want it very clear that I am telling the truth.”

“Veritaserum is a very powerful truth potion,” Albus whispered to Harry, to make sure Harry knew what was going on. “It is possible to fight off the effects, but with the use of a truth charm as well, no one will doubt his testimony.”

“An excellent plan,” Amelia agreed, “Clerk, fetch the Veritaserum. I will cast the truth charm myself, as head of Magical Law Enforcement.” She waved her wand a few times, made a swish, then pointed at Sirius. A bright green glow surrounded him. When it finished, the scribe appeared with the potion.

“Before I take it, who will be asking the questions?” Sirius demanded.

“I will,” Umbridge and Amelia said at the same time.

“As Head of Magical Law Enforcement, I have the ultimate right,” Amelia snapped. “And I would thank you not to try and usurp my authority again.” Amelia raised her wand. “I, Amelia Susan Bones, hereby swear that I, and I alone will be asking questions of the suspect. I swear that the questions I ask will be relevant to the events of the 31st October, 1981.”

Sirius nodded and leaned his head back, allowing them to place three drops on his tongue.

“The suspect has been dosed,” Amelia said. “There will now be quiet in court. Anyone speaking will be immediately arrested, tried, and if found guilty, sentenced to four weeks in Azkaban.

“You are Sirius Black?”

“Sirius Orion Black, yes.”

“Were you the secret keeper of James and Lily Potter?”

“No.”

“Quiet in court,” Amelia immediately said, as hushed whispers broke out.

“Who was the Secret Keeper?”

“Peter Pettigrew. He betrayed us to Voldemort. After I confronted him, he cut off a finger on his hand, created an explosion, and took off in his rat Animagus form.

“As he escaped, it suddenly hit me that it was I who had suggested that we switch secret keepers, as I was the obvious choice. I remember falling to my knees, saying that it was my fault. The next thing I knew, I was in Azkaban.”

There was complete silence in the court.

“The court notes that Peter Pettigrew is indeed alive, with his picture on the front page of this morning’s *Daily Prophet*,” Amelia said in a small voice.

Umbridge raised her right hand. “You may address me,” Bones said.

“How did he escape from Azkaban?”

Bones frowned. “Firstly, that is not relevant. Secondly, as he was illegally interned at Azkaban, he cannot be deemed to have escaped.”

“Is he a Death Eater?”

“Good question. Black, were you a Death Eater?”

“Never.”

“Do you have any more questions about the night in question?”

Fudge and Umbridge shook their heads.

“There will be a twenty minute recess, while the Wizengamot come to a decision as to Sirius Black’s participation on the night in question.” The Wizengamot stood and walked out.

Albus whipped out his wand and cast a spell at Sirius.

“Albus?” Amelia asked.

“Simply a silencing spell,” Albus explained cheerfully. “Until the potion wears off.”

Amelia nodded. "Thank you."

"Now comes the dull part, waiting," Albus said softly to Harry.

"I don't like that woman."

"Umbridge? Yes, a particularly dreadful woman."

Harry nodded in agreement. "To me, that went well."

"Yes, Amelia Bones, who is Susan's aunt, a Hufflepuff girl from your year, is a competent Ministerial employee."

Sirius looked dreadfully bored, sat in his seat. He leaned back and closed his eyes, looking completely relaxed, despite his current situation.

Albus kept a light conversation going with Harry, while he waited. Finally, the Wizengamot returned. Elphias Doge stood and moved to the front. "We, the Wizengamot, unanimously clear Sirius Black of any and all suspicion in the act into which he was illegally interned. Additionally, we order the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to launch a public investigation into how this occurred."

"I will," Amelia promised.

Albus resisted the urge to palm his face. He was pleased he was no longer involved in the I.C.W. because that sort of sloppy and vague statement would only have caused him more embarrassment.

"Sirius Black, you are an innocent man." There was a cheer from the audience, one that Albus noticed Harry was quite keen to join in on.

Sirius stood and looked at Albus, who removed his spell. Sirius turned. "Madam Bones, it is my intention to sue the Ministry for Magic for its admitted illegal internment. I will be doing so this summer, when I have completed my rehabilitation."

Amelia, Cornelius and Umbridge all paled.

Sirius turned his back on them. "Come on," he said directly to Albus and Harry.

Albus hurried out of his seat and down to the courtroom floor, where he was bypassed by Harry who hugged Sirius hard.

They were quickly surrounded by well-wishers, busybodies, and the press.

"To the smithy," he heard Harry call, and a second later, he was grabbed by a House-elf and popped away.

They arrived at the Hogwarts forge, which was now decorated with a large banner declaring, "Congratulations Sirius!" The roof had been decorated with streamers, and four girls were all wearing party hats.

Harry popped to the front. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he called, "May I present Sirius Orion Black, the completely exonerated Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black."

The girls cheered.

"Sirius, you do of course remember Hermione Granger?"

"Hermione," Sirius said, with a large bow, obviously playing along.

"And this is Daphne Greengrass, who has designed all my armour."

"Charmed," Daphne said, with a formal curtsy.

"It is an honour to make the acquaintance of such a witch," Sirius said with a roguish grin.

Harry moved over to Romilda. "We also have Romilda Vane, of the Romany Vane clan. She is personally responsible for the curse that affected the not-yet-sufficiently damned Mr Pettigrew, and made him show to the world 'Voldemort's mighty basilisk.'"

"Enchanted," Romilda said with a grin.

"A witch with wit to match her beauty," Sirius said, his eyes wandering a little too far down for Harry's liking. Romilda blushed, as Harry smacked Sirius over the head.

"And last, but in no ways least, Astoria Greengrass, the witch who kicked off everything we are doing with one little spark of knowledge."

"My Lord," Astoria said, giving another curtsy,

"I've got to know," Sirius said, dropping his acting, "who did your dad marry? Because he's the only man to ever make me question my sexuality. Slightly."

Harry laughed. "I thought the same thing."

"Cressida Dumarks," Astoria replied.

"Cressida, Cressida..." Sirius mumbled.

"She was in the sixth year when you started," Albus said helpfully.

"Oh, yes, and frightfully smart," Sirius said. "Prefect as well, she always seemed to catch us when we were going to prank Ravenclaw."

Astoria smiled proudly.

“Anyway,” Sirius said with a shrug. “I wanted to thank you four for sticking with Harry, and helping him like you have. It means a lot to me, and means I’m not going to feel guilty when I head back to my counselling sessions. I’ll be missing Christmas this year, so that I can look after Harry properly from the summer.”

“Sirius,” Hermione said, “that’s great! Truly.”

“Yeah, I lucked into it,” Sirius agreed. “But depressing talk is for another night. I need to know what happened at the first task!”

“Actually, Sirius, I do have a Pensieve. Would you like to view it later?” Albus interrupted.

“Yeah, do that,” Harry agreed. “The House-elves have been cooking all your favourites, we’ve got some music, some whiskey for you and Professor Dumbledore, we’ve even got a Lemon Drizzle cake for Professor Dumbledore afterwards, and Remus should be arriving...”

There was a pop, and Remus appeared, and bounded over and hugged Sirius tightly.

Albus smiled; absolutely delighted that Harry was including him. He felt so lucky that his mistakes were not haunting him. He spared a brief thought for poor Minerva, whose mistakes apparently were not so readily forgiven, then turned his attention back to the party.

---

“Mum?” Astoria called, as Cressida walked out of Harry’s bedroom. They quickly headed into Astoria’s bedroom.

“Yes, dear?”

“I need a new robe.”

“I know.”

Astoria pouted. “I’ve seen Romilda’s new dress, and it’s not fair.”

“What isn’t?”

“Well, if I had a dress that showed off my best assets like that shows off her boobs, it would barely cover my bum and people would call me a whore, but if Romi has her cleavage on show, no one cares!”

Cressida chuckled. “Yes, dear. However, you are still twelve. There is plenty of time. I didn’t start to mature until I was fourteen.”

“By that time, Romilda’s boobs will turn corners before she does!”

“I think you are exaggerating, dear.”

“A little,” Astoria agreed. “I’m just ranting; I’d do the same if I could.” She sighed. “So, can you get me one?”

“Your father and I will pick one out for you and Daphne.”

Astoria nodded, before she paused. “Do you think Dad would help with our hair beforehand?”

“I think you should ask him yourself.”

“Yeah, I will.”

---

Christmas morning officially began with four bodies landing on his bed. He was pleased they all missed him. He still remembered one unfortunate morning when an over-enthusiastic bounce had ended with an elbow landing where it shouldn’t.

“Come on,” Daphne demanded. “It’s time for Christmas! Dad will have breakfast ready soon, and we need to get there!”

Harry blinked. “We’re going to your house?”

“Of course,” Hermione confirmed. “Why stay at Hogwarts when we can spend some time with some really great people?”

Harry tilted his head and looked at Hermione.

“Not now,” she said to his unasked question. “Someday, maybe.”

“Romilda?” Harry asked.

“My family don’t celebrate Christmas, so today is just a fun day to spend with my friends.”

“Right, then, get out, the lot of you,” Harry demanded. “I’ll be ready in five minutes.”

The four girls giggled and left, not without some play reluctance from people already caught up in Christmas Spirit, leaving Harry to have a lightning-fast shower, and then pull on some clothes and shoes. He met them in their little common room as five House-elves appeared to pop them to the Greengrass mansion.

They appeared near the door between the kitchen and the living room. The kitchen had been fully decorated, and the living room now had a large tree in the corner, complete with floating lanterns. It, too, was decorated enthusiastically.

“Excellent,” Derek cheered as he spotted them. “Come, sit. We’re going to have smoked salmon and scrambled eggs for breakfast, then do presents, then we’ll have a late lunch, before you get

ready for the ball tonight.”

“Yes, sit,” Cressida ordered with a smile on her face.

Harry started to, before he paused, and then went and hugged Cressida, and Derek, before sitting down.

“Harry?” Hermione asked.

He smiled. “I feel at home here.”

“Why thank you,” Derek said. He placed a plate in front of Harry, and spooned a large portion of eggs on top of the salmon.

“No, thank *you* . I mean, don’t get me wrong, I always felt welcome at the Weasleys, but it was always just that bit...” he paused, “tense?”

Hermione nodded. “What, with Ginny staring at you, the twins wanting to prank you, Percy wanting to rant at you, and Molly wanting to feed you more than you wanted to eat.”

“Yeah, it’s just here, I fell, well, respected as a person.”

“If you treat people as children, they will act that way. You are all old enough to act maturely, so we treat you as such.”

“Yeah, it’s nice,” Harry agreed.

“Even if we do have to make our little Tori have fun,” Derek said with a playful ruffle of her hair.

“Dad,” she complained playfully.

“Anyway, dig in,” Derek ordered.

The conversation died down, as everyone concentrated on eating. As soon as they had finished, the plates vanished. Harry blinked. “Dobby?”

Dobby appeared. “Tis Christmas,” Dobby said shyly, “so Dobby was wanting to do a bit of work for you.”

“Derek, do you have plenty of food for lunch?”

“Yes.”

“And do you mind me helping you with it?”

“Can you cook?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’d be delighted.”

“Excellent, in which case, Dobby, I’d like you to sit down with us, for dinner.” He paused. “Er, excuse me, Derek, Cressida. Do you mind if I invite someone to dinner at your house?”

“No, it’s alright,” Cressida said. “But please ask next time.”

“Harry wants to cook for Dobby?”

Harry nodded firmly.

“Dobby keeps being honoured,” the House-elf said, his voice wavering. “Dobby will be being back for lunch,” he promised, and popped away,

“So,” Harry said, into the silence, “I have a bunch of presents for people that are not going to open themselves.”

“Presents!” Daphne cheered.

“I suppose it is time,” Cressida agreed. Daphne, Astoria and Romilda all scrambled into the front room, Derek close behind them. “Go on,” Cressida urged.

Harry entered, and found a chair near the fire. He sat, kicked off his shoes, and curled up slightly. Derek was sat at the base of the tree, near all the presents.

As Cressida took her seat, Derek grabbed the first package. “To Cress, from Romilda.”

Cress opened the package, and smiled warmly. “Thank you, dear,” she said, as she held out the black shawl with intricate rose pattern.

The presents sped up, and Harry was delighted that there was nothing extravagant, just thoughtful gifts to and from everyone. His own gifts were well received, and he was delighted with the ones he’d received in return. Especially a new cage for Hedwig from Cressida.

“And second to last, Hermione, from Derek and Cressida,” Derek called, handing a slim envelope to Hermione. She opened it eagerly, and she squealed in pleasure. She jumped up and hugged Derek, and then Cressida.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

Hermione handed over the paper. Harry read it out loud. “One day to read through the Greengrass Book of History.”

Romilda, Astoria and Daphne all burst into laughter. Hermione stuck her tongue out at them.

“And finally, Daphne, from Harry.”

Daphne eagerly ripped open the presents, and looked curiously at the titles.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said softly. “You’ll love them, Daph, I promise.”

“The Wind in the Willows,” she read out.

“Come on, let’s cook,” Harry said to Derek, as Daphne pulled out the first book, and opened. Astoria and Hermione quickly pulled out new books as well, and even Cressida joined in.

Romilda rolled her eyes, and joined them in the kitchen. She sat at the table, “I can’t boil water, but I can keep you company.”

Harry looked at the side, and saw all the ingredients. “How about I take care of the parsnips, the brussel sprouts, and the roasties?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Derek agreed, as he made his way to a huge rack of beef. “I’ve never been a turkey fan,” he explained. “The plan is to cook everything at once, and we’ll keep it at the right temperature with a nifty little spell my mam taught me.”

“You have any bacon?”

“In the fridge.”

“Cool.” Harry took the sprouts and dumped them in front of Romilda. “You can help with this, it needs a knife.”

Romilda reached under the table, and a second later, the elvish dagger he’d made was in her hand.

“I wondered where that went,” he said. “These sprouts are peeled already, so you just want to make a small cut in the base.”

“Is the knife clean?” Derek called.

“Magically so,” Romilda replied. “I keep all my knives clean and sharp.”

“Good girl. Clean your hands first.”

Harry started with some bacon in a pan, and put it on the heat, as Romilda popped up to wash.

At the same time, he started to peel the parsnips. This felt so different from the times he had been forced to cook for the Dursleys. Here, it was fun, and he was happy that he was cooking for people that he truly cared about.

“So, I hear you’re a good flyer?” Derek said.

“The best in the school,” Romilda confirmed.

“Yeah, I like flying, but this year, well, I’ve loved smithing just as much.”

“You do it with the same intensity,” Romilda intervened. “It’s so... I could watch you all day.”

“You do,” Harry said dryly.

“Perhaps after lunch, we could all go for a fly?” Derek suggested, getting the conversation back on track. “We have some Cleansweeps out back.”

“The Greengrasses always have an after dinner fly,” Romilda said.

“Hush, you,” Derek called, flicking some water at her. “I didn’t want to put any pressure on Harry.”

“And Harry would have been horrified if he’d said no and mucked up a tradition,” Romilda replied with a cheeky grin.

“She’s right,” Harry agreed. “I’d love to go flying.”

“Finished,” Romilda called.

Harry looked at the pot with the bacon in it, and as it was now nicely browned, he added some water and a couple of good splashes of cider vinegar, and then added the sprouts. He turned the heat right down.

“Here,” he said, “slice these, like this.” He took the knife, and made quick work of one of the parsnips.

“Will do,” Romilda agreed.

Harry went back and started to peel the potatoes. “Thyme?” he asked Derek.

“Herb garden.”

Harry nodded, and went back to peeling. There was something so pure about peeling potatoes that he loved. He wasn’t thinking of anything, just repeating an action over and over.

“Finished,” Romilda called.

“Put them in a pan, Romi, then add a little bit of water, and put them on the stove with a lid on. We’ll steam them to start with.”

Romilda did as she was told, dancing herself between him and Derek, before retreating.

“Cut,” Harry said, placing the potatoes in front of her, “into rough pyramids, we want to maximise the surface area to get them as crispy as possible.” He headed out the kitchen door, and was struck with envy at the herb garden. He picked a couple of sprigs of thyme, and headed back inside.

As soon as Romilda finished, he put the potatoes on to par-boil, and put a large roasting tin of duck fat into the top oven. With nothing else left for him to do, he cleaned up quickly, and then sat with Romilda. Derek placed the rack of beef in the oven; it was coated with mustard powder.

He quickly finished prepared the other veg, and joined them at the table.

“Dessert?” he asked.

“We have some trifle in the fridge, and a Christmas pudding.”

“Of course, Derek prefers apple pie,” Romilda said with a grin.

“I have no pastry,” Derek pointed out. “It will be fine.”

“Nonsense,” Harry said, as he hopped to his feet. He had a good look through the cupboards, and grinned. “Right, I’m going to need a ridiculously good looking volunteer?”

Derek waved his hand.

“And a pretty little gypsy with great knife skills?”

Romilda waved her hand as well. “Ooh, ooh, pick me, I can do that!”

“We are going to make our own pastry.”

“Really?” Derek asked. “I’ve never done that.”

“My upbringing wasn’t great,” Harry said softly, “and my aunt didn’t like store-bought pastry, so I learnt.” There was a moment’s silence. “This is going to be messy,” he warned.

Derek took off his shirt, leaving him in a blue t-shirt. Romilda took off her cardigan; she had on a fitted tank top.

Harry placed a bowl in front of each of them, as well as a large amount of butter, some salt, some cold water, and two rolling pins. He added some flour to each of the bowls, and then some butter. “Right, using your fingers, rub the flour and butter, until it resembles bread crumbs.”

He pulled out some apples and started to peel them, keeping an eye on the two pastry chefs.

“Now add some water, not much, just enough to make a dough. Knead the dough just enough to get it all moist, not any more than that, then cover it, and put it in the fridge.” He watched them pour water carefully, telling them to stop when it looked enough.

While they did that, he finished the peeling, and cored the apples, and sliced them, before putting them in a pan, along with a tiny bit of water and a large chunk of butter.

“The fun part is next, after it’s chilled, as we roll the butter into the pasty.”

Romilda and Derek both grinned at each other.

The problem with puff pastry was that it was five minutes of activity, followed by half an hour of waiting and doing the other food. It did allow them to talk.

At the end, they'd both made some acceptable pastry, and had rolled it out into thin sheets. Harry greased the bottom of a dish, and used Derek's on the bottom, added the half-cooked apple, along with some cinnamon, and put Romilda's pastry on top. He sliced around the edge with a knife, and then used his fingers to crimp the edges.

Romilda and Derek both beamed. Harry looked at them, and laughed softly. "You two look like there was an explosion down t' mill."

Derek looked at himself, and nodded in agreement. He waved his wand a few times, and everything and everyone was soon clean.

Harry placed the pie in the now empty oven, and sat back down.

"It smells fantastic in here," Cressida announced as she entered the kitchen.

"Yes," Derek agreed, "that's because someone's a really good cook." He pointed at Harry.

"So is Derek," Harry protested.

"I'm willing to bet this dinner is going to be the best we've had," Derek continued, ignoring Harry. "Take a look at the honey-glazed parsnips."

Cressida walked over, and inhaled. "I'm impressed," she said. Her hand flew out, coming back with a sprout. "Sweet Merlin, these are edible," she said in surprise.

Derek looked smug. "Told you so. And have a look in the oven."

She did so, and laughed. "An apple pie? Where did you go to get the pastry on Christmas Day?"

"Derek and Romilda made it from scratch," Harry said.

"Pfft," Derek said, "Chef Potter told us exactly what to do; all we had to do was follow instructions."

"That doesn't change the fact that you made it," Harry said.

Cressida ruffled his hair and sat next to him. "I love my husband, and Romilda," she said softly, "and he is a very good cook, but there is nothing wrong with being better than someone at something. Not if you've worked hard at it."

"Okay," Harry said softly.

“What time of day do your relatives eat?” Romilda asked.

“On Christmas day, they have a full breakfast, the roast at lunch, then chocolate at three, and another roast in the evening.”

The adults looked slightly sickened.

“In which case,” Romilda said, “it’s time for a cursing!”

Harry laughed. “When is it not time for a cursing?”

“Never!”

Harry, Derek, and Cressida laughed along with the curse-happy gypsy.

Romilda sat on the floor, and Harry sat opposite her. He took her hands, and brought his magic up.

“The balance has been broken, justice has not been served. Wrongs were not set right. To the spirits of my ancestors, I ask that the guilty be punished justly for their crime.” Romilda paused for a second. “The name?”

“Vernon Dursley,” Harry said firmly.

“The crime?”

“Child abuse.”

“The duration?”

“Over ten years.”

“The punishment?”

“That he be cursed to never enjoy food again, that all food consumed gives him the minimum nutrition needed to survive, as it traverses his body instantly.”

“Take this offering of magic, so that justice may be done!”

Harry let loose his magic into the spell that Romilda had cast. He felt it rush out of him, and smiled. The curse had been accepted, as a just and responsible one.

He actually felt lighter, as something Nadya had said when he had asked about removing a curse came back to him. “The simplest way is not to do something that would get you cursed.”

A do-unto-others philosophy that he liked.

He released Romilda’s hands, and gave her a quick hug.

“Feel better?” she asked.

He nodded, and then inhaled deeply. “I think it’s time to eat!”

“I agree,” Derek said immediately. He pulled out his wand and created a spot and a higher chair for Dobby.

“Dobby?” Harry called. “Hermione, Astoria, Daphne. Food!”

Daphne scarpered in, and gave him a huge hug. “I love Mr Toad, and Ratty, and Mole,” she declared.

“I’m glad,” he said softly.

She smiled and sat down. Dobby popped in next and took his seat. Hermione and Astoria entered last, “Ooh,” Hermione said, “It smells amazing in here. And is that apple pie?”

“Did you know that Harry can make puff pastry?” Romilda asked. “He taught Derek and I.”

“I think, now that Harry is trying his best, I’m never going to be surprised at what he can do,” Hermione replied proudly.

Harry grabbed some oven gloves, and moved the beef in front of Derek. “You carve, while I sort everything else.”

Very used to feeding others, Harry soon had a production line system in place, where he was able to take the slices from Derek and then fill the plates.

“This is far too much,” Hermione said as she looked at her huge portion.

“Eat what you can, the rest will make great bubble and squeak tomorrow,” Harry replied, as he placed a large jug of gravy in the centre of the table.

“Thanks you,” Dobby said shyly, as Harry put a plate – deliberately the same as everyone else’s – in front of him.

Harry served himself and Derek last, and removed the tray of the beef, and sat down.

“Don’t stand to attention,” Derek said, “let’s eat!”

There was little conversation as they all dug in, the wait and the smells had awakened a huge appetite in Harry, and he was delighted the food tasted so good. About half the way through the meal, the conversations started to pick up, but Harry felt something pricking his magic.

“Dobby, are you using magic?” he asked.

Dobby nodded eagerly. “Dobby is broadcasting,” the House-elf said excitedly. “House-elves are

not remembering the last time someone cooked for a House-elf. So Dobby is sharing the meal with every House-elf.”

“That’s great, Dobby,” Harry said. “You guys are so good at magic.”

“Harry Potter is great,” Dobby replied. “Harry Potter helps and likes helping. All House-elves agree.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Anyway…”

Dobby giggled. “And Harry Potter is not liking praise. But Dobby has to. Dobby, and other House-elves, think this is best Christmas ever. And Pretty Derek and Great Harry Potter with help from Cursing Romi have made meal house-elves would be proud of.”

“Hear hear,” Cressida agreed.

“And there can be no greater praise than that,” Derek said.

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“I’m glad you could all attend this evening,” Albus said as he opened the staff meeting. “It should be a lot of fun, and I do hope to see you all on the dance floor as well.

“Now, before we kick off properly, I’d just like to say that I expect all of us to keep a close eye out this evening. It is a chance to show the I.C.W. that we have learnt lessons, and that we are taking things forward.

“So please, everyone, be proactive. Nip anything untoward in the bud. Minerva’s idea of banning people from Hogsmeade visits is a splendid one. I’d encourage you to all use it, both as a threat and following through.

“I will supervise anyone banned for the entire day, a Headmaster’s detention, if you will.

“And while I dislike special cases, I would also like to use this evening to show Harry and his friends that we can be the teachers that he, his friends, and every other student deserves.”

“Well said,” Filius agreed. “I am planning on having a word with my Ravenclaws beforehand, and reminding them to be on their best behaviour.”

“Good idea, I’ll do the ‘Puffs,” Pomona agreed.

“I’ll do the Gryffindors,” Minerva added.

“And I shall do the Slytherins, with Aurora’s assistance, then,” Albus said. “Now, did everyone get good presents?”

There was some chuckles around. “What about you, Albus?” Aurora Sinistra asked.

Albus allowed himself to beam. “I got the greatest present,” he admitted. “Five pairs of the finest argyle wool socks.”

“Someone gave you socks?” Pomona asked in disbelief.

“I told Harry, many years ago, when we were discussing the Mirror of Erised, that I saw myself holding thick socks. And he must have remembered, because he had Cully deliver a package to me this morning.”

“Only you, Albus,” Minerva groaned. “Only you!”

---

Harry found that one problem with being male was that it really didn't take him too long to get ready. After dinner, they'd had a fly, and then sat around and talked, and Harry had found himself napping. He honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd been so relaxed.

They'd then had a slice of the pie each, and started to get ready for the evening ball. He had been particularly pleased when Hermione had pronounced it better than Mrs Weasley's!

All he'd had to do was shave, shower, wash, and put on the clothes that Derek had laid out for him.

After that, the only thing he had to do was use the gunk in his hair to make it stand up, just as Derek had shown him (six times). And with that done, he was ready.

He stood at the bottom of the entrance hall. The door at the top opened, and Hermione entered. Slowly and carefully, she walked down the huge wooden stairs.

Harry blinked, and did a double take. He opened and closed his mouth. She was wearing a pale pink dress, with diaphanous shoulder coverings. “I'm going to need my armour,” he eventually blurted. “Bloody hell, Hermione, you are gorgeous!” Her hair was half up, half down, and looked long and smooth.

Hermione blushed. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“I mean, seriously, you've always been really pretty, but with your hair smoothed down, and that wonderful dress, you look fit to grace the arm of any man in the world.”

“And since when have you been so smooth?” Hermione teased.

“Always thought it, never had the confidence to say it,” Harry replied with a grin. “And I had three hours to kill while you got ready. Derek and Cressida talked with me for a while. Derek told me that I have the 'sincere' part down and now I need to work on the 'charming' part, then they both gave me some pointers on being charming.”

“Daph,” Hermione called. “I'm done.”

Daphne walked out next; she was wearing silver robes that set off her dark hair wonderfully. She

smiled at him hopefully. Her robes were calf length, and she was wearing matching silver heels. Her hair was neatly braided in an elegant pattern that fell down her back.

“I said it before, Daph,” Harry said, “that someday, you are going to make someone the luckiest person in the world. You are amazingly beautiful, and that smile, that happy Daphne smile, just makes you radiant.”

“Oh, Harry, you’re going to make me cry and ruin my makeup,” Daphne scolded, as she hugged him tightly. “Thank you.”

“I’ll protect you,” he whispered back to her. “Just have fun tonight, and show everyone what they could have got to know if they didn’t suck.”

Daphne giggled. “Tori, Romi,” she called.

The two younger girls appeared. Romilda was wearing a deep blue tiered dress with a low-cut ruffled bodice, and a cinched waist. Her dark curly hair was loose and hung over her left shoulder in an artfully chaotic wave.

Astoria was in a floor length A-line princess dress, with fabric over the left shoulder. As she moved, Harry noticed it had a split in the front, where you could see her bare right leg from just over her knee and matching ivory sandals.

Harry whistled slowly. “When I made this plan of going as friends, I didn’t realise I was putting myself in such danger. When the other boys see that I have four incredibly beautiful women with me, they are going to want to kill me!

“Tori, Romi, you both look absolutely incredible, and frankly, any one of you four will put that French Veela girl to shame!”

Astoria and Romilda both blushed, but looked happy.

"Pictures," Derek called, as he appeared with a reasonably modern looking camera.

Ten minutes of posing in various combinations later, they were finished.

“Shall we go?” Harry asked. The four girls nodded, and they were all popped away. They appeared in front of the doors to the Great Hall. Some people were entering, except for the champions, who were hanging around near the door. Krum was with a girl Harry had never seen before. Cedric was with Cho Chang, and Harry remembered that he’d been crushing on her what seemed a lifetime ago. She was wearing a flattering pale pink dress, and had her hair up. And she had no effect on him at all.

Delacour was with Roger Davies, who looked completely besotted. Harry refrained from comment, and started to enter.

“Harry?” Cedric called.

He turned his head to look at the senior boy.

“Aren’t you joining us?”

Harry shook his head. “You heard the results of the investigation. The Goblet only chose me as a champion of a school of one. That’s not a champion, that’s a default. And as I’m not a champion, there is no way in hell I’m getting in your way.”

Daphne and Hermione moved in front of him, while Astoria and Romilda each stood next to him, close, and they entered the Great Hall. They quickly found a table, and Harry hurried around so that he could sit each of the girls, clucking his tongue at Hermione when she started to seat herself.

The champions, and their dates, entered last, and sat at the head table. “Who is that at the table?” Harry asked lightly.

“Dirk Cresswell, he’s quite senior in the Ministry, he must be Crouch’s replacement,” Astoria replied.

“Ahh,” Harry said. As everyone sat, he could see and hear people say the name of food out loud, and it appeared.

“Harry?”

Harry turned, as a House-elf he hadn’t seen before appeared. “I is being Crenky,” the House-elf announced shyly. “I used to be nasty Malfoy cooking House-elf. Crenky was so happy to be free,” he added. “Crenky is cooking your dinner, if that’s okay?”

“That’s great,” Harry said seriously. “I had no idea what to order, and you cooked the last special meal we had, in the library the first night after you guys were freed.”

“Harry is remembering,” the House-elf said in awe. “Crenky is cooking greatest meal,” the House-elf promised, and popped away.

“Yay,” Romilda cheered. “This is going to rock!”

A starter of spiced pumpkin soup was followed by pan-fried saddle of venison, with a sweet potato, roast garlic and rosemary fritter, and duck fat roast potatoes. It was followed by a dark chocolate mousse, with hazelnut foam.

And the best thing about it was that it was light. Crenky was clearly aware that they’d eaten a huge meal earlier.

After dinner, the three champions took to the dance floor. Harry shook his head, Krum, for all his grace on a broom, danced like a sack of potatoes. Cedric was adequate, as was Cho, but that was it, and while Fleur may well have been the best dancer, her partner was an inept as expected of someone lacking higher brain function.

“That’s pathetic,” Hermione muttered. “Derek would be in tears.”

Daphne giggled. “True,” she agreed. “Harry, I want to dance next.”

Harry frowned, “won’t that look like I’m trying to show off?”

Daphne paused, and looked at Astoria. Astoria winced and nodded. “Would be better to leave it for a few dances, so that there is not a direct comparison.”

Daphne pouted.

“How about a drink?” Harry suggested. As the girls nodded, and before he could move, five drinks appeared for them. Harry chuckled. “Thank you,” he said with a small shrug. “So, as my back is to everyone else, am I still being glared at?”

“Not so much glares, as looks of jealousy,” Hermione said. “Perfectly understandable, as you are sitting with four shining specimens of feminine perfection.” She buffed her nails and everyone laughed. “So, while we are waiting for the right chance for us to dance, how are your plans for the new armour coming along, Harry?”

“I got a bit distracted,” he said. “Some gypsy stole one of my knives.”

“The thief!” Romilda said, with a faux horrified tone.

“And I’m going to have to ask for it back, later.”

Romilda pouted.

“Because I made you all one.” At his signal, four small walnut boxes appeared in front of them, transported by the House-elves. “I only made enough for your four, so I didn’t want to give them out earlier.” Almost as one, Daphne, who was sat next to him, and Hermione, Romilda and Astoria who were opposite him, opened the boxes.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione sighed, as she held up hers. The four knives were identical. Each had a steel handle, wrapped in leather. The leather at the quillion had been inscribed with the Hogwarts crest. The steel cannellure was surrounded by a heavily worked piece of dragon bone.

“It’s a full tang,” Harry said, “which means that it’s a single piece of steel worked into shape. The leather was then wrapped around for comfort and decoration, and it was then bonded to the bone with runes. I even managed to fit on some ever-sharp runes to the bone, so that it will never go dull.”

“This is an amazing piece of work,” Romilda said softly. She held it up on her finger, balanced neatly. “Just the balance of it.” She shook her head. “You are going to be in so much demand,” she said with a laugh. “This sort of thing can sell for thousands of galleons.”

“Much more,” Daphne said. “It was made by Harry Potter. He could sell crap, and it would sell,

but selling such quality? People will queue for miles to get a hold of one.”

“I am thinking of working really hard on this for the next few years,” Harry admitted, “and trying to get to the stage where I can do anything. If I can do that, I will be ready to open a commercial shop and sell the sort of items I want to sell.”

“Like what?” Astoria asked.

Harry shrugged, “Anything, from steel roses to broadswords.” He took a deep breath, “I am planning on seeing if I can get Daphne to work with me.”

“Me?” Daphne squeaked.

Harry nodded. “Your designs for my armour have been brilliant. Imagine what else you could design for a house, or for a wizard with more money than taste of his own?”

“Oooo,” Daphne’s eyes went wide.

“And after you two get started,” Romilda said, “You’re going to need a pretty little Gypsy to sell things for you.”

“And a researcher to add protection, strength, warnings, communication and everything else that people would want attached to steel and iron,” Astoria added quickly.

Harry laughed. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

“I would love to, Harry,” Daphne said. “So, let’s do it. We’ll put a year or two in together and see where we end up. That way, if we don’t like it, it’s only a year, or if we fail. And if we love it, then we have our careers set.”

Harry put an arm around Daphne and hugged her.

“That’s an excellent idea, Harry,” Hermione said approvingly. She put her knife away reverentially. “From what I’ve heard, there is a huge gap in the market for this sort of thing. And who knows, when I finish university, you might be making enough to afford to hire me to run the whole thing for you and ensure you actually make money. That will allow me to get some out-of-education experience before I return to University to get my teaching qualifications.

“I’ve heard in the Muggle world that some truly great blacksmiths and other craftsmen only make things on commission and have multi-year waiting lists. We should research whether the same is true in the magical world. And then research immortality, because that’s the only way you’ll be able to fulfil all your commissions”

Harry laughed at the teasing tone Hermione used. He looked behind him, and noticed that it had been at least four songs since the opening dance. He stood, and offered Daphne his hand.

She smiled and took it, standing gracefully. They moved into the crowd, and as the song started,

they danced.

---

Hermione found herself dancing with Astoria and Daphne, while Romilda and Harry were weaving around the dance floor, in an energetic dance that she wasn't sure she had the fitness for.

The evening had been a surprising amount of fun. Once they'd started dancing, they'd all been able to rotate with the only male, and dance with each other the rest of the time.

She'd been asked to dance four times by four different guys, which had given her an ego boost – and had shown that Harry's awe at her new appearance hadn't been faked.

She did feel a little like a fraud, though. As this wasn't really her, it was like an idealised version, maybe, what she could be. And she wanted a boy who would understand that she would not be like this most of the time.

Still, the best thing about the evening was the total lack of pressure. At fifteen, she didn't think she was ready for more than the odd kiss, and an evening like this could lead to all sorts of events that she might agree to in a fit of hormones, and regret later.

Actually, that was the second best, the absolute best was seeing her best friend so relaxed. She'd spotted Ron approaching them earlier, only for McGonagall to intercept, and the same with Malfoy. Everyone else, apart from the admirers, was leaving them alone. She wondered if the professors had had a word with the students, warning them not to bother Harry, or if it was simple fear of the dragon slayer.

Harry and Romilda landed next to her, and a second later, she was in Harry's arms, dancing slowly as the song changed.

She put her head on his shoulder, and wondered if life would ever be this simple again. Five friends, a good time, no worries, and after such a warm and caring day at the Greengrass house.

She didn't let her mind worry about the future, about Voldemort. For one day they were just teenagers. They didn't have to think about dark wizards or evil, they could just relax and have fun.

And it was amazing.

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 5

“Sit!”

“I am not a dog,” Harry replied evenly.

“You’re working like one!”

“What does that even mean, Hermione? Most dogs I know prefer to spend their time napping or licking their own balls.”

“Harry!” Hermione protested. “First, don’t be crude, second, its etymology is based on sawyers working on a split-level system to saw through large trees. The one on top was the top-dog, while the one on the bottom was the under-dog. So it meant manual labourers, who did work incredibly hard.”

“Oh.”

“So, sit.” Hermione looked around. “You three as well.”

Harry sighed and sat down. He was itching to get down to the forge and start work for the day.

“Right,” Hermione said, now looking happier. “Harry, I know you’re nearly finished with your new armour, but we really need to discuss the next task, and what we are going to do with it. While you were busy, I took the egg to the bath and held it underwater. Basically, someone is going to be kidnapped and placed under the lake. You will have an hour to fetch them.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed.

“So, what is your initial plan?”

“I walk there, pick up the person, and walk back.”

Hermione paused. “How are you going to breathe underwater?”

“Normally, I’d say the potion of Waterbreathing,” Romilda said, “but with the armour, it would be far better to enchant the helm with the same thing.”

Hermione nodded. “Tori?”

“I’m with the gypsy. We can also enchant his boots so that he doesn’t need to swim, and add some haste, so he can move quickly without sinking into the bottom.” She paused. “But we really need to make sure we get the runes right on his helm.”

“We will,” Romilda promised. “That would be the worst way to die.” She shuddered deeply.

“Huh?” Harry asked. “Why that one, Romi?”

“I’m terrified of drowning,” Romilda explained after visibly gathering her courage. “It gives me such nightmares. It’s a truly awful way to die. In fact, you should add these runes to anything you do, just in case. You don’t want to die while in armour!”

Astoria moved over and took Romilda’s hand, squeezing it.

Harry raised his hands. “Okay, okay,” he promised with a smile. “It’s a good idea anyway.”

Romilda grinned. “Of course, that’s better than what Tori is scared of.”

“Romi,” Tori complained playfully. Romilda poked her tongue out at her. “Fine. Zombies.”

“Zombies?”

“They never stop. They just keep coming!”

“You mean Inperi?”

“I mean *zombies* !” Astoria said firmly. “I’ve seen the programmes!”

“They were movies,” Romilda mumbled.

Astoria hushed her. “You can take them out with gun shots to the head, chainsaws or decapitation with silver, but that’s it. Even fire isn’t guaranteed. Which is why I always put some silver runes in the arrays I give Harry,” she finished smugly.

“I agree,” Hermione mumbled, clearly not paying attention to Astoria. “That does sound horrific.”

“Okay, I promise I’ll always add silver runes to my swords, as well as the breathing stuff on my helms,” Harry said, “I can use some backup armour for this task.”

“Wait, why backup armour?” Hermione asked.

“Because once you enchant something, it’s permanent, and those aren’t enchantments I want on my main armour. There’s a limit to how many different things you can apply to one piece,” Harry explained.

“Yeah,” Astoria continued. “The more you add the less effective they become. It is the Law of Diminishing Returns.”

“Oh, that’s logical. So, can we do this in a week?”

“Of course,” Harry said casually. “I’ve got several pieces lying around that, with Daph’s help, I can make into something neat.”

“No problem,” Daphne added cheerfully.

“In which case,” Hermione said, “we are having a day off.”

Harry reared back. His wand came out. “Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?” he demanded.

“Ha ha, very funny,” Hermione muttered. “We’ve all been working non-stop since Christmas, and I’m feeling a little burnt out. And I suspect some of you are as well?”

“Slightly,” Romilda agreed. “It’s hard to stop when you’re on a roll.”

“Yeah,” Astoria agreed. “I’ve learnt so much extra about potions, enchanting, and knife fighting.”

“I know, I know,” Hermione agreed. She slumped down in a chair herself and joined the circle. “I’m the same way. I adore learning new things, Daph has me able to hit a human at ten paces with a knife, and I came within an inch of talking Professor Binns into moving on.”

Harry chuckled. “Daph?”

“I’m getting the best grades I’ve ever had,” she said with a proud smile.

“So, we’ve all been practising our skills, learning new stuff, and working hard,” Harry summarised. “So what do you want to do for today?”

“Relax together,” Hermione said instantly. “We need to have some fun.”

“Hmm,” Harry murmured.

“Is that your, ‘I’m about to have a crazy idea’ hmm?” Hermione asked.

“Possibly.”

“Am I going to regret this?”

“Potentially.”

“Bring it, Potter.”

Harry chuckled. “Right, a plan for the day. First, breakfast. Second, we’ll do a cursing.”

“Yay!” Romilda interrupted happily.

“Then, we’ll pop into London and wander around the Tate.”

“Yay,” Astoria and Hermione interrupted together.

“We’ll have a late lunch somewhere, go and see a movie.”

“Yay,” Daphne said with a grin.

“And then?” Hermione asked warily.

Harry just smiled. “If you’re going to wear skirts, wear shorts under.”

---

To her surprise, Daphne felt energetic. The day had been fun; she’d enjoyed the cursing of Dudley, walking with Harry and Romilda around the museum, and eating lunch. Astoria and Hermione had been together as well, having a far higher level of conversation than they were. Afterwards, Harry had directed them to a cinema, but had taken one look at what was on and changed his mind.

And so they ended up in a huge theatre watching *The Phantom of the Opera* .

And she had utterly, utterly, utterly adored it. As soon as she could, she was going to grab her parents and take them to see it.

Daphne gave herself a mental shake. So far, they’d done something that each of them enjoyed, and now it was time – or so she hoped – for them to do something Harry liked.

He was a boy, so it would probably be physical, but that was okay. She’d put on trousers after his ominous warning. She looked up from her spot on the magically-warmed ground as Harry dashed over. They’d returned to Hogwarts and sat where he’d told them.

He dumped a bag on the floor in front of them. It rattled somewhat alarmingly. Harry dropped to his knees and opened it, pulling out two pieces of metal. He crawled over to Daphne and pushed the metal against the sole of her boots. She felt a slight pressure against her feet through her boots, and then what felt like a cushioning charm around her ankles and shins. She shook her leg slightly but the metal didn’t move,

“Keep your legs straight,” he told her, as he stretched them out. He moved quickly around to the other girls, before he attached the identical plates to his own shoes, put his hands on to the ground, and pushed up.

And Daphne felt her jaw open, and she couldn’t seem to send the correct signals to close it again. She looked around quickly, and was relieved that Hermione, Astoria and Romilda were looking just as dumbfounded.

“Harry,” Hermione whispered, “you appear to be hovering around a foot off the ground.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed. He squatted, pressed down, jumped and was catapulted into the sky, where he flipped, and landed on his feet with a jaunty bounce.

Romilda scrambled up and laughed giddily. “Come on,” she called. She started to bounce and then kicked her legs out, and then back in as she landed on her feet.

Daphne warily stood up, only to find that keeping her balance was quite easy. With a shrug, she tried a cartwheel, her feet flying into the air, to find that her feet actually kept her from falling on to the ground, and she ended up back on her feet.

With an excited cheer, she bounced.

“Harry, how in the name of Merlin have you done this!” Hermione demanded.

“You want answers?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Astoria and Hermione stated together.

“Then you’re just going to have to catch me.”

He turned and started to run toward the school building, with huge leaping bounds, away from them and toward Hogwarts.

“Right, girls,” Hermione said, “can I count on your support?”

“Yes,” Daphne agreed, and grinned.

“Sure,” Romilda said. “Let’s get him!”

“He’s ours,” Astoria asserted.

Daphne found herself moving faster than she ever had, and she couldn’t help laughing. Harry soon stopped running away, and taunted them, before he jumped high over their heads, and ran past them, laughing.

Romilda seemed to have picked up the physical acts fastest as she was starting to match Harry’s jumps and flips.

“Daph, go right,” Astoria called, and she followed instructions, as they all started to bounce so that Harry wouldn’t be able to go over them.

They had him trapped in a against a castle wall, forming a bouncing semicircle too high for him to jump over.

“Uh huh,” Harry said with a grin. He turned, and ran up the wall, before pausing to stick his tongue out at them. “Meep meep!” he yelled.

Daphne ran after him. If he could do it, then so could she! It was like gravity changed when her feet hit the wall, allowing her to walk sideways. She squealed with laughter and took off after him.

At the top, Harry tensed his legs and back flipped off the wall, falling down fast. He bounced, almost as high as he had left off, and covered an immense distance. Daphne didn’t hesitate, and followed him.

This was more fun than she'd ever had!

The chase went on for an hour, all over the grounds of Hogwarts, from the gate to the Black Lake to the Forbidden Forest and the Quidditch pitch. They had to occasionally dodge students as they landed, but they were easy to bypass. Even when they weren't standing and staring, the bouncing chasers were so much faster that it was easy to treat the walkers like stationary objects

It was Romilda who managed to tag him first, with a triple back flip to a wall, she bounced off like a rocket, and caught Harry mid bounce.

Astoria pounced on them, closely followed by Hermione. Daphne herself was less than a second behind them, which made her last, but which put her on the top of the dogpile.

"Okay, you got me," Harry laughed as he pushed them off. He slowly raised one leg and took off the piece of metal. He slowly sunk about half a foot of the ground, and tilted, so that he had one foot on the snow. He then removed the other piece and stood down. Daphne found herself helped down next, before he removed the plates from Hermione, Romilda and Astoria.

Astoria and Hermione were both panting, but had huge grins on their faces. Romilda was actually glowing with happiness, and Daphne understood how she felt.

"Harry," Hermione eventually broke the silence, "What... you... HOW!"

Harry chuckled and started to walk toward their school. "I'll explain over dinner. Hungry?"

"Yes!" Romilda and Astoria agreed in unison. Daphne felt like she could eat a centaur, lightly roasted. She stumbled slightly. She missed the charms already. Walking seemed positively dull now.

Hermione pulled out her wand and cast some spells to get rid of the results of their exercise. It wasn't perfect, but it would do until they could hit the showers and get properly clean. At least this way they wouldn't be putting anyone off their food.

They entered the Great Hall, Daphne last, and as such, she was able to see the looks of envy and amusement on the other student's faces. The Durmstrang boys seemed to be trying to get each other to go and talk to them, the Beauxbatons students had some that looked envious while the rest looked disapproving. The Headmaster and were looking amused, as they stared down at them.

She turned to their table at the foot of the Gryffindor table, suddenly noticing the fact they had the worst seats in the hall. She sat next to Romilda, opposite Astoria and Hermione, who had a space for Harry between them.

"I'll be back in twenty minutes," Harry said, "don't eat." He was popped away.

"That boy," Hermione grumbled. "I'm hungry."

"Harry wouldn't just drop us," Astoria pointed out. "He's probably doing something fun for us."

Hermione grumbled but didn't complain. Romilda asked her a question about charms, which started a discussion that lasted until Harry returned with four large cardboard boxes.

"Hello."

Daphne blinked. She had just seen the Headmaster in his seat a few seconds ago!

"Hello."

Daphne blinked again, Nadya had been there as well!

"Professor, Nadya," Harry said calmly, "would you like to join us for dinner? I got extra."

"Why thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said as he created a two person couch at the end of the table.

Harry flipped open four boxes and put it in the middle of the table. A delicious aroma wafted straight into his nostrils, that caused her mouth to start salivating.

"Harry, you do know that I love you, right?" Hermione said as she took a large piece of what looked like bread covered in tomato sauce, cheese, and vegetables. In the most unladylike way Daphne had seen Hermione act, she tilted her head back slightly and slid the thin edge of her wedge into her mouth and took a huge bite.

There was a look of bliss and relaxation on her face, as well as a small drop of tomato sauce.

Daphne exchanged a look with Astoria, and she reached out together and took a slice. She followed Hermione's example, and took a bite. Her taste buds erupted as a variety of textures and tastes assaulted them.

By the time she'd finished her first bite, Astoria, Romilda, Dumbledore and Nadya were digging in as well.

"I've not had this for close to fifteen years," Professor Dumbledore mentioned. "I was in America, I believe, and they had an entire hut dedicated to it. Those huts were everywhere!"

Nadya chuckled. "You can get better ones in Naples," she said, "but this is pretty damn good. Where did you go, Harry?"

"Vernon used to drive twenty miles into Guildford to pick these up. And I figured that if that lard-arse would go so far out of his way to get them, they must be pretty good."

Hermione giggled. "Yeah, better than our local pizzeria." She sighed. "Pity there's no beer."

"Hermione!" Astoria chided, sounding playfully shocked.

"Oh, right, sorry," Hermione mumbled. "It's just that pizza and beer go together like Simon and

Garfunkel.”

“Huh?”

Hermione waved her hand. “They go together well.”

“Isn’t it illegal to drink alcohol?” Daphne asked curiously. “We can’t get it at the Three Broomsticks.”

“No, it’s illegal to buy it,” Romilda said, “not to drink it.” She pouted, “Not that mum lets me drink.”

“And she’s right not to,” Nadya said in amusement. “It’s never the child that has to clear up the vomit after the first time a member of our family drinks to much.”

“I’m hardly a raging alcoholic,” Hermione said with a roll of her eyes. “A cold bottle of lager is the best accompaniment to pizza, if you don’t want to rot your teeth.”

“Which is why I didn’t pick up a bottle of Coke,” Harry agreed.

Hermione smiled at him. “So, come on then, Potter. Spill the beans.”

Harry relaxed back. In fact, he leaned too far back, but somehow didn’t fall over. Daphne concentrated hard, and she was able to make out that his magic was supporting him via a faint green glow.

“I was playing with ideas for my boots,” he said, between bites, and after swallowing. “I went a bit overboard with the power on a cushioning enchantment. I thought that if I put a lot of power in, they’d be really comfortable. I just forgot how *much* magic I have access to nowadays.

“When I tried them on, it was like walking on a giant inflatable, and useless. So I replaced the soles on my boots, and kept the charmed soles as a side project. I’d used too much magic to just dump them, but didn’t know what else to do with them.

“A few weeks later, I added the stabilising charm and the localised gravity charm that allows for running on walls, and that made it more fun. So I just played around with them whenever I had some spare time, adding more charms and some runes, until the result is what you had.

“Once I had the prototype done, it was easy to make copies. I was going to bring them out to play at Easter but then we had this enforced rest day.”

“Harry,” Professor Dumbledore said, “would you mind if I have a go later?”

“Of course not, Professor.”

“Splendid,” Dumbledore said with a large smile. “Nadya?”

“Yeah, go on, Gran,” Romilda said eagerly. “The charms made everything really soft.”

“Also, you can’t fall on anything but your feet,” Harry added.

Nadya sighed. “I’ll give them a try.”

“The only objection I have to you leaving the house system is that I can’t award you points,” Dumbledore said.

Harry smiled. “I’m just happy having things I’ve made in use. Daph and I are going to create a blacksmithing business when we leave school. The idea is that we try and make enough of a success of it that we can hire Romi and Tori when they leave school and then Hermione when she finishes university.”

“What a wonderful idea,” Albus said. “Are you going to accept commissions?”

“Yes. We might also see about having an enchanting business on the site. Dunno, yet.”

“Well, the Hogwarts Gates are a little worse for wear. Do you fancy replacing them?”

“Ooooh,” Daphne said. She wiped her hands on napkin, and pulled out a piece of paper and a pencil.

“Excuse Daph,” Harry said, as she concentrated, “she’s got an idea.”

Daphne tuned him out and concentrated. She started with a wrought iron version of the Hogwarts crest as the centrepiece. She then added each of the four houses badges, two to each gate, before frowning and turning the paper over and starting again.

This time, she drew four outlines, one of each of the house badges, before adding the Hogwarts letters over the top, and the motto under. From there, she drew in the struts, added an arch over the middle, and fleur-de-lys finials. From memory, she added the stone pillars each side with the winged boars.

Finished, she looked up to find that the pizza was gone, apart from three slices in front of her that were under a golden charm.

She passed the sketch to Harry, who gave her one the little smiles that she’d come to treasure from him. It was pride in her ability, and pride in her. He passed the sketch to Professor Dumbledore.

“Consider yourself commissioned,” he said with a small smile. Daphne felt a burst of happiness shoot through her.

“Right, Tori, you can come up with what protections we can add,” Harry said to the two girls.

“Okay,” Astoria said with a confident smile. She reached across and borrowed Daphne’s pencil, before she started to scribble on a notebook she pulled out of her bag.

“Professor,” Romilda said, tilting her head slightly. “Normally, a custom piece such as this is expensive, but we’re aware of Hogwarts’ status as one of the premier castles in the world, so we’d be willing to do a deal.”

“Oh?” Dumbledore asked.

“Naturally, we will photograph all our installations, to show prospective customers, and a few words from your august self for our advertising brochures. If you’re happy with the work we’ve done, and the acceptance that we have our company logo discreetly on one of the pillars, and we could do it for the cost of the material.”

“At cost?” Albus asked.

“Well,” Romilda said with a small laugh, “we would be utilising Hogwarts’ forge until we all leave school, and Hogwarts is our beloved school.”

“I think that we have a deal, Miss Vane.” They shook hands, as Nadya laughed softly. “Nadya?” Dumbledore asked.

“I’d guess that a decent gate, like the one designed, is worth around two to three thousand galleons. You just agreed to lease the Hogwarts forge out to Harry and Daphne for an extra two years – until Romilda and Astoria graduate, rent free!”

Albus opened his mouth, and then closed it again, before he looked at Romilda.

Romilda smiled cutely at him.

“The advertising was a distraction?”

“Mostly,” Romilda agreed. “It will help, but I wanted the free location.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “The reputation of your clan is safe for another generation.”

Daphne clapped excitedly and gave Romilda a hug.

Astoria turned the notebook and put it in front of Harry. Harry and Hermione peered at it, and then Harry nodded. Astoria put the notebook in front of Professor Dumbledore, who raised his eyebrows.

“Actually, we might get our money’s worth,” he said with another smile. “Excellent, Miss Greengrass.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “We’re going to start planning the Lily Potter Memorial Library and the other projects at the start of next term. I’d like to invite all of you to join in with the design committee.”

“We’d be delighted, sir,” Hermione said softly, as Harry looked like he couldn’t quite say anything.

“Yes,” Daphne agreed. “Honoured.”

Nadya took a look at Harry. “So,” she said lightly, “ready to watch two old people make fools of themselves?”

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“Can I get a couple of House-elves, please?” Harry asked. As four popped in eagerly, he smiled at them. “Thanks,” he said. “I want to put you guys in charge of my charmed boots. The students can rent them for thirty minutes a time, for five sickles. They are not allowed to rent when they should be in class. All money should then be split between you guys and a charity.

“Hermione’s written an information sheet if anyone has concerns, and they’ll need to sign the disclaimer that Astoria got her mum to write for us. Understood?”

“Cans we be accepting pre-bookings?” one asked.

Harry nodded. “Of course, you run it how you see fit.”

The House-elves glowed happily, and turned. In front of them was a large queue of people waiting for a go.

“Mopsy is thinking that we needs to invent sports,” one of the House-elves murmured. “And gets more bouncy boots.”

“Ohh, Trixies is liking thats.”

“Good luck guys, and if you need anything, just ask for me.”

The House-elves all nodded with visible happiness, and started to work.

Harry chuckled, and asked Dobby for a lift to his smithy.

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“Ladies?” Albus Dumbledore called, it was the day before the Second Task, and he needed some assistance. The four girls turned as one. “Could you accompany me to my office? I have a problem that I need your help with.”

“Of course, Headmaster,” Hermione said instantly, and followed him up to his office. His gargoyle jumped immediately to one side for him.

He took the arm chair in the corner, and invited the girls to sit on the sofa and other chairs. Astoria and Romilda took the sofa, leaving Hermione and Daphne to take the other chairs.

“Tea?” he offered.

Romilda half raised her hand. “Miss Vane?”

“Erm, could I try one of your famous lemon drops?”

Albus felt sheer delight shoot through him. Never, in all his years, had anyone actually asked to try one. Normally he'd offer, and they'd say no. “Of course, my dear,” he said happily, and waved his wand, summoning the dish.

Romilda reached out and snagged one, chucking it in her mouth. Her lips pursed at the sourness, and her eyes lit up. “These are great!”

The other three girls shrugged and reached for one as well. Albus took one himself and settled back. If there was one thing he knew from long exposure, it was that lemon drops and tea did not go well together.

“As you no doubt are aware,” he said, around the sweet, “tomorrow is the second task. And that something of value is being taken from Harry and hidden at the bottom of the lake.”

The four girls all nodded their agreement, proving that he was right in his guess that they would have decoded the clue.

“For Mr Krum, Mr Diggory, we will be using their girlfriends. For Ms Delacour, we will be using her younger sister. Each of them will be charmed to be complete asleep, and there will be two merpeople per person ready with Gillyweed in case anything goes wrong. The rest of the merpeople will be acting aggressively, to ensure that the competitions have some challenges, and we've transfigured some rocks to look and act like Grindylows.

“My problem is that there are four of you, and we can only use one hostage so I'd like for one of you to agree to agree to volunteer to help in this next task.”

Astoria and Romilda looked at each other. “It should be one of you two,” Astoria said. “Neither of us wants to be above the other... yet.”

“Yeah,” Romilda agreed.

“It should be Hermione,” Daphne suggested, “if it's the person he'd miss most?”

“That's not necessarily true,” Hermione countered. “I've never spent hours in his room talking, like you two do at night.”

“Anything I should be concerned about?” Dumbledore asked softly.

Daphne shook her head. “Harry's the first boy I know who doesn't want to do me, so I take all my problems to him,” she said happily. “He listens and gives me advice and reassures me.”

Albus suppressed a grin at the expression on Hermione's face, as she heard Daphne's overly-honest declaration.

“Daph?” Astoria asked softly, “You do know that I love you too, and will always help.”

“I know, Tori,” Daphne said, “it’s just that Harry can explain things to me so that I understand them, and he always tells me that it doesn’t matter what I do, or how I live my life, he’ll always be there for me. Hermione’s his best friend in the world; I’m more like his little sister.”

“Flip a coin,” Romilda suggested. “We all know Harry will fight the world for all of us.”

“That’s a good idea,” Hermione agreed. She pulled a galleon out of her purse. “Call.” She flipped it. “Dragons,” Daphne called quickly. Hermione caught it with her right hand, and slammed her hand down on the back of her left. She then revealed the coin. It was showing a dragon.

“Now that’s sorted,” Astoria said, “why don’t we go through all the protections for Daph one more time?”

Albus chuckled merrily. It was nice to know that they didn’t take things at face value, and actually questioned what was before them. Too often, he felt, that the Wizarding world was too eager to follow without question or thought, and seeing four students bucking that trend gave him a wonderful feeling for the future.

“Oh, but before you do,” Hermione interrupted. “If Daph is being held underwater, with the other hostages, and the competitors are heading underwater, what, exactly, is the crowd going to see?”

Albus almost coughed on his lemon drop. He swallowed quickly, “Why don’t we discuss that next?” he suggested. “Wooster?”

A well-dressed House-elf appeared. “Could you nip down and tell Harry that I’ve borrowed his friends for the afternoon, and then tell the relevant teachers that I’ve pulled these four out of class to help me fix a rather obvious problem I’d missed?”

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Harry finished attaching the last leather strap to the shoulder piece, and nodded happily. It wasn’t his best armour, but it would do for swimming. As a sword was going to be slightly unwieldy, he’d borrowed the concept of a harpoon gun, with runes to power it. He’d made it crossbow shaped, so that it would match the rest of his armour.

The concept of the parts matching had been something that Daphne had been very firm about, which was probably why he’d given up and just let her choose what things should look like. She was incredibly good at it.

And that thought, about someone being incredibly good at something, made him think about Ron and chess. He did somewhat miss his best male friend – playing chess, talking about incredibly stupid things, talking about boobs and other important things.

But then he looked around the forge, and at his armour and the blades *he* had made, and the feeling went. He’d gained so much more, and not once did he have to use air freshening charms. Except once when Romilda had had an accident with some perfume.

Chuckling to himself, he looked up as Dobby appeared. "Is time, Harry."

"Are you betting on me this time?"

Dobby shook his head. "Dobby has enough money, and Dobby feels guilty about taking money from peoples who are silly enough to bet against Harry." He paused. "Other elves don't feel guilty."

Harry sniggered and took the elf's proffered hand, and was popped away. He arrived in a line with the three main champions, and noticed worried looks on their faces.

The other three champions were wearing dressing gowns in their school colours. As he was in jeans with an emerald green t-shirt that had warming runes on the inside, he felt a little overdressed.

In the stands, he could see the same banner from the first task, but with Romilda and Derek holding the ends, and Astoria, Cressida and Hermione in the middle waving and cheering.

It didn't take Hermione's reasoning skills for him to spot the odd one out, and understand whom he had to save.

Out over the lake, a giant screen hovered, supported by three floating pillars, each with the crest of one of the three schools on it.

Harry smiled, recognising Daphne's design handiwork. Dumbledore waved his wand, and he saw himself, with the other champions, appear. The screen split into four, with each corner showing one of the champions. Harry looked at Dumbledore and nodded, impressed.

Dumbledore nodded back, made a self-deprecating eye-roll and then pointed at his friends.

"You ready, Harry?"

Harry looked at Cedric and smiled. "Sure," he agreed.

"Going to devastate us again?"

"Yup," Harry agreed. "This one should be easier than the last one. No dragons."

"Not that that stopped you," Krum murmured.

"True," Harry agreed.

"How much would it cost to get some of my own bounce-boots?" Cedric asked. "They're more fun than Quidditch!"

"Ya," Krum agreed, moving closer. "Krum haf sister, is birfday soon. Bounce-boots would make Krum best bruvver in world, ever. Krum likes that."

“I’ve not thought about prices,” Harry admitted. “I’ll have to get Romi and Tori to look into that. But, in the short term, I’ll make you both a pair in the spirit of the tournament.” He cast a quick measuring charm at their feet, and memorised the result.

Viktor reached out and patted him in the shoulder. “Krum was wrong, Krum learn lesson about prejudging things. Krum hears Potter can fly as well as bounce. Potter fly with Krum?”

Harry smiled. “I’d be delighted, and call me Harry.”

“Harry,” Krum agreed. “You too, Diggovy?”

“Cedric,” Cedric said quickly. “I’d love to, but candour forces me to admit that I’m not as good as Harry.”

Krum shrugged. “Delacour?”

“How can you three chatter like this?!” Fleur demanded.

“Takes my mind off the things I can’t change, and relaxes me so that I do a better job,” Cedric replied instantly.

Fleur blinked. “Oh,” she said in a meek voice. “Sorry.” She took a deep breath. “Yes, I’d love to come flying, after we get through this.”

“Der, see,” Krum announced. “Flying, bring everyone together. Then maybe we have bounce, da?”

“The House-elves have been coming up with a game,” Harry said, “How about we do that, you three against me and two of my friends. I’ve not even seen the rules, so I have as little an idea as how to play as you will, so it should be a laugh.”

“Krum likes competition.”

“Sounds fun,” Cedric agreed. Fleur looked doubtful.

“I’ll throw in custom bounce-boots for you, along with Krum’s and Cedric’s.”

“Deal,” Fleur agreed.

“Welcome to the Second Task,” Dumbledore’s voice rang out. “The contestants have an hour to rescue their hostages from the bottom of the lake. With thanks to Miss Granger, Miss Vane, and both Miss Greengrasses, you will be able to follow each of the contestant’s progress on the screens.” He started to clap, as did the rest of the crowd. For a few seconds, the picture on the screen showed Harry’s blushing friends.

“Now,” Dumbledore continued, “We will start at the bang.”

From the distance, a firework shot into the air, before it exploded with a crashing wave of sound

and light. Harry took a step forward, and then stopped, to see the others hadn't moved.

"I'm waiting to see the armour," Cedric said with a grin. "We missed it last time."

Harry shrugged and turned, "Armour on!" he yelled, flaring his magic. He took a step forward, and two shards of metal surrounded his foot, before collapsing into his boot. He took another step, and the process was repeated. As he continued to move, metal trees grew from the ground, allowing him to step into his shin guards, and then turn into his cuisse. As he continued to spin in a slow circle as he moved forward, he raised his arms, allowing his chest piece to settle into place, before his cuirass landed on his shoulders, his helm was wrapped into place, and finally weapons were placed into his hands.

It had taken less than three seconds for all the parts to be in place.

"You guys feeling like little kids?" he heard Cedric ask.

"Da," Krum agreed. "Krum need lessons in style."

"I am French and I am a part-Veela, I'm not supposed to be outshone," Fleur muttered.

Harry paused at the edge of the lake, and then started to march in. He felt the charms kick in as the water came up to his waist.

Harry couldn't help holding his breath as the water went over his head, and it was with a tentative breath that he used his enchantment. While they had tested in the bath, this was real. Cold sweet air entered his lungs, and he grinned. He started to run, the haste charms on his boots allowing him to move smoothly through the water at a steady pace.

As he went, he grumbled at the fact that he'd been forced into entering first, and as such had missed the opportunity to look at Fleur in her swimsuit.

He headed deeper into the lake, allowing himself a good look around. The charms on his helmet kept the water away, allowing him a perfect view of the lake bed. It wasn't as interesting as he'd hoped, not compared to the pictures of the Great Barrier Reef he'd seen on TV. He made a mental note to see if they could arrange a holiday there in the future. He could do the work, and Daph could design cool helmets, so that they could all explore.

It was about five minutes of jogging later that he encountered his first problem – a shoal of Grindylows were swimming toward him. He raised his crossbow, and fired a bolt into the head of the lead one. It sank down into the depths, and the others circled around it in confusion, before swimming off.

Harry shrugged and spotted some buildings in the distance. He put on a bit more speed and ran toward it. The water parted before him, one of Hermione's charms did something to the water pressure that she and Astoria both understood, and he didn't. He was soon entering the merpeople village, and allowed himself a good look around, the huts looked medieval, and he wondered why

they needed roofs.

It wasn't as if they had inclement weather down here.

In the centre of the village, near a statue, four girls were floating, held down by thick vines. They all appeared to be unconscious, with their eyes closed and their limbs drifting with idle eddies.

He headed toward Daphne, but paused as two mermen swam in front of him. Harry raised his harpoon crossbow and fired it into the wall of the nearest hut. The bolt shot away, burying itself half-deep into the wood.

The mermen raised their hands and backed away slowly.

Harry moved toward Daphne once more and pulled out one of his knives. He cut the vine, and Daphne floated down into his arms. He caught her and turned to leave, before he groaned to himself. He had to make sure that everyone got out of there safely.

He was pretty sure that no one was in danger, but it was better to be safe than sorry later. He took a seat on a large rock, and wished he had something to pass the time. He crossed his legs at the ankle, and relaxed back, and started to think about the next armour he could make.

He had his display armour now, and it would be good for most things. But maybe he could design something specifically to help kill Death Eaters.

Maybe that one should be completely black, and built to withstand curses.

The thought of killing a human deliberately actually made him feel a little squeamish, but he wasn't going to let these scum continue their murderous ways.

Frankly, he wanted the lot of them dead so he could concentrate on smithing – and other things that were a lot more fun.

Cedric was the first to arrive, and looked at him quizzically. Harry shrugged, and offered his knife to Cedric. The boy took it and looked at the mermen. The mermen gave resigned shrugs and pointed at Harry. Cedric grinned and cut Cho free, then looked at Harry again. Harry shooed him away, after taking his knife back.

Cedric nodded his thanks, and swam away with Cho. Viktor arrived next, and quickly bit through the vine for his girl – a svelte brunette with some of the largest boobs he'd ever seen.

He settled back down, and waited until there were only five minutes left. There was no sign at all of Fleur, so he carried Daphne over and cut Fleur's little sister down as well. It took a little arranging to carry both, and in the end he put the child on top of Daphne, and carried Daphne in a bridal style.

He took off at a dead run, just to make sure he hit the land before the hour was up – just in case.

He broke through the water and looked down, to see that the young girl's eyes open, and then Daphne's.

He was so utterly proud as Daphne's first reaction was to cradle the girl and give her a hug.

He reached land, to find Fleur – who looked completely relieved – waiting for them. As he reached her, she reached out and pulled the girl into a hug. “Thank you, so very much, 'Arry,” she said softly. “I don't know 'ow I would 'ave kept my sanity, if I 'adn't seen you waiting on the screen.”

Harry took another step, so that he was completely on dry land. “Armour off, melt,” he called. As he had Daphne still in his arms, he couldn't take the armour off the same way he'd put it on, so he allowed it to just melt down into liquid, and transport itself back to his armour dummy in the forge.

“You're welcome,” he said to Fleur, before turning his attention to the girl he loved like a sister. “You okay, Daph?”

She put an arm around his neck and used it to raise herself up and kiss him on the cheek. “I wasn't worried,” she said seriously, “because I knew you'd rescue me.”

“Always,” he promised, before he concentrated hard and cast a warming spell without his wand. Hot air swept around Daphne, drying her clothes and blow-drying her hair.

Daphne squealed in laughter. “Tickles,” she explained, after she was dry. “Thanks, Harry.”

“Want to get down?”

She shook her head. “I'm happy that everyone knows that my big brother is awesome. As long as I'm not too heavy for you.”

Harry felt himself blush a little as they headed toward the judging table. “You are not even close to being too heavy.”

Krum and the girl stood next to him.

“Harry, is Esmeralda. Esmeralda, is Harry,” Krum grunted.

“Do excuse my caveman of an intended,” Esmeralda said. “He has a warped sense of humour and thinks that talking in the third person is fun.”

“Krum no likes English.”

“True,” the woman agreed. “I should thank you, as I'm only here because of you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, the only other girl my hero liked was that bushy-haired one. He figured he’d be able to have a quiet night with her and not be entangled. When she wasn’t around anymore, he sent for me. Which he should have done from the start.”

“Da, da” Krum muttered.

Cedric and Cho, and Fleur and the unidentified girl joined them.

“This is Gabrielle,” Fleur introduced her. She then talked to the girl in French, and Harry made out all their names.

Gabrielle moved in front of him and curtsied, before saying what he presumed was a thank you. He looked at Fleur and then back down at the little girl. “You’re welcome.”

Gabrielle trotted back to Fleur and attached herself to her sister’s side.

“And now the scores,” Dumbledore’s voice rang out with perfect timing. “The judges have conferred. For a perfectly executed bubblehead charm, and a valiant attempt, we award Fleur Delacour twenty points.”

There was a cheer that was deep enough in tone to suggest that most of the cheering was from the male population, and was perhaps as much for Fleur in a swimsuit as for her efforts.

“I deserve nozzing,” Fleur murmured.

“Hey,” Harry snapped, “Putting everything you have into something and failing, does not make you a failure. It means you work harder next time, and you learn, you do not let it get to you.”

Fleur blinked. “Oui,” she murmured.

“Next, for his partial transfiguration, and arriving back with five minutes to spare, we award Viktor Krum thirty-five points.

“To Cedric Diggory, who correctly used a bubblehead charm and returned with fifteen minutes to spare, we award thirty seven points.

“And to Harry Potter, who was the first to reach the hostages, but stayed to ensure all of them were rescued and arrived back with two hostages bang on time, we award the full forty points.”

The cheers of the crowd were the loudest yet, and Harry smiled happily.

“Dad mailed me this morning and told me that he’s got some pig cheeks,” Daphne announced, “and he put them on to cook this morning. He’s got a mountain of potatoes ready, and the sauce has a bottle of red and a bottle of port in it.”

“Then let’s go find him and the others,” Harry agreed, and turned away and headed toward the crowd. He picked out Derek’s tall frame easily, and carried Daphne over. Cressida, Hermione,

Astoria and Romilda were with them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone appear. He didn't have time to do anything but turn and duck to protect Daphne as the green flash shot towards him.

The last he knew was the spell hitting him, then everything went blank.

---

In what seemed like slow motion, Romilda saw someone rise up and fire a curse at Harry. It was so sudden and unexpected that everyone seemed to freeze.

And then Harry crumpled to the ground, and Daphne yelled his name.

Romilda sprinted toward the man, automatically grabbing the knife Harry had made for her, pulling it from under her skirt.

Curses shot at her, and from behind her, but she ignored them; some missed her, others hit a shield that appeared in front of her. The man started to shield from the other curses, a panicked look on his face, as he clutched at something. Romilda leapt, a loud war cry coming from her lips as she landed against him, sending him flying. She pounced forward, slicing the blade against his wand hand, severing the tendons and leaving the wand useless, before she spun the blade in her fingers and stabbed it deep into the man's shoulder. She wanted this fucker alive.

He screamed. Romilda released the knife and punched him in the face, crushing his nose, before clasping both hands together, swinging them to her left, before bringing them down with all her momentum against his cheek.

She was pretty sure that she felt his cheekbone break against her magically reinforced fist.

Astoria appeared in front of her, and cast Stupefy at the fallen person who'd dared to curse Harry. Romilda growled and pulled her knife out roughly, taking care to twist it, just like her mother had taught her, as she pulled.

Astoria took her hand, and they left the man in the care of the Aurors who had surrounded the two of them. Together, they ran over to Harry.

As they got there, they could see Daphne in tears, Hermione crying as well, Cressida pale as Derek looked both angry and helpless.

"No!" Astoria cried.

The events of the last thirty seconds suddenly hit Romilda, and blackness engulfed her.

---

Anger, white-hot anger coursed through Albus Dumbledore. Memories of his sister had haunted him all his life, and now, seeing another cut down, seeing another so full of promise and life killed

made him so incredibly angry,

In the first seconds after Harry had collapsed, and Romilda had attacked, he'd turned the school wards on to full, ensuring that no one could get in, and more importantly, out. He'd then assisted in cursing Barty Crouch Junior, to allow Romilda, and Astoria behind her, time to get near him.

He took a shuddering breath. "Accio Barty Crouch Junior, Accio Veritaserum," he snarled. One way or another, he was going to find out just what had happened.

"Rennervate," he spat at the man, who was now floating in front of him, held up by Albus's anger-fuelled magic. A vial appeared and floated over him, and as Crouch screamed, Albus dumped a few drops straight down his throat.

With a twist of his hand, he cut off the pain signals from Crouch's body to his brain. "Name?" he growled.

"Bartemius Crouch, Junior," Barty replied, his voice affected by his clearly broken nose.

"Why have you killed Harry Potter?"

Barty's face twisted into a vicious grin. "My Lord knew that it was his soul that you were using to embarrass him," he spat, "so he ordered me, his most faithful servant, to destroy the Horcrux inside Potter, and if it killed him, all the better."

"Who is your master?"

"Voldemort!"

"How did you get here, and what did you do?"

"I snuck in with the other spectators, then disillusioned myself, and waited for the right moment."

Dumbledore released the pain blockers, and let Crouch drop to the floor. A little part of him hoped that it hurt, and the scream afterwards suggested it had.

He turned. Romilda and Astoria were pressed against Cressida, crying their hearts out. Daphne and Hermione were sobbing together, while Derek gently lifted Harry up, and with a disturbing steadiness, started to carry him toward the school.

Amelia Bones moved over to him, as Aurors stunned Crouch. "You broke a lot of laws just then, Albus."

"Right now, Amelia, I don't particularly care," he replied distantly. "And I'd do exactly the same thing again."

Amelia sighed, "There is not a court in the world that would convict you," she said. "I'm not even sure that I would."

Albus shrugged. "I think I am going to hunt down Voldemort, and tear his limbs off, one at a time," he murmured. "And see if that kills the bastard, no matter what the prophecy says."

"What?" Amelia asked.

Before he could repeat, there was a commotion from the entrance to Hogwarts. He turned; hope beyond hope shooting through him.

He stepped, appearing next to the group as he finished. And then he started to laugh, as, improbably, Harry was standing, in the middle of a frantic group hug.

He met Harry's eyes, and was reassured at the complete lack of accusation in the brilliant green.

He couldn't do anything other than beam at the boy, as Harry's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he passed out. Albus paused for a moment, but it quickly became clear that it was just exhaustion this time.

---

Harry looked around, and then looked down. A small, bloody creature wrapped in rags was on the ground. They were standing on a ghostly version of Platform 9 and  $\frac{3}{4}$ s at Kings Cross station. With a shrug, Harry booted the creature from the platform and on to the rails, and hoped that a train would come through soon.

There was a soft giggle behind him and he turned, and instantly saw eyes that were identical to the ones he saw every time he looked in the mirror.

"Mum?" he gasped.

The woman smiled, a breathtakingly beautiful smile, full of love and heartache. "My baby boy," she whispered, as tears started to flow down her face. She took a couple of steps forward and embraced him. He found his arms around her, as he hugged with a desperation.

"Mum," he whispered again.

"I'm here," she whispered back. He felt his own tears on his face, as he clung to her and sobbed for all the times that he had wanted her growing up, but couldn't have her.

He had no idea how long they stood like that, and simply didn't care. "Mum."

She pulled back slowly, and brushed his hair out of his face. "My baby," she whispered. "I, no, we, we are so very proud of you."

"Dad?" he asked hopefully.

Lily shook her head. "Only one of us could come, and your father did the most unselfish thing I have ever seen. He let me come."

Harry took a deep breath, working past a huge lump in his throat. “When you see him, please, say thank you for me. And that I love him.”

More tears fell down her face.

“As I love you, mum.”

“Oh, my baby,” Lily sobbed, hugging him tightly again. “My wonderful, amazing baby.” She sniffled. “I’m supposed to be here giving you the choice,” she mumbled.

“Choice?” he asked.

“Yeah, this is the crossroads, you’re mostly dead, but the curse was absorbed by the Horcrux, so you can go back, if you want, or you can move on with us.”

“Mum,” he said, “I love you, honestly, but I have to go back, I have too many friends, too many plans, too much to do to quit now, I have to defeat Voldemort, I have to make sure that the Potter name doesn’t end with me.”

Lily reached up with a soft hand and stroked his face, before lifting his chin a little so that she could look into his eyes. “We’ve been with you, Harry, watching in impotent frustration at what happened to you growing up, and then marvelling at the person you turned into, and then watching in awe this year, as you took your destiny into your own hands and forged a life stronger than any blade.

“But of everything you have done, everything you will do, nothing, ever, will make me prouder than what you just said. When I see you again, I want to know that I have grandbabies and that you have lived a long and wonderful life, doing something you love – and that, my beautiful baby, is the secret of life.” Lily smiled with so much love and affection that Harry felt it in his heart.

Harry tilted his head. “When you say you’ve been watching...”

Lily giggled, “When you have needed us to,” she reassured him. She kept hold of his hand, and moved them to a bench so that they could sit.

“Wheew!” Harry exclaimed in relief. “Mum.”

“Yes, dear?”

“I just like saying it,” he explained.

Lily hugged him again. “Tell Remus and Sirius that we expect them to live as well, will you?”

“Of course.”

“And Harry, your generosity in donating to the school and to a hospital had your father and I bursting with pride. You might not know it, but you’ve set a new standard; no more will people

accept fake contributions to charity, as Malfoy has been doing.”

“Oh, good.”

“And of course, the dragon.” Lily’s eyes seemed to radiate pride and joy. “You were incredible, taking it on head to head, prepared in the armour that you made with your friends. Your father is still talking about it, and he no longer even cares about you carrying on the Marauder tradition.”

Harry smiled. “Good, because I don’t think I have any pranks in me. Every time I think of one, I remember what it was like to be isolated or bullied, and I don’t want to do it.”

“That’s very mature,” Lily said softly.

Harry smiled. All he wanted to do was luxuriate in the company of his mum.

“I like Derek and Cressida,” she said, before she looked around. “And,” she continued in a whisper, “I had such a crush on Derek when I was in my third year.”

Harry giggled. “He is ridiculously good looking.”

---

Wormtail scurried back and forth as quickly as he could. A door appeared in front of him and he scampered in. As the door shut behind him, he changed back in to his human form and hurried into the room. Buried near the back of the room, under a sheet, was the pedestal he was looking for. On it was the Diadem of Ravenclaw.

He took it and hurried out. He turned back into his rat form, and held the Diadem with his teeth, resting it on his back as well, and ran down a small hole.

Hogwarts was old, and more than slightly decayed in places, and he knew all the bolt holes and where to hide from the cats. More than the others, he’d been able to explore the castle in his rat form, and he knew it like the back of his paw.

It took him over an hour to run the distance to the edge of the wards, attach the Diadem to a Portkey, and then send it on its way.

He took a deep breath, and scampered back into Hogwarts. It was time for the third and final part of his Lord’s truly audacious plan.

---

Lily sighed as she looked at her son. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, “but my time is up.”

“Mum,” Harry said softly. “Mum.” He took a deep breath. “Right now, this has been simply the best thing that has ever happened to me. I promise that when we meet again, I will have new memories and a new best memory.”

“That is all I ask for,” Lily replied gently. “Remember, I want to hear about grandbabies.”

Harry grinned. “Not for a while, I’m not ready.”

“No, you’re not, but when you are...”

“When I am.”

She reached forward and gently kissed his forehead. “You’ll feel freer without him in your head,” she said, “and you’ll no longer get headaches when he is around.”

“Awesome!” He paused. “Any hints?”

Lily laughed. “No, we are dead, not omniscient. We follow you, not the world.”

Harry pouted. “You couldn’t just tell me the quick way to end him?”

“With a sword?” she guessed.

“Deal,” Harry agreed. He stood, and pulled her up, so that he could hug her again. Even in their spiritual forms, Lily marvelled at how strong her son was. She contemplated telling him about how she’d seen Romilda and Astoria with their crushes on him, but decided not to. It was up to her son to live his life however he wanted, and not for her to interfere.

Even if she really, really, really wanted to.

“Remember, Mum, that I’ll always love you, and always remember you and dad.”

“It’s supposed to be me saying that to you,” she whispered softly.

“Meh,” he replied.

She giggled. And then smiled as she realised he’d been trying his best to make her smile, and not be sad. He’d not even complained when she’d called him her baby. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For making this easy.”

He shook his head.

She moved forward once more and hugged her son as tightly as she could. She leaned back, and saw her own eyes smile at her with pain and joy in them. “Goodb...” she started, but stopped as his eyes seemed to spark.

“Never goodbye, because you will never be forgotten,” he said intently. “This is just farewell so that I can meet you with the stories you and dad need and deserve.”

“Farewell,” she whispered.

“Farewell,” he echoed and started to fade. A second later, he was gone, leaving her alone on the platform. She jumped down onto the tracks and landed near the fragment of Voldemort’s soul. She took two swift paces forward and kicked it as hard as she could. The creature flew into the air and bounced, before coming down once more and passing through a large hole that had flames licking out of it.

She raised her arms in triumph, before nodding sharply to herself. She had complete faith that her son would be able to send the rest of him downstairs as well.

She turned and climbed stairs that weren’t there. At the top, James was waiting, bouncing around eagerly. “Well?”

“He loves you,” she said softly. “He loves us, and he won’t join us until he’s lived a long and happy life.”

James beamed.

“James,” she said seriously, “Our son is awesome.”

“We did good,” James agreed. “My looks, your intelligence, and both of our determination to do the right thing? It’s brilliant!”

---

Wormtail laid his wand on the floor next to him, and then put a paw over it. He took a deep breath, and then changed into a human. “Stupefy,” he called, the second he was enough of a human to do so. His spell caught the House-elf instantly.

“Stupefy,” he said again, catching the boy in the bed of the Hospital wing. He scurried over, and looked at the son of two of his childhood friends. He’d watched Crouch succeed in the first part earlier, and everyone knew that having survived death again, there was no way that the nurse would allow him to sleep outside of her infirmary.

His ex-friends had never understood why he’d made the decisions he had, why he had to survive above everything else.

They only got one chance at life, and he wasn’t going to end up dead at an early age. Like James and Lily.

He pulled out a knife and a bottle. “Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe,” he chanted, as he cut into Harry’s arm. Blood leaked out, and he captured it in the vial. He paused, and looked at Harry. He wanted to cut the boy’s throat, but his Lord had demanded that if the boy survived the killing curse then Pettigrew was to leave the boy alive, so that his Lord could kill him personally.

Peter shook his head, before carefully placing the bottle down. It was too important to risk the blood by transforming with it. He turned into his rat form, and picked the vial up and scampered

out a crack in the wall. He made it out just as the door to the Infirmary banged open behind him.

---

Albus had his feet up on the corner of his desk, a lemon drop in his mouth. All he needed was his phoenix on his lap to complete the picture. Sadly, however, Fawkes was on his way to the Flamels' to keep them updated.

Of all the things he'd done, lying about Nicholas and Perenelle dying had been the best. They were currently assuming new identities, and planning a new book on transfiguration. Albus had read the first few chapters, and was eagerly awaiting the rest.

If nothing else, they were fantastic authors, and their command of pre-Normandic English was outstanding.

With no phoenix to hand, he instead had an amusing I.C.W report in front of him. Harry's cursing of Lucius had paid off, with the I.C.W managing to persuade a judge to give them permission to dose Lucius with a truth serum – his song had been the tipping point the judge had required, and so they had asked him several questions that his money had allowed him to avoid thirteen years ago.

The biggest one had been getting Lucius to admit that he had never been under the Imperious curse.

And all of a sudden, Lucius previous crimes were back on the table and with the confessions they'd extracted, the Malfoy family was going to have a female regent for at least three years, until Draco Malfoy was an adult. Lucius had also admitted to making generous contributions to the Ministerial re-election campaign and the bribing of many bureaucrats, but to Albus's great surprise, had never actually bribed Fudge directly.

He was a trusted advisor, but Fudge had treated him the same way as Albus – as a wise person to bounce ideas off.

Albus had truly believed Fudge corrupt, and had never entertained the thought that Fudge had simply taken the advice he'd felt more comfortable with.

Of course, the fact that he'd taken Lucius's advice so often meant that Fudge had really poor judgement, in his opinion, at least, but Albus guessed that was better than him being corrupt.

Not that incompetence was a significant improvement over corruption.

Albus chucked the report on to his desk, and eyed the new pile with a hint of joy. He had the distinct impression that whenever he looked away, it increased in size.

A lot of people were very interested in the Boy-Who-Just-Wouldn't-Die and wanted to interview him, talk to him, invite him to various things, make business arrangements, make arrangements of a more personal nature, poke him, prod him, and have him as some sort of performing monkey at

their soiree. And that wasn't to mention the requests he'd been receiving since the first task for all of Harry's secrets, including his liquid metal.

Having learned his lesson, Albus had approached Harry earlier about them, and Harry had asked if he wouldn't mind dealing with them.

The fact that he'd gotten the response he'd wanted delighted him. It was a sign that Harry still trusted him, despite his mistakes, and they were mistakes he would not make again. And so the paperwork sat on his desk, just waiting for Albus to be in the right frame of mind – tired, irritable, and generally annoyed with the entire world, but not quite homicidal – to enjoy telling a lot of people to bugger off – in the most politically correct manner, of course.

With his lemon drop finished, he took a quick sip of water to clear his palate, before he started on his other weakness in life. The large mug of hot chocolate covered in swirls of cream, with chocolate sprinkles and a '99 Flake.

He'd once been told that you were supposed to mix it together, so that the chocolate tasted nicer. Nonsense. The chocolate stick was to be used as a spoon to eat the sprinkle-covered cream, then you ate the spoon, and at the end, you had a slightly less sweet chocolate to finish off with.

Albus picked up the chocolate flake, swiped a large amount of cream, and then groaned as the wards reported two stunning spells in use in the Infirmary. He frowned. It was unusual, but Poppy was not above using Stunners to get patients to sleep. In some cases, it was better than potions to get them unconscious, and once there, she could keep them in that state far easier.

However, she always let him know afterwards so he wouldn't worry. Only, he was worrying. It was Harry in the wing, and the thought that he was having nightmares was not a palatable one.

He slowly placed his mug down, as the sense of worry grew. "Bugger," he whispered, as he popped down to the entrance hall, he took a breath, and popped to the door to the infirmary, which was the single longest pop he'd managed.

He barged in, and gasped. Dobby was unconscious on the floor; Harry was flat on his back on his bed, with a bleeding wound on his arm. Almost absently, Albus waved his hand at the elf, reviving him.

Dobby gasped. "What?"

"I do not know, young Mr Dobby," Albus said, as he looked at Harry.

"Albus?" Poppy asked, as she came out of her room looking sleepy.

"The wards registered two stunning spells. I found Mr Dobby on the floor."

"Harry," Poppy gasped. She moved over to Harry and started to cast some diagnostic spells at him. "He's fine, lost a little blood, but nothing else." She healed the cut on his arm and cleaned it up expertly.

“I’m going to wake him,” Albus said.

“Could it not wait until the morning?”

“I don’t think so,” Albus sighed. “Dobby, would you mind fetching my hot chocolate from my desk, and getting three more for yourself, Poppy and Harry?”

Dobby nodded and vanished.

“Rennervate.”

“Headmaster?” Harry asked with a yawn, as he sat up.

Dobby appeared, holding four identical mugs. He handed them out, a look of worry on his face.

“Albus,” Poppy scolded, “What have I told you about this? You have to take care of your health!”

Albus poked his tongue out for a second, and then settled down. “The wards told me that two stunning charms were used in here,” he said softly to Harry. “When I arrived, Dobby was unconscious, and you were bleeding from your arm.”

“Dobby,” Harry said.

“Yes?” Dobby asked fearfully.

“Do you remember what happened earlier today?”

Dobby nodded.

“So, before you say anything, just remember that I was hit in an ambush, and I kind of died. And I don’t blame anyone but the bastard who hit me, so the same should apply to you. You were not here as a bodyguard, but as my friend, and you were perfectly right to be sleeping!”

Dobby blinked, opened his mouth, and then shut it again. Finally, he nodded slowly. “Harry Potter is great and wise.”

“And I have good personal hygiene,” he agreed with a teasing grin, before he took hold of the flake, and ate some of the cream.

Albus grinned as he saw someone else do it the proper way. He could see Poppy already stirring her cream in, the barbarian. Dobby was eating the same as Harry; whether this was because of innate style and culture or because he was copying The Great and Wise (and Properly Bathed) Harry, was difficult for Albus to say.

“What do you think, professor?” Harry asked after the only sounds had been four people enjoying chocolate.

Albus sighed. “Barty told us earlier that he knew about the soul fragment, and I cannot overlook the likelihood that this was related.”

“So you think Voldemort has my blood?”

“Yes, or will very soon.”

“Professor, now would be a really wonderful time for you to tell me that you don’t know any rituals where Voldemort could regain his form with my blood!”

Unfortunately, Albus knew four.

“Bugger,” Harry sighed a few seconds later, obviously having seen the look on his face. “I’ve got to admit, I’m feeling slightly guilty.”

“Why?” Poppy asked.

“Because we could have killed Voldemort, but I decided it was more important that we ruin his reputation beforehand.”

“Ahh,” Albus mused. “Who was the most effective of Voldemort’s Death Eaters in the first war?” As Harry didn’t answer, Albus looked to his nurse. “Poppy?”

“Probably Malfoy,” she half asked, half stated.

“Indeed. And today, I received a report from the I.C.W that Lucius has forcibly confessed to a rather large number of crimes. His potential four year sentence is now going to probably be closer to fifty years. At a stroke, you’ve taken out the most influential of his supporters, and given the Ministry justification to confiscate the majority of the Malfoy fortune as the fruits of illegal activities. We now have Crouch, self-described as Voldemort’s most loyal follower, in custody, being interrogated with more potions than you’d find in an apothecary. Your stated goal was to ruin his reputation, and destroy his legacy.

“And you’ve done that! Yes, Voldemort might have returned, and yes, there may be some violence, but as crass as it sounds, sometimes bad things happen because of the decisions we make, and as much as we want to protect the individuals, we have to look at the larger scale as well.

“The term *the greater good* is much maligned. It does not mean that you have a blanket pass to do anything as long as you keep the end goal in mind. It’s much more personal than that. It’s not the greater good for an unspecified group, it’s a greater good for as many people as possible. It’s the greater good for all the individuals that you know and love. It’s the greater good for the people who can’t fight, for the people who are defenceless, for the people without the ability and power to stand up for themselves!

“It’s a narrow line, and a difficult one to walk, because you will make mistakes, good people will suffer, but if at the end, you have achieved your goals and you have kept your morals, then you

have won.”

Harry nodded slowly. “So I can still feel guilty about it, even though it was probably for the best?”

“Yes,” Albus agreed with a sigh. “Guilt is sometimes a sign that you are still on the right path. And my greater good has rarely comforted me at night, and perhaps I am glad of that. It helps remind me that we are all human.”

There was a silent pause. Poppy and Dobby were sitting, watching them.

“Can I have Daphne for a couple of days, out of school?”

“For what purpose?” Albus asked curiously. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, but I am Miss Greengrass’s headmaster and am responsible for her education and general well-being.”

“I’ve been planning some battle armour, and I think I need to work non-stop to get it finished. I’m guessing that Voldemort is going to want to announce his return shortly with a bang. I’d like to be able to be there to stop it. When it’s ready, I’ll be ready to Portkey or pop anywhere at a few minutes’ notice.”

“I have to say that I don’t like the idea,” Albus said sadly.

“I don’t, either. But, if there is one person here who the skill to create and use the armour, it’s me.” Harry paused. “I think my new armour might stop the killing curse.”

“That’s impossible,” Poppy blurted.

Albus calmly put the now-empty cup of chocolate down. He didn’t remember finishing it. He thought, hard, before he reached up and removed his spectacles with one hand and palmed his face with the other. “Poppy, dear, do you remember how I have dealt with killing curses?”

“You would raise walls, or banish things into it,” she replied.

“Now, what would happen if you reinforced some armour to be practically indestructible, and added some runes to absorb the force?” Harry asked.

“The spell would hit, and do nothing, because it would take the curse instead of you,” Poppy gasped. “Harry, that’s incredible!”

“It is,” Albus agreed. “And I would bet our ancestors are laughing at us for forgetting the lessons they had taught us. Did you know that records of the killing curse show that its effectiveness was much lower hundreds of years ago, than it is today?”

“Harry, this changes everything,” Poppy said softly.

Albus smiled. “Well, Mr Potter, how about a deal. I give you your friends for the week. In return, you allow us to test your armour before you wear it, and, for a hefty fee, you agree to supply five

sets of standard armour to the ministry?”

“What do you mean by standard?”

“Plain, nothing as beautiful as yours, of course.”

Harry chuckled. “Okay,” he agreed. “Professor?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“I’m not going to go out of my way to keep the Death Eaters alive, if they are attacking me or innocent people.”

Albus sighed heavily. “That is a price I had hoped you wouldn’t have to pay. Sometimes, though, you have little choice. When you are defending yourself or others is the only real time you are justified. ”

“People are scared of them, and it helps them. They need to be scared of me as well.”

“I know,” Albus said. “I know.” He was saddened that the boy was going to have to go through it, but Albus accepted Harry’s point. And he couldn’t help feel that maybe they wouldn’t be in this situation if he had been a little more proactive in his dealings with Voldemort. “Poppy, can Harry have a dreamless sleep potion? A good night’s rest would be ideal, as he’s going to be very busy.”

Poppy walked to her supply cupboard, and returned with a vial.

“Night,” Harry said, as he downed it.

“Oh, dear, Albus,” Poppy said as Harry fell asleep.

“I know,” he agreed.

“I’m going to talk to some friends. See if we can get a mind healer to spend some time here. The more we can help Harry now, the less likely it will be that he has some serious problems in the future.”

“A capital idea,” Albus agreed. “Very much so.”

“He has changed this year, and now, when I look at him, I no longer see the small child with the Quidditch injury. I see the man who can kill a dragon, and who has earned the right to live up to his word,” the nurse said, as she looked down at the sleeping boy.

“I will do everything I can to help and protect him,” Albus said.

“And Dobby will be makings sure that Harry Potter sir is safe at Hoggwarts!” Dobby said fiercely. “All House-elves wills be helpings.”

“Excellent, mister Dobby,” Albus agreed.

“And you,” Poppy said in that healer’s tone which could not be denied, “Will go straight to bed, and I’m banning you from hot chocolate for a week!”

“A week!”

“Yes,” Poppy said sternly. “You have been warned about your sugar intake, and if you can’t cut it down, I’ll do it for you! Now out! Bed!”

Thoroughly cowed, Albus quickly returned to his room, and headed to bed. Before he did, he sent a quick message to Amelia.

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 6

When Harry awoke, Poppy was pottering around. “Good morning, Harry. Are you up for a couple of out-of-school visitors before breakfast?”

“Derek and Cressida?” Harry guessed. “And good morning.”

“Yes,” the nurse replied as she ran a few charms over him. “You can leave when you are finished.”

He grinned and nodded, sitting up.

Less than two seconds later, the named pair arrived by elf transportation.

“Harry,” Derek called exuberantly, “we are going to have to talk about this strange way of fixing your scar. Makeup, that’s an answer to a vivid scar or other blemish, and there is nothing wrong with someone as ridiculously good looking as us wearing makeup!” Derek reached over and hugged him, hard. He pulled back and allowed Cressida to take his place for a much lighter hug.

“And speaking of which, I had a grey hair this morning!” Derek said, “Put there by worry! Worry about you!”

Harry laughed. “I’m sorry,” he agreed. “The next time I’m being ambushed, I’ll be sure to think about your grey hair first.”

“Thank you,” Derek said primly. Cressida reached across and whacked him on the arm. He grinned in response. “Seriously, though, Harry, thank you for saving Daphne’s life.”

“Thank you,” Cressida added, a tear running down the right side of her face. “And I am so glad you are back and safe.”

“Basically, Voldemort had a piece of his soul in my head,” Harry explained. “The killing curse was absorbed by the soul fragment so this unexpected plastic surgery actually rid me of him.”

“Which is why the scar is hardly noticeable now?” Derek asked.

“Is it? I’ve yet to see a mirror.”

There was a rustling, and Derek was able to produce a small mirror seconds before Cressida. Harry looked, and saw they were right, his scar was hardly even visible now. He smiled broadly. “No more people staring,” he said happily.

“Not at that,” Derek agreed. “You, as I, will still have to suffer the envious glances of other males.”

“Yeah, I kinda got that at the Ball,” Harry said with a smile. “Astoria, Daphne, Hermione and

Romilda all looked so incredible.”

“They did,” Cressida agreed. “I know it’s not something you are comfortable with, but yesterday, a killing curse was aimed directly at our older daughter, by a criminal who had shot at you before aiming. As the curse headed toward you, you didn’t freeze, didn’t pause, you dropped down so that the curse hit you, and not Daphne.

“Your actions saved her life, and for that, we are in your debt.”

Harry blushed. “B…”

“No, Harry,” Derek interrupted. “This is where you thank Lady Greengrass, and ask for the Greengrass hand in formal friendship.”

Harry tilted his head, and then nodded slowly. He trusted Derek. “Thank you, Lady Greengrass,” Harry said formally. “While I believe that my role has been overplayed, I am delighted that Daphne is alive and well. And although I do not believe that my actions deserve a reward, I would be delighted with a formal declaration of friendship between our families.”

“Then let it be so,” Cressida said. There was a small feeling of magic that was gone as quickly as it began.

“What was that?” Harry asked with a blink.

“Official friendship is probably the easiest way to explain it,” Cressida said. “The Greengrass family have formalised our friendship with you. It matters to Pure-bloods, and to members of the ruling bodies. It means that people will not ask us to do anything that might go against that declaration.”

“It also means that all our friends will treat you as their friends as well,” Derek continued. “We might not be high in the corridors of power, but I’m ridiculously good looking, and Cress has been the divorce solicitor for a lot of Pure-bloods, so we know a lot of secrets.”

“A formal friendship like this is very rare, because it takes something like you saving Daphne to allow us to do so.”

“As opposed to our friendship as it was before?” Harry asked.

“Exactly. How we feel about you hasn’t changed, but how others on the Wizengamot feel about you will change, as you have honoured their traditions.”

“Thank you,” Harry said.

“Oh no, old bean,” Derek said. “You’re the one we’re saying thank you to, today.” He stood and shook Harry’s hand, before Cressida hugged him again.

“We’ll get out of your hair,” Cressida told him, “I’ve got to get to work anyway; the Malfoy

divorce is probably going to go a lot smoother with Lucius in jail.” She paused. “Oh, and I’m afraid you’re just going to have to do without your schoolyard rival. It appears that his grades have not been good, and Narcissa is absolutely furious. He won’t have time to do anything but study, if he wants to stand a chance of inheriting what is left of the Malfoy estate.”

“And I have some meetings,” Derek said with a mournful sigh.

Harry said goodbye as they were popped away. He gave a small chuckle at Draco’s fate, before he looked into the hand that Derek had shook, and then read the note that Derek had palmed him. He was grateful for the warning it provided.

“Well,” Poppy said, “What are you waiting for? Get out of here.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, as he climbed out of bed, and then gave in to the urge to give her a quick hug. He then turned, and was popped away to his bedroom, where he could get changed.

As soon as he was ready, he was popped to the Great Hall.

“Harry!” Daphne yelled, pouncing on him and hugging him as hard as she could. Romilda beat Astoria to joining in the hug by less than a second. Hermione, who’d taken the slow way around the table, unlike Romilda, who’d simply vaulted it, was last to join in.

“I’m fine,” Harry said, “hungry, and fine. I’ll explain more, later, after I’ve eaten.”

“Never stand between a boy and his food,” Daphne said with a little giggle. “Normally,” she added. She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. The others pulled back, as Daphne took a step back. She straightened her shoulders, before dropping down on both knees.

“My lord,” she said in a clear and strong voice. “Yesterday, you protected me, taking a killing curse that was aimed at me. This is a debt I freely acknowledge to all. My life is yours, I am your vassal to do with what you wish.”

“Scion Greengrass,” Harry replied formally, quoting the suggested words Derek had palmed him. “I will consider your debt to me paid in full, if you continue to be the beautiful, amazing, wonderful sister you have been for these past few months.”

Daphne slid her hand to her pocket and pulled out her wand. “I, Daphne Eugenie Greengrass, do swear as payment for the debt of my life, and from the very bottom of my heart, that Harry James Potter is my beloved and adored big brother, with all rights and responsibilities as pertained.”

Harry reached down and lifted her up easily. “And my sister should never bow to me.”

Daphne smiled, “But she can hug her brother?”

“Whenever she wants.”

Daphne hugged him tightly. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Right, food now?”

“Absolutely,” Harry agreed. He sat down, next to Daphne, and grinned at his other friends. “Guys, can I get steak, eggs, hash browns, buttered toast, a large pot of tea, some orange juice, and some cereal to start with?”

The cereal appeared instantly, and Harry could detect a happy hum of House-elf magic around him. He was able to finish the cereal as a truly humongous plate – a serving platter, really – of food arrived.

It was five minutes later that he finished, and was able to relax. “So, morning,” he said with a grin.

There were some giggles. “That is the biggest breakfast I’ve ever seen anyone eat, ever!” Daphne announced.

“Yeah,” Romilda agreed. “And I thought my brother and cousins could eat.”

“I’ve seen more eaten, but not with table manners and with such a wonderful reason to be hungry,” Hermione added.

Harry shrugged, “I think it was the killing curse, because I woke up ravenous. I feel human again. And good,” he added. “Professor Dumbledore agreed with my idea for armour that could stop a Killing Curse.”

“What!” Hermione shrieked. “How?”

Harry blinked, “Didn’t I mention it?”

“No!”

“Oh,” he said, and went silent. Watching Hermione get frustrated was fun. After a suitable pause, with the measurement of such the almost visible volume of steam coming out of her ears, he continued. “Dumbledore agreed that I can borrow Daph for a few days to help me get it done. It’s going to cost us, because we have to make five copies of plain boring armour for some Aurors afterward.”

“Boring armour?” Daphne asked.

“Yeah, generic stuff you’re going to have to design.”

“Can I at least make it kinda good looking?” she asked.

“If you must, just not as good as mine.”

“Of course not,” she said with a giggle.

“Harry,” Hermione growled. “Knowledge, impart!”

Harry shook his head playfully. “You’ve been spending too much time with Tori and Romi,

fragmented sentences and everything!” He looked around for a distraction, and was granted one as one of the ladies he’d seen at the trial, Amelia Bones, entered accompanied by a group of Aurors.

“Madam Bones?” Dumbledore asked.

“Did you expect me to wait?” she said, her delivery like she was making a dramatic speech to thousands. “The whole world trembles at the idea of protection from the Killing Curse. I know that armour is custom made, so I asked for some volunteers, and these are some of my best. They’re here for measurements.”

“Wonderful,” Dumbledore said dryly. It looked like he wanted to say more, but was being polite. “Harry?”

Harry stood, and walked around the table, looking at the slightly uncomfortable-looking Aurors, who were standing next to their boss in a school full of children.

He called his broad-sword, the one he’d used on the dragon, and held it in one hand loosely. As one, they all watched the sword warily.

“Daph, can you get the rough measuring charm going?”

Daphne nodded and started to move her wand. Harry lifted his sword, and held it at eye height. The tip wavered a bit, but he concentrated and made it still. After fifteen seconds, he lowered the sword, and handed it to the first Auror. She was about five and a half foot tall with pink hair in a pixie cut. She had a friendly smile on her face. “Lift,” he ordered.

She did, and then struggled to hold it up properly. “Crikey, this weighs a tonne!”

“Pass it on,” Harry said.

She did, to a larger Auror. “Give it a shot, Shack,” she added.

The Auror’s eyes widened as he lifted it into position, but could only keep it there for a few seconds.

“You guys are going to need to get fit, and I mean really fit,” Harry said bluntly. “The armour is heavy. We can only put one or two enchantments on each piece, and we will not be wasting something important to make it lighter, not when you can work and get stronger.

“I’ll be building the armour, but you will not receive it until you are fit enough to handle it. The fitness test will be running a mile with a quarter of your body weight on your back, holding the sword up for twenty seconds, and being able to swing it – properly – in a spar for two minutes. I’ve yet to see a magical shield that can stop a swinging sword.

“I seriously suggest that you get someone in to train you in wielding a sword. And look up the experience potions, they can help immensely.”

“Which Nan can supply, for a price,” Romilda chipped in.

The Aurors all nodded, and looked nervous. “You can do that exercise?” the pink haired one asked.

“More,” Harry replied dryly. He nodded at Bones. “To the smithy, please?” He vanished, and a few seconds later his friends appeared, and he explained his plan.

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Amelia blinked as the boy vanished with the House-elves, his friends vanishing shortly afterwards. She had come early to show how eager the Ministry was to work with him, and to present the Aurors she’d chosen.

She’d even added Tonks and Shackbolt, as a gesture to Albus – she was aware where their true loyalties lay. What she hadn’t expected was the way Harry hadn’t actually seemed that interested. She allowed herself a small chuckle at the look of fear on her Aurors’ faces.

“Politics?” Alastor Moody grunted as he thudded toward her. She’d been surprised when he’d actually taken up the role as a teacher for the rest of the year. “Wrong kid for that, Amelia.”

Amelia shrugged.

“Albus, can I have some quarters for these five?” he asked. “It will be better if they are out of normal circulation for a few weeks, while we get ‘em fit.”

“Beaty, can you arrange for some guest quarters?”

“Beaty cans be doing that,” an elf said, popping in.

“Beaty,” Alastor grunted, “you got any House-elves that won’t mind ordering this lot around?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. Right, you five, leave, return with clothes for two weeks, say goodbye to your loved ones. Return tomorrow at seven. Beaty, I’ll design a schedule, and help supervise when I can. Your House-elves will supervise the rest of the time.”

“Wes making sure they are ready for great Harry’s armour?”

“Exactly.”

“House-elves will be making thems work.”

“You heard me,” Alastor suddenly roared. “Leave!”

“You’re going to have fun,” Amelia noted, as her Aurors fled.

“A bit,” he agreed with a shrug. “Advice?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t play games.”

She nodded. And then smiled and nodded at her niece.

“Madam Bones, do you have it?” Dumbledore asked.

“Of course,” she replied. She held out a scroll. “Desperate times call for desperate measures,” she said with a sigh. “But you are right, better to get permission upfront than have issues later.”

Albus was suddenly in front of her, the parchment in his hands. “Excellent,” he said as he read through it. “This is all in order; I’ll pass it to Harry later.”

“It’s not a complete commission to kill,” Amelia warned.

“Of course not, just a guarantee that he won’t be prosecuted if any Death Eaters do wind up dead when they are fighting,” Albus agreed. He duplicated it, and the copy vanished. “The I.C.W now has a copy as well,” he explained cheerfully.

Amelia blinked, and then nodded. “We’re going to get slaughtered for letting a child do this.”

“What child?” Albus asked, in his serene mode. “All I see is a man who can take on a dragon one on one, and win.”

Amelia sighed and nodded. She wasn’t going to beat that point, mainly because she agreed with it. “Well, it’s been a pleasure as always, Albus.”

Albus bowed smoothly. “A deep pleasure indeed.”

Amelia disliked that fact that she was never quite certain that Albus didn’t have a completely wicked sense of humour. And that she could never tell if he was being serious or gently mocking her, and most other people.

She nodded to her ex-Auror and headed out into the fresh air. She allowed herself a little chuckle at the thought of the gruelling exercises they were going to go through.

At the gates, she Apparated back to the Ministry, the Ministry that so desperately needed to be purged. As soon as that was done, she was going to retire as well. It desperately needed new blood and energy, and she was very much part of the old guard.

She had been peripherally aware of some of the bad things that had happened, but had never really felt it was worth rocking the boat. She was an old pureblood who had worked for the Ministry all her life and she wanted her retirement to be pleasant.

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Harry stretched as he riveted the last strap to the chest guard. The forge was glowing, giving off a low heat that made the room pleasantly warm; it never truly went out. It was the last piece for the first set of armour for the Aurors.

It had taken him several weeks, but he was pleased with what they had designed, and he would be able to knock out copies reasonably quickly now.

Hermione and Daphne had gone to bed a couple of hours ago. Astoria and Romilda had stayed up with him, but they had both fallen asleep at their desks. Romilda seemed to be in a deeper sleep, so he moved over to Astoria and picked the girl up. She instantly snuggled into his arms. He was surprised, in a way, by how light she was. He didn't know what he had expected, though.

He took a deep breath, and popped to their dormitory. He grinned in triumph as they arrived. He'd been paying a considerable amount of attention to how the House-elves did it, and was delighted that he now understood the different twist on magic that they had to use.

He carried Astoria into her bedroom, and nudged the covers back. He placed her down and removed her shoes, before covering her. He lightly kissed her on the forehead, before popping away.

Romilda was still fast asleep, and he was pleased she hadn't woken up alone to an empty room. He lifted her, finding that she was heavier than Astoria, more firmly built, more energetic than her friend, but just like her, she curled into his arms.

He popped her away as well, and did exactly the same thing as he had with Astoria. Unlike Astoria, as soon as she was in bed, she turned onto her front and lay spread eagled under the cover,

He silently exited her room and headed to their Common Room. As he did, Cully and Dobby popped in.

"Harry is popping," Dobby pointed out. "Humans aren't popping, ever."

"You've popped me a lot," Harry said as he sat, indicating the House-elves should do so as well. "So I just copied the twist you give the magic."

"Twist?" Cully asked. "Cully was thinking it was being elf's magic."

Harry shook his head. "That doesn't make sense. Magic is magic."

Cully and Dobby both scratched their heads. "Magic is magic," Cully murmured. "What is your meaning?" he asked.

"Magic is like a language. A form of communication, with House-elves speaking a different version to humans, which allows them to express concepts in a different way," Harry said.

Both House-elves nodded. "So House-elves can help Harry learn new language?"

“And Harry could help the House-elves learn as well.”

Both House-elves perked up massively. “But that’s a long-term thing,” Harry added, “something to look forward to once Voldemort is being perpetually burnt in fiery pits.”

Both House-elves giggled. “House-elves still needed, right, for others?”

“Of course,” Harry said, while he thought he could possibly pop all of his friends in one go, he didn’t want to make the House-elves feel like they weren’t helping. He stretched. “Do you think the rules are ready for the bounce game?” he asked.

“They is being ready,” Cully said. “Mopsy and Trixie have them ready. House-elves have tried them out with boots, so we know is working. House-elves is enjoying,” he added.

“So I’ll need to do some elf size boots?”

Cully and Dobby both cheered.

“I’ll do some,” he promised. “We’ll play on Sunday afternoon.”

The two House-elves nodded, and after bidding him goodnight, popped away. Harry went straight to the bathroom, before hitting the sack.

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“You were awake, you tart,” Romilda said as she bounded into her friend’s room and landed on her bed.

“Look who’s talking, you cow,” Astoria replied as she sat up. “I told you it would work!”

“Yeah, it was so romantic!” Romilda swooned happily. “And he can *pop* !”

“He’s Harry. He’s made of awesome, he can do anything,” Astoria stated.

“Yeah, which is why I’m gonna win!”

“Bring it, bitch!”

They stared at each other for a second, and then burst out laughing,

Astoria climbed out of bed and headed to her bathroom. Ten minutes later she exited, to find her friend reading on her bed. She dressed quickly in jeans and a shirt, before grabbing her friend’s hand and walking with her to the Common Room.

“Morning,” Hermione said. “Harry’s getting a shower, and will meet us for breakfast.”

“Okay,” Astoria agreed. “Can we be popped, please?” she asked the empty air. As they arrived, she looked at Romilda and giggled.

Romilda looked blank for a second, before she did so as well. “What?” Daphne asked.

The younger two started to laugh, as they imagined Hermione’s reaction when she knew that Harry could pop on his own.

“What’s up with them?” Daphne asked Hermione.

And if by magic, which it was, Harry popped in.

Hermione’s head tilted to one side as she looked at Harry, before it jerked straight up. “Harry James Potter,” she yelled.

“Hermione Jean Granger,” Harry said back. “Bit formal for a good morning, isn’t it?”

“Did you just pop on your own?”

“What? Oh, that,” Harry said, as he took the seat. “Yeah, don’t have a cow.”

“Have a cow!” Hermione shrieked. “Humans *don’t* pop, House-elves pop, you are not a House-elf, therefore, you *do not* pop!”

“But that’s just a logical fallacy,” Harry pointed out. “Just because *you* don’t understand magic, doesn’t mean that the rest of us have that issue,” Harry teased.

“But…” Hermione stated.

Harry swept his hands around, and every plate in the Great Hall started to float, before he let them down gently.

Astoria found herself utterly enthralled by the weird conversation between the two friends.

“Then how?”

“Dobby, Cully and I were discussing it last night, and they came up with a great analogy. The House-elves speak one language of magic, humans speak another. I’m just learning how to speak a little bit of elf.”

“But…” Hermione started.

“Magic is magic,” Harry said with a shrug. “I think that we try and put rules onto it because we’re inherently logical creatures, and so we have formalised everything we do, but I’ve got this idea, I’ve been working on it for a while, while working on the forge, that magic isn’t that.” He looked down. “It’s just, my thoughts have been clearer since the incident, and I feel like I understand it more now.”

“You’re being unclear,” Hermione pointed out gently. “Harry, take a breath, organise your thoughts.”

Harry nodded, stood up from the bench, stepped over it and started to pace in front of their table.

“Magic is magic,” he repeated. “That’s the point. We’re here in a school, learning magic, right?”

“Well, most of us,” Romilda pointed out cheerily, “You’re more here absorbing the lessons as a hobby while making magical armour.”

“True,” Harry agreed, as Hermione hushed her.

“So yeah, you can’t teach illogically, that doesn’t make sense, so everything gets formalised, and before you know it, you’re turning one thing into another.” With a casual ease, he transfigured their cutlery into miniature dolls. The knives, now girl dolls, bowed to the forks, now boy dolls. The girls and boys paired up and they started to waltz around the table.

Astoria noted that their dance moves were smooth, and that her parents would have been impressed with their technical skills.

“Magic,” he continued, “like Professor McGonagall taught us. And that’s great, it’s a spell, it’s something that can be taught, and we can understand. But what is it?”

“First,” Hermione said, “That’s transfiguration and charms, two different things. You used the first to turn the knives and forks, and the second to animate them into this dance.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed, “but what is it?”

“Magic,” Astoria pointed out the obvious.

“Exactly,” Harry agreed. “It’s the way we were taught, the way everyone here has been taught. Romi, how do you curse?”

“It’s like a prayer: you pray to magic, you explain the reason, offer your magic, and wait for magic to respond,” Romilda replied instantly.

“Where’s your wand?”

Romilda opened her mouth, and then shut it.

“You don’t use one,” Hermione said into the silence.

“And what are you using?”

“Magic,” Astoria whispered.

“Daph, what was the first thing that Snape said about potions and how they are made?”

“No silly wand waving,” Daphne recited.

“And yet, we offer ingredients, we treat them right, and in return magic gives us the potions. But what is it?”

“Magic,” Astoria said again.

“Exactly, so what is magic?”

“Going by what you’ve said, a bizarre subset of Latin, with some Greek thrown in, invoked by a wand in a mini ritual to produce a desired effect?” Astoria asked.

She then found herself lifted out of her seat, hugged exuberantly, and kissed on the cheek, before being placed back down. She was aware that she was blushing like never before, but she wouldn’t take that moment back for the world. She had felt just how powerful Harry was in that moment, both magically and physically, and it increased her determination to be the one who had all of that looking down on her, as she welcomed him into her body.

She was shocked at the image that had suddenly popped in to her mind, and realised that puberty now had a very firm hold of her. And as shocking as the image was, it was also an extremely charged one, and she felt faint at the very idea.

“Tart,” Romilda whispered as Harry took up his pacing again. Astoria reached out and grabbed Romilda’s hand under the table, using that to try and centre herself, and get herself back from the dangerous areas her mind had drifted to.

“Exactly, a mini ritual formalised as a spell. But what is that, at its core, what is that?” Harry asked.

“A request,” Hermione said suddenly. “A request to magic to do something for us.”

“Exactly,” Harry crowed. “That’s exactly what it is! And each of the examples I gave are us asking a different way for something to happen.

“So when I pop, it’s just the same, just a different way of asking for something to happen.” Harry paused and looked around the room. “Delacour,” he called. “What’s *Terroir* ?”

“There ees no direct translation,” the French witch said after a few seconds of thought, “It is a combination of many things, of the sun, the land, the temperature, and many ozzier things, and is used to describe the areas that grow wine, coffee, chocolate, tomatoes and other such things where the soil ees as important as the plants.”

“So it’s difficult to explain in English, but is summed up in one word in French?”

“It is,” Fleur agreed. “And you can call me Fleur.”

Harry grinned at the French witch, and then turned back to them, “That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” he continued eagerly, looking at Hermione. “Magic is magic; it is just easier to do different things in different flavours!”

“Magic is magic,” Hermione whispered. “Daph, Romi, I’m going to have to ask a huge favour from you two.”

“We’ll do it,” Daphne said brightly.

“You should always ask first,” Romilda groaned. “But fine, I’m in.”

“Just stay in class,” Hermione said. She stood, and walked around the edge of the table, lightly thumping Harry in the arm as she went past. She then shook her hand out and winced, before she marched up to the Professor’s table.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione started, “judging by your facial expression, and the expressions of the other staff, this is not something you’ve thought about before?”

“I don’t think that any human has ever had as much contact with the House-elves as Harry has,” Dumbledore replied evenly. “They are probably the closest beings who use a different magic to us.”

“Or the time to think about it,” Hermione suggested, as she nodded at Dumbledore’s point.

“Indeed, normally, thought is driven by need, or guided by others,” Dumbledore replied.

“In which case, I’m going to have to pull out of classes for a while, along with Astoria.”

Astoria blinked, wondering why she was needed.

“So you both can write up Harry’s ideas in a paper?”

“Exactly.”

“As long as I get first look,” Dumbledore said with a small smile.

“How about you get first read, and if it’s good enough, you sponsor it?”

“Agreed,” Dumbledore said. “The idea is utterly fascinating. My own popping is something I mimicked, but it is not the same; it’s limited to line of sight or places I know very well, and I must confess I never really wondered how the House-elves did it.”

“Why would you?” Hermione asked. “We’re all products of our education, it’s only because we persuaded Harry to be himself, and took him out of the education system, that he had the time and the circumstances to actually think about it, and I’m so proud of him I could burst.”

“A feeling I know well,” Dumbledore agreed with a twinkle in his eyes. Astoria looked at Harry; he was blushing.

Hermione grinned as she turned and walked back down to them; she stopped, and hugged Harry hard, whispering something in his ear.

He chuckled and hugged her back, before releasing her. He looked around, and shrugged, “Fleur, Viktor, Cedric, we’ll play our game on Sunday afternoon, okay?”

“Da, will be fun,” Krum stated.

Harry popped away, returning seconds later next to Krum, and gave him a pair of black hiking boots, before he popped over to Cedric and handed him a second pair. He finished with Fleur, handing her a pair of feminine-looking troopa combat boots in Beauxbatons’ blue colour with lighter blue laces.

Fleur looked at them, and then at Harry. Harry simply pointed to Daphne. “But ze leather work?”

“Leather’s easy to work with,” Harry stated. “Dragon’s a complete pain in the posterior to work with, not only is it resistant to most magic, it actively rejects being used in some ways, so you have to over-power it.”

“Oh,” Fleur said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He turned, and headed toward the table and stopped in front of Professor Moody. “So, your doppelganger, he liked to throw around the killing curse. As you, in fact. Was he exaggerating about your prowess with it?”

“No,” Moody grunted.

“Cool, so, how about you throw a few curses at my new armour, after breakfast?”

“Tonks, Shackbolt,” Moody roared. Astoria looked down the Professors’ table to where the five Aurors were sat. “Run down to the Gate, then go and get permission from Amelia.”

“But, breakfast,” the female one whimpered. “And we could use the Floo...”

“A nice run before breakfast,” Alastor cackled. “Go!”

Two House-elves appeared, with sparks coming out of their hands.

Tonks and Shackbolt jumped over the table, and dashed straight out, the House-elves behind them.

“I love those House-elves,” Moody said with a slightly terrifying grin. “Sit down lad, we’ll try it after food.”

“One more thing,” Krum said loudly. “Our fly!”

“This afternoon?”

“Da!”

Harry nodded and sat down. “So, a paper?” he asked Hermione.

“A scholarly paper,” Hermione corrected primly. “Peer reviewed, based on research, duplicable evidence, citations, everything.”

“And what are you going to entitle this formal write up?”

“Magic is magic,” Hermione said dryly. “By Hermione Granger, Astoria Greengrass, and a big jerk.”

Harry laughed.

“My best friend, a philosopher,” Hermione continued to tease, as the breakfasts finally arrived. “And I just thought he was mindlessly banging on metal like a demented drummer.”

“Pfft, that from the girl who’s only happy when she’s sleeping on a pile of books.”

“Education trumps ignorance,” Hermione countered.

“And yet this ignorant one came up with something new,” Harry said back.

“Pfft, even a brute can get one sliver of an idea, it takes real thought to expand that into something publishable,” Hermione said snootily.

Harry blinked away and appeared behind Hermione, where he dug his fingers into her sides, before popping back.

Hermione jumped, and then pouted at him. “Brute,” she mumbled. She shook herself. “Your idea, Harry, it is unbelievable,” she said seriously. “It’s startling because it’s so complex and yet like all truly brilliant ideas, is so simple. Every book sets out the rules of magic, one way or another, and it puts limitations in place, limitations that people have worked around, often, to use your analogy, by inventing new vocabulary, but this, Harry, you could take further, and invent a new language for a new field.

“The possibilities are endless.”

Harry grinned. “So you’ll want to be around when I start to teach the House-elves our language?”

Hermione giggled and nodded. “Of course you’ll want to do that! But don’t worry; you can talk as you hammer.”

“Ug,” Harry agreed cheerfully. As they finished eating, they stood, and Harry moved slightly and gave Romilda a huge hug. “Everyone told me what you did while I was dead,” he said. “Thanks.” He kissed her on the cheek as he had Astoria.

Romilda blushed and didn’t look like she was able to say anything. Astoria moved over to her and took her hand. “I know what you’re thinking, you tart,” she whispered.

Romilda giggled and was back to normal, as House-elves popped them down to the forge. Professor Dumbledore and Professor Moody arrived a few seconds later.

Harry pulled out a dummy, with his new black armour on it.

It was frankly terrifying, with blood red inserts highlighting it. The red seemed to glow with an unearthly light of its own generation. It was huge, with insets and spikes all over. They were asymmetrical, which seemed to draw the eye in and then make it back off with a feeling of unease. The helmet looked almost like a crown, with two large horns bracketed by two smaller horns, making the whole ensemble close to 7 foot tall.

“Daph and I were going for intimidation,” Harry explained. “And while it might look like the extrusions would guide a sword to vulnerable bits, they actually guide to heavily reinforced bits, and are designed to detach if necessary. The base material is magical ebony, reinforced with everything we could think off.”

“It is beautiful and terrifying,” Astoria said softly.

“Thanks,” Daphne said brightly, “that’s what we were hoping for.”

Astoria moved closer to Daphne, and wrapped an arm around her, resting her head on her sister’s shoulder. Daphne moved an arm around her waist and hugged her. Astoria couldn’t remember the last time she had hugged Daphne like this.

“Well, let’s try it then,” Moody grunted. He whipped out his wand. “Avada Kedavra!”

The green light sped out of his wand and hit the armour dead in the centre. The dummy rocked back a bit, but did nothing else. Harry moved over, checked it, and grinned. “Armour on,” he called excitedly. The armour on the dummy vanished, as a small tornado lifted Harry into the air. As he span, bits of armour appeared, rotating along their own axis, and attached to him.

The helm landed on his head last, casting his face into shadow, despite the fact it was still open. The dull red started to throb, like a heartbeat, and the colour was just a little deeper.

It was the most complete armour Astoria had seen from Harry, black ebony chain mail covered parts that were normally just leather.

“Turn it on,” Daphne cheered.

Harry shifted slightly, and then his eyes started to glow an unearthly green colour. “Place down your wands, now,” he said in a deep gravelly voice, “or face the consequences of your actions!”

The voice touched a part of Astoria that was primal, and she shivered in fear, instinctively grabbing at her wand.

“The curse, Professor Moody,” Daphne encouraged. Harry lowered the lid, but the eyes still seemed to dominate his face, impossibly through the metal.

“Avada Kedavra,” Moody said. Harry twisted as he took an aggressive step forward, his left hand flashing out to catch the curse. He continued his movement, drawing his sword with his right and swinging it. He pulled the strike close to Moody.

Moody gulped. “Please, Potter,” he whispered, “can I be there when you do this to Death Eaters? I want to see them piss themselves in fear!”

Daphne giggled, and Astoria looked up at her sister, and for the first time, realised that she didn’t know her as well as she should, and that Daphne was indeed correctly sorted into Slytherin.

“Armour off,” Harry said, and as it melted away, he looked at his hand. The front was red raw, showing the impact the curse had made. “Ouch,” he said laconically.

“Harry!” Hermione said, moving over to him and taking his hand.

“Nothing is perfect, Hermione,” he said. “The energy in the curse has to go somewhere, and the gauntlet can only dissipate so much magic; my chest piece is better protected.”

“Then why?” she demanded.

“Because I was ready to shit myself when this hulking beast from my nightmares grabbed my killing curse and swung a fuck-off massive sword at me!” Moody said flatly.

“Intimidation,” Harry explained in a slightly cleaner version of what the professor had said.

Hermione turned and looked at Daphne, “Why do I keep expecting sanity from him?”

Daphne smiled brightly, “Because you’re still trying to get out of the mindset you’ve been taught about magic. And you define anything that doesn’t follow that as insanity.”

Astoria looked up in surprise, as she’d never heard Daphne defend someone so directly.

“Come to the insane side, Hermione,” Harry whispered. “We have cookies.”

On cue, a plate of fresh-baked cookies appeared on the table next to her.

Hermione chuckled. “True,” she agreed. “And tempting. But then, who would write the paper?”

“So, Professor, do I pass?” Harry asked.

“You do,” the Headmaster agreed. “I asked for, and received, from Amelia, a commission for you that will ensure that you will not suffer any legal repercussions from fighting Death Eaters. And as soon as we hear of anything, we’ll let you know. We do have some spies, and we will use any information immediately.”

“So that they attack, thinking it’s like the old days, but then Harry appears and wham-bam-take-that-bitch?” Romilda asked, as she mimicked Harry attacking.

“Quite,” Dumbledore said with a chuckle. “Quite.”

“And in a few weeks’ time, you’ll be joined by others,” Moody added. “Really great work.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Right, before lunch, I promised that I’d make some elf bounce boots, and we need to come up with a name for them.”

“And protect the spell work from imitation,” Astoria added. “At least to start with. We might want to licence the production out later, and keep a premium product in house.”

“Oh, bugger,” Hermione suddenly said. “I’ve just had one of those thoughts.”

“Who’s the lucky guy?” Harry teased.

“Not that, git,” Hermione retorted. “The sort of thought that you’re incapable of because it deals with reality, not Harry Potter-ity, the weird world you live in and keep dragging us into.”

“What if the armour doesn’t protect from the Killing Curse, and it’s just Mr I’ve-Already-Survived-Two-And-I’m-Now-Immune who it works for?”

There was a brief silence as everyone contemplated both her words and her appalling naming skills.

“If you ever have children, I’m naming them,” Harry decided. “You’d just end up calling them Eugenie or something equally as horrid.”

Hermione gracefully stuck two fingers up at Harry.

“You do raise a good point,” The Headmaster mused.

Daphne sighed and removed her arm from around Astoria. She took a step forward and touched the armour Harry was still wearing. “Armour off,” she ordered. The armour flowed off him, and back onto the stand. “Armour on,” she then said. The armour flowed onto her, causing a few squeaks from her.

“Can we hurry, please?” Daphne asked. “This armour is not fitted for me, and is really uncomfortable.”

“Erm,” Moody started. “I’m... well... it’s just...”

“Today?” Daphne snapped. “I’m standing on tip-toe here, and it’s far more intimate than I’m comfortable with, and while you lot seem to have some doubt about Harry’s skills, I don’t. So if we could get this demo out of the way, I can get out of this armour before I slip and risk not being a virgin on my wedding night!”

Astoria found herself blushing furiously as she looked at the cross and uncomfortable expression on the face of her sister.

Alastor took a deep breath. “Avada Kedavra,” he said. The spell crashed into the breast place.

“Armour off, immediate,” Harry ordered a second later. The armour vanished, showing that Daphne was balanced precariously on her toes, before Harry swept her up into a bridal-style hold. He carried her over to a table and sat her down carefully, before his hand swept up and guided her face so she was looking up at him. “You okay?”

“Of course, my brother doesn’t make cheap rubbish.”

He chuckled and pulled her into a hug. “That doesn’t mean that I like anyone throwing a curse at my sister,” he told her. “It took every bit of mental effort I had not to attack him.”

In the background, Moody gulped.

“Are we happy?” Harry asked.

“Indubitably,” Dumbledore replied for all of them.

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Cedric stood in the courtyard of Hogwarts, with Fleur and Viktor, waiting for Harry. The boy wasn’t late, they were just all early. There were a lot of students milling around, waiting to watch the champions fly together.

He had his Cleansweep Ten, Seeker Edition broom, while Fleur and Viktor both had Firebolts.

Cho and Esmeralda were waiting with them, but no one was really talking. Cedric felt intimidated by how good Viktor was, and how physically perfect Fleur was.

He was the Hogwarts champion, and a very good wizard, but he felt massively inadequate, especially when it came to the Default Champion, as he called himself. He had to stop himself from snorting. “Default”. If the armour-forging, dragon-killing Harry was a default, what did that make Cedric? He had a sneaking suspicion that distinctly second-class was the answer that no-one would ever say.

And now, he’d even come up with a new theory of magic that was out of this world. And the hook line had kept Cedric thinking all day. Magic is magic. There was nothing he could think of to counter it, nothing at all.

He snorted suddenly.

“What?” Cho asked curiously.

“I’ve just realised that all my life I’ve had this nagging feeling that something isn’t right. It’s magic.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Magic is magic,” he quoted. “When I was younger, I always wondered why I couldn’t fly without a broom. Mum always told me that magic couldn’t do that.”

“I was told that magic couldn’t do lots,” Krum agreed.

“And your next point,” Fleur said with a cute little sigh and a huff, and vastly improved English, “is that the idea of magic not being able to do something is completely false. We just were not asking it properly.”

“Da,” Krum grunted. “When I was kid, seemed wrong.”

“And it was, but we just accepted it and moved on.” Cedric shook himself. “Because that was accepted knowledge and why ask silly questions?”

“Because ze adults told us, and we accepted.”

“Yeah,” Cedric agreed. “You have to wonder what is going to come of this.”

“A complete revolution of magic,” a new voice joined them. They turned, to see Hermione had been popped in to them. “Harry’s on his way,” she added.

“Thanks,” Cedric said for the message.

Hermione nodded. “Watching Harry forge is incredibly relaxing. And when he is in the zone, nothing else matters to him, it’s just him, the forge and his hammers. And he can happily spend more than ten hours at a time doing it. It’s that dedication with the meditative way he handles it that has given him the time to just think. Dobby is probably his closest male friend at the moment, and that doesn’t really count as they are on different levels, so it’s no wonder that Harry thought about House-elves. And he’s been popped as much as we have – the difference is that Harry is very self-reliant.” She pouted, “And he can cook.”

“Really?” Fleur asked.

“He made quite possibly the best roast potatoes I’ve ever tasted at Christmas, and then for a lark, he taught two people how to make fantastic puff pastry and then he knocked up an apple pie that was out of this world.” She shrugged. “Of everyone I know, he is the only person who could lose his magic and instantly transfer to the Muggle world and be a success.”

There was a series of pops, as Harry’s other friends arrived, and then Harry. The boy was wearing a green t-shirt, jeans and a pair of trainers, despite the cold spring weather. In his left hand was his Firebolt, in his right, a long box.

“Ahh, I thought so,” Harry said cheerfully. He dropped the box, which splintered on the paving slabs, revealing another Firebolt broom. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Cedric said in disbelief, as he was handed a new broom.

“No problem. So, ready for a flight?”

“Da,” Krum said, grinning suddenly.

“I am ready,” Fleur agreed with a small smile.

“Ced?”

“Apart from an insanely jealous girlfriend, ready.” Cedric moved to avoid the incoming slap, but wasn’t quick enough.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. Maybe another time, Chang,” Harry said with a nod, before he simply took off. It was only as he was ten feet in the air that he bothered to bring his broom between his legs and shot into the sky.

Viktor was the next up, copying Harry exactly, as he just allowed his broom to lift him in the air by his arms, before swinging his legs over.

“Oh,” Fleur said with another devastatingly cute little pout. “Zis is going to be fun.” She mounted her broom and took off.

“Fun,” Cedric mimicked with an eye roll. He mounted his broom and took off as well, loving the feeling of the wind in his hair. He was aware that his takeoff was not as exciting as the other two guys’, but one was a professional Quidditch player and the other was Harry Potter, so he could be excused.

In the air, Krum and Harry were already engaged in a high-speed game of tag. For the first few minutes, Cedric concentrated on learning how the Firebolt reacted to things: extremely well. When he was confident, he flew in to the area that the other three were using.

Harry whipped under him, then did an aileron roll around him, tagging him on the shoulder as he flew past.

Cedric immediately accelerated, sliding around to tag Fleur’s foot. At high speed, she took off after Viktor, who was escaping her with ease, before Harry flew into Viktor’s path, putting him off enough for Fleur to catch him.

The game continued for a while, with plenty of whoops and laughter as they pulled off tricks and manoeuvres to tag each other randomly.

Krum was the first to stop, hovering as the others joined him. “Krum has had fun, good flyers, all.”

“Thanks,” Cedric said.

“Krum mean no disrespect, but Krum is holding back. Cedric and Fleur not mind if Krum and Harry go for it?”

Cedric looked at Fleur.

“Go for it,” Fleur decided. “We shall watch.”

“Yeah,” Cedric agreed.

“Tag,” Harry said, nudging Viktor, before diving close to a hundred foot in less than a second, and taking off. Viktor was immediately on his tail, not paying any attention to such things as gravity, the laws of conservation of motion, or anything else except his single-minded pursuit of Harry.

They both skimmed across the Black Lake, their feet brushing the water, as they left trails behind them, before they shot up to the castle and corkscrewed around one of the towers.

“Zey are good,” Fleur said in an understatement.

“Yeah,” Cedric agreed. “Harry’s lost some speed, though.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he’s bigger than he was, and you can tell he’s not used to it yet.” Even as he spoke, Krum was able to tag him and then fly straight down. Harry took after him, as they rocketed down at full speed, only swooping horizontally at the last possible second.

They headed out over the lake, both rolling in opposite directions as the Giant Squid appeared. Harry pulled violently on his broom, and shot straight up, going incredibly high, before he seemed to pause and just hover.

Gravity slowly exerted its pull on him, as he somersaulted backward and shot down at an incredible speed. He pulled up, turning his vertical movement into a horizontal one, and shot after Krum, who didn’t manage to dodge in time.

Harry rolled away and flew back up to them, with a sad look on his face.

Krum joined them, looked at Harry, and nodded. “Takes practice.”

“It’s not the same, Vik,” Harry said softly. “I’m not the same.”

“Da,” Krum agreed with a sad look. “Harry cannot have two loves. Broom is jealous.”

“Heh,” Harry said with a slight smile. “Anvil is jealous, too.”

“Viktor has seen armour, Viktor has seen bounce-boots, Viktor thinks that Harry could do own broom, in metal, for Seeker.”

Harry’s eyes lit up.

“Viktor wants first go, though,” Krum added.

Harry laughed, as he swung his feet up and relaxed back on the broom, staring into the blue sky.  
“You going to pay?”

“He!” Krum said, “Viktor get *team* to pay, Harry gets money, no feels guilty about charging friend lots.”

“This is why I’m getting Tori to deal with the money side,” Harry agreed.

“You two are being friendlier,” Cedric pointed out lightly.

“Diggovy and Delacour are fun, friends to Krum, but Harry is more; Harry understands Viktor.”

“The price of fame, the unwanted burden when all you want to do is what you love,” Harry explained.

“How?” Fleur asked.

“We flew,” Krum said, as if that explained everything.

Fleur rolled her eyes. “Men.”

“Indeed,” Harry replied, “because we can learn everything we need to know about another person without talking. Vik is strong, direct, and dislikes subterfuge. He wants to just do what he loves, but is very aware of the price for that.”

“Harry is similar, is very strong, driven, wants to be best, but no longer on flying. Could be best flyer, but only loves it now, no longer has obsession to push beyond all boundaries.”

Fleur tilted her head thoughtfully. She then nodded sharply. “I repeat my earlier statement,” she said with a small smile that softened her words.

Harry had a thoughtful look on his face. “Okay,” he said slowly. “Does anyone want to see the smithy?”

“Yes!” Cedric half-shouted, beating the other two by microseconds.

“Come on, then,” Harry said, as he dropped like a stone. Viktor was immediately with him, they both stopped centimetres from the ground, and they climbed off at the same time.

Cedric swooped down with Fleur, dismounted regretfully, and handed Harry the new Firebolt back.

“Thanks,” the younger boy said, as he held both Firebolts in one hand.

“Can we go to the smithy please?”

Cedric found himself popped, and discovered it was a far better way to travel than Apparition.

“Vik will play close attention to Harry’s work,” Krum said, “Learn new magic travel, better than wizard travel.”

“Agreed,” Fleur said.

“Guys, can you get Cho, Esmeralda, and...” he trailed off, looking at Fleur.

“Gabrielle would love it,” she decided.

“And Gabrielle,” Harry finished.

Hermione, Astoria, Romilda and Daphne appeared next, closely followed by Cho, Esmeralda and Gabrielle.

“Fleur, Cho, Esmeralda, do you carry knives?” Hermione asked.

“Knives?” Fleur asked.

The four girls reached under their skirts, and pulled out beautiful knives. “Last option in self-defence,” Hermione explained. “There are rumours of what can happen with girls and memory charms.”

Fleur looked outraged, as Gabrielle looked confused and tugged on her sister’s skirt. She said something in French, causing Fleur to crouch and say something in gentle terms.

Gabrielle’s eyes went wide, and she shuddered. She pointed at Harry, said something, and then crossed her arms, as if whatever she had said was the winning argument in a national debate competition.

Fleur looked at Harry. “I do not need a knife, because I have Mr Potter to protect me,” she quoted.

Harry knelt opposite Gabrielle, and looked into her eyes. “Thank you, Gabrielle, for the compliment,” he said softly, “but while I am good, I am not a deity. I’m not everywhere, and while if I know you are in trouble, I will be there, there are many things in this world that could stop anyone, even me.

“It’s never too early to learn how to help defend yourself, if only to delay until help does arrive. We’re all happy to teach you, as long as you promise to listen carefully, and never show off with it. It’s a secret that could give you the edge if something bad does happen. Hopefully, it never will, but we would all rather be prepared for that one time, than be found wanting.”

There was a pause as Fleur translated, before Gabrielle frowned and slowly nodded. She looked up at her sister and said something with a pout.

“Gabrielle Delacour!” Fleur said with an angry voice; that started a conversation that seemed quite petulant from the younger girl.

After another minute of this back and forth, Fleur looked at Harry, “Can you pop to France?”

Harry nodded. “If I know the destination.”

Gabrielle screeched something at Fleur, who whipped out her wand and silenced the younger girl, before she blushed as she looked at Harry. “Merde,” she muttered. “Do you mind if I give you the directions to your mind?”

“Nope.”

Fleur reached out and touched Harry’s forehead. Harry nodded, and then grabbed Gabrielle’s shoulder, who reacted by trying to get away. Fleur reached out and grabbed her, and took Harry’s hand. A second later, they had vanished.

“What was that?” Cedric asked.

“I did a bit of French before I came to Hogwarts,” Hermione said, “and I’ve been on holiday there a few times. Gabrielle seemed to be demanding that Harry should do something, and Fleur disagreed.”

“Treat her like Daph,” Romilda said. “She demanded that Fleur tell Harry to drop everyone else and take care of her. Fleur told her not to be silly, and Gabrielle replied that as Fleur had failed at the task, she couldn’t help, so she should make herself useful and translate properly.”

Cedric winced.

“She’s a bit of a brat,” Romilda added with a laugh.

“The problem, Romi, is that that was probably Harry’s first interaction with a girl like that, and while he was trying to be nice, it’s going to colour his interactions in the future,” Astoria pointed out.

“True,” Romilda agreed with a frown. “We could get my sister to bring my niece over?”

Astoria giggled. “No way, she’s a complete cuddlebug, she’d immediately climb into Harry’s arms and we’d never get her out of them.”

Romilda giggled as well.

“Harry’s mature enough, now, to understand that everyone is different,” Hermione pointed out evenly. “And one spoilt little princess isn’t going to change that.”

“Veela chick,” Krum grunted. “All headstrong and fiery and think world is for them.”

“And them alone,” Esmeralda agreed. “It’s one of the reasons a lot of Veela keep to themselves, it’s not until they start to mature that they become tolerable.”

Hermione had a fascinated look on her face, before she took a deep breath. “Okay, that’s not important, I’ll file it under interesting, but don’t pursue,” she said to herself. She looked up. “I have an awful habit of trying to research everything, and that’s not necessarily a good thing.”

“It isn’t?” Cho asked, speaking for the first time.

“It just means I have a lot of general knowledge,” Hermione explained, “and that’s why it took my best friend to come up with a new theory of magic. If I’m going to make something of myself, I need to focus on one thing more, and less on everything that comes across my radar.”

“Da,” Krum agreed.

“You can’t talk, you Neanderthal,” Esmeralda grunted, “you’re cheating on your broom with me.”

“Broom understands,” Krum replied evenly.

“Pfft,” Esmeralda said and elbowed him in the stomach, hard. Krum barely flinched.

Krum reached out and pulled her back against his chest, and placed his arms around her stomach. “This why Krum loves ‘Relda,” he said. “She understand that Krum has two loves, but only one that Krum hopes to have baby Krums with.”

Cedric watched as the irritation faded from Esmeralda’s face.

“Harry understands,” Krum continued, “same point as earlier, when fly, to be very best, you focus one thing or two things, focus lots means little progress, focus like nothing else means win.”

“And that’s what he does when he’s forging,” Astoria agreed. “Anyway, it seems to me like Harry was asking about knives.”

“I have one,” Esmeralda replied. She pulled it out of her skirt, and handed it over. Romilda took it, looked at it, sniffed, and then jammed the blade into the vice, pulling on the handle until the blade shattered with a crack. She chucked the handle over her shoulder. It arched through the air and landed in a large pile of scrap metal.

The Bulgarian girl blinked, “Errm... I just bought that!”

“Trash,” Romilda stated. “Absolute trash, an insult to knives everywhere. You’d be better off with a whistle blowing for help.” She handed the other girl her knife. Esmeralda moved away from Krum and did a few practice moves, and her eyes widened.

“It’s about fifteen percent lighter,” Romilda stated, “but more importantly, the balance is right. The steel is tough, but flexible, you can feel it wants to move with you, and it feels natural sat in your hand.”

Esmeralda nodded eagerly.

“Well, as someone who has purchased a knife recently, what do you think it is worth?” Astoria asked.

“I paid fifteen galleons for that piece of junk,” she replied. “For this one, I’d pay a hundred.”

“I was looking at around seventy-five,” Astoria said, “based on how long it takes Harry.”

“I’ll take two, one for me, one for my mother.”

“Krum will take two as well,” Viktor added. “Krum has little sister. Krum worries. Krum thinks 75 is good price for protection and Krum’s peace of mind.”

“I’ve not got that sort of money at school,” Cho said with a small pout. “Can I pay once I’ve owled home?”

“Sure,” Astoria said with a smile. She looked up as Harry and Fleur arrived back. “Romi did a demo of your knife, and we’ve sold five of them!”

“How much?” Fleur asked, as she took the knife from Esmeralda. It seemed to dance in her hands as she played with it.

“Seventy-five.”

“I think you might be undercharging a bit,” Fleur said.

“True, but by pricing it like this, we’ve already sold more. Esmeralda’s ordered two.”

Fleur nodded slowly. “It does feel like a bargain,” she admitted. “I will ‘ave four. My muzzer will want one, as will my aunt, and despite being ze world’s biggest brat, my sister will love one as well.”

Harry blinked. “Wait, that’s nine, knives, meaning six hundred and seventy-five galleons?”

“Harry,” Astoria interrupted sharply, “Not in front of customers!”

Krum chuckled. “Is not about raw materials or time, is about skill and result. Krum would play Quidditch for free, but Krum gets paid a lot to be best. When Krum plays, he plays with heart and soul, with years of practice and experience. Krum sits on broom and flies and catches snitch.”

Harry slowly smiled. “Thanks, Vik.”

Krum nodded. “Now, order, make knives!”

Harry laughed. “As they are our first customers, sit down with my sister and she’ll do you a custom colour scheme.”

“Ooo,” Fleur said happily, instantly moving over.

Harry waved a hand at the forge; it burst into life, before he pulled off his t-shirt and pulled on a heavy leather apron. Every move he made was smooth and well-oiled.

Romilda and Astoria started a running commentary as Harry worked on creating the knives for the girls. It was fascinating to watch, and incredibly calming. For a while, the only sound was the roar of the fire and hammer shaping the red-hot metal.

Cedric subtly poked Cho when he caught her joining Romilda and Astoria in spending a little too long staring at the smooth muscles in Harry's back as they tensed and released.

The gathered guests settled down into conjured chairs and relaxed. Low-voiced conversations started and stopped organically, as everyone lost themselves watching a master at work.

While the metal was still hot, Harry pulled out a template sheet, and inscribed the knives with a series of runes, before he charged them. He then heated the metal back up to a glowing red before he shoved each knife into a bucket of oil. The knives thrummed as the now bubbling oil had small flames on the surface. Harry pulled the blades from the oil, looking quickly at the runes before the blades ignited in the air. With a satisfied nod he dunked the blades again, swirling them gently before he pulled them out. This time they smoked, but didn't ignite. He gently placed them on the shelf in front of the forge and then picked up a rag to clean his hands.

"No matter how many times I do that, it's still cool," he said with a grin as he moved over to a table and started to work with some leather.

The whispered magic he used to work the leather was just as impressive, as it changed into the colours the girls had requested. He then joined the knives and the leather, and the last thing he did was sharpen each one.

When they were finished, he displayed them on the tables, each knife, or knives, in front of the person who had ordered them.

"I think I would have paid the money just to watch that," Cho admitted.

Krum laughed. "Da, Krum not been so relaxed in years. Viktor is keeping friends with Harry, come watch forge before big game, win ever faster!"

Harry laughed.

"But more," Krum continued, "With bounce boots and now knife for sister, Krum wins best bruvver in world award!"

"These are wonderful, Harry," Esmeralda agreed. "Well worth the money. There will always be a market for high quality items, and the fact they are functional as well, it will make them very much sought after."

"I don't just want to do weapons," Harry said with a nod. "Daph's come up with some amazing designs for all sorts of things. We're going to put out a catalogue."

“Krum will take one,” Viktor said instantly. “Krum likes metal work.”

“Bulgaria likes metal work,” Esmeralda corrected. “Our blacksmiths are not as good.”

“Nor ours,” Fleur agreed. She was stroking one of the knives lovingly. She shook herself, and gave a small smile. The smile was amazing, beautiful, completely out of this world. It was the smile of an angel, favouring him with her presence.

“Easy, tiger,” Harry called.

Cedric blinked, to find himself hoisted in the air by his shirt, by an amused looking Harry Potter. He’d been heading toward Fleur with his arms outstretched.

“I am so sorry,” Fleur called. She had a devastated look on her face.

“Was accident.” Krum said, “Friends forgive.”

“You actually love me,” Esmeralda said in disbelief.

“Viktor has said so at least once.”

“I thought that was because you like doing me!”

“I do,” Viktor agreed. “And I like being with you.”

“But...” Esmeralda said. “Broom....”

“Broom can’t give me babies, or keep me warm at night.”

“There was a Veela, with Allure, and you held me!”

Viktor nodded calmly.

“You love me,” she repeated. She reached up and kissed him, hard. When they broke, Krum grinned at Fleur.

“Not even something to forgive,” he corrected himself. “Relda now knows Krum loves her.”

Fleur blushed.

Cedric winced and looked at Cho, who was scowling at him.

“Don’t be little girl,” Krum said firmly. “Krum is older, has been around world, knows life, is man. Children confuse hormones with love, need growing. Krum grown. Diggovy growing well, not there yet.”

Cho blinked, and opened her mouth.

“Now’s the time to listen,” Hermione interrupted her before she could speak. Cho was still scowling.

“Pare!” Daphne suddenly called. Cho’s eyes went blank. “Sit on the floor.”

Cho did as she was told.

“Fold your legs and sit like a child.”

Cho did, again.

Daphne cancelled the spell. Cho looked at herself in shock. “Oh, look,” Daphne said, “You are sat like a little girl, should we all call you that now?”

“Wh... how?”

“I cast a compulsion charm on you, a simple little thing that allows a few basic suggestions to work,” Daphne explained. “And yet, you didn’t fight it. And now you’re sat like a little girl. Do I have to explain further?”

“No,” Cho said meekly. “Sorry,” she said to Cedric.

Cedric smiled and helped her up. “I think Viktor was right,” he said lightly. “We’re still growing up.” He hugged her, and leant in, “and it’s not that different to staring at the blacksmith.”

Cho pulled back and gave an apologetic smile, and kissed him very quickly, her eyes giving him a deeper apology.

Daphne walked over to Fleur, who looked at her nervously, before Daphne reached forward and hugged her. “We’re friends,” the younger girl said to the Veela, “so don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah,” Romilda agreed cheerfully.

Hermione and Astoria both added their assurances as well, and Cedric could see a tear appear on Fleur’s cheek.

Daphne stayed next to her, and Fleur looked pleased. “Thank you, all,” she said, “I am improving all the time, but not there yet.”

Harry chuckled. “No one’s perfect Fleur. Well, maybe Daph is.”

“You’re biased,” Daphne replied with a small smile.

“I’ve got competition for the best big brother in the world,” Harry replied, nodding at Krum.

“Oh, Harry,” Daphne called, as she smiled and wiped at her eyes. “I suspect that all that matters is what the sister thinks, and this sister knows she has the best.”

Harry lightly scratched the back of his head. He removed his apron, waved his wand over himself and pulled his t-shirt back on. Cedric made a mental note that he needed to spend a bit more time working out.

“Astoria, we’ll pay in the morning, if that’s okay?” Esmeralda asked.

“Of course, we’re all friends,” Astoria agreed. She frowned, “I’m going to have to do some research into the tax implications,” she murmured to herself. “I’ll start with Mum.”

“I... oh, damn,” Hermione said and stopped. “Focus,” she muttered to herself.

Astoria walked over and hugged her.

“Let’s get to dinner,” Romilda suggested, and they were soon popped away.

And all that Cedric could think, as he ate with his girlfriend by his side was that he had been incredibly lucky that his name had come out of the Goblet, because he would not have had such a good day otherwise.

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Alastor Moody blinked as something caught his eye. He’d popped out of Hogwarts for a walk, and a secret smoke of his pipe. Having run out of tobacco, he’d Apparated to Diagon Alley.

Ahead of him, a rat scurried across the cobblestone pavement. The stupefy spell came out of his wand before he’d made the connection between the rat and a person.

He hurried over and activated one of the seventeen Portkeys he kept on his person at all times. The whole thing had taken less than five seconds, and he was pretty sure no one else had noticed. One of the benefits of his eye was that he was able to see reactions of people who thought he couldn’t see them. And with his reputation, who would care if Mad-Eye Moody stunned a rat – people would think he thought it had looked at him in the wrong way.

As the man on the floor of his safe cottage in Essex stirred, Alastor tied him up, and then took a vial of highly illegal truth serum and dumped three drops down the man’s throat.

“What were you up to, Pettigrew,” he demanded.

“Buying ingredients for potions,” Pettigrew said in his normal weak and wheedling voice.

“Which potions, and for whom?”

“Regeneration potions, strength potions, healing potions, and all for my Lord and his followers!”

“How is he back?”

“It was thanks to me,” Pettigrew said, his eyes alight as he seemed to actually enjoy boasting to someone who was listening – even if he was under the influence of a potion.

“We performed a ritual; I used Potter’s blood, the flesh of His most devoted servant, me, and the bones of his father. My lord repaid me with this!” Pettigrew held up a silver hand. “My lord then re-joined his soul, after having the piece in Potter removed.”

“How many pieces did he have?”

“Seven.”

“Did he get them all?”

Pettigrew drooped. Alastor was shocked that the snivelling wretch wasn’t even trying to fight the potion. “No, there is one missing, Regulus Black stole it, and two of the Horcruxes have been destroyed but every other part is back with my Lord!”

Alastor growled, Horcruxes were truly vile things. “Why do you need the ingredients tonight?”

“Because there is going to be a raid in Birmingham, at the Wizarding community there.”

“When?”

“Tonight, at Midnight.”

“Are there any other raids planned?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Stupefy,” Moody grunted, and looked at the pathetic Death Eater in front of him. He should hand him over to the Aurors. He should do a lot of things, but he’d spent months locked in a trunk because of Death Eaters, and he hated them even more than he had before.

He Renervated Pettigrew, and immediately cast the Imperius Curse on him. It was a disgustingly easy to do, and he felt he’d get more fight from a toddler. He made Pettigrew write out the name of every Death Eater he knew.

When Pettigrew had finished, Moody took a deep breath. “Avada Kedavra.” Pettigrew had shown some disturbing signs of competence, which meant that he was too dangerous to leave alive.

With another problem permanently ended, and advance notification of a raid, Alastor found this his conscience didn’t bother him as much as Dumbledore might have suggested it should have.

He transfigured the body into that of a mouse, chucked it into the garbage can as he left his cottage, and headed back to Hogwarts.

As soon as he arrived, he called for a House-elf. “Need Potter,” he said. “It’s urgent.”

The boy arrived, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, a few minutes later.

“There’s going to be a raid in an hour, in Birmingham.”

Harry paused and took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“We’re going to grab Bones, and a few of your trainees,” Alastor said. “Do you need anything?”

“No.”

Fifty-five minutes later, Alastor, Bones, Shackbolt, Tonks, and ten other Aurors were hidden under multiple charms, waiting.

Moody was keeping a very close eye on the Aurors, to ensure no one did anything stupid. His other eye was focused on the darkness where Potter was waiting. He couldn’t see the boy, even with his magical eye, his armour rendering him effectively invisible.

Time passed incredibly slowly, before he felt and then saw the Death Eaters arrive in a sloppy formation eight minutes late. There were twenty of them, all with their wands raised and their masks gleaming in the moonlight.

“Ready?” The lead Death Eater demanded.

There was a sudden noise, of someone breathing heavily, only far louder. It was a steady breath, and the volume made it incredibly creepy. Potter was still invisible, so that only the noise gave sign that the Death Eaters were not alone. It brought to mind a predator about to hunt its prey.

In time with the breathing, a soft red pulsing glow arose from where he knew Potter was standing.

“W-what’s that, who’s there!” one of the Death Eaters demanded.

There was a clunking sound, as the red lights grew darker in tone, and they started to move. Two gleaming emerald eyes appeared, focused on the Death Eaters.

“Bah,” the leader shouted. “Avada Kedavra!”

Harry took a few steps forward, batting the curse aside, as he unsheathed his massive sword and cut the lead Death Eater in twain.

Alastor blinked both his eyes, to check that he hadn’t missed it. His memory replayed the stroke as the Death Eater’s upper torso flopped and slid to the ground, the blood spurting from his lower torso.

Two of the other Death Eaters collapsed on to the ground, passed out. Alastor’s magical eye made out that another two had just pissed themselves – the heat from the puddles growing by their feet showing up.

“A demon,” one of them whimpered in a feminine voice.

Alastor nodded at Shackbolt, who activated the anti-Portkey and anti-Apparation wards. Another Death Eater raised his wand. “Diffindo!”

Harry didn’t move this time, allowing the curse to strike his chest with a metallic ring. He moved afterward, his sword flashing horizontally, and the Death Eater became headless.

With a scream of terror another attacked, “Get him, all of us, fight or we die!” he yelled.

And Harry started to move, his long blade swinging darkly in the night, rending limbs from bodies and relieving the scum of the burden of living.

Screams and curses rang out, until it was over. Three of the Death Eaters had surrendered, and two were passed out. The other fifteen no longer existed.

Alastor emerged from the cloaking spell. He spotted Tonks vomiting, and most of the others looked queasy.

“Nicely done, lad.”

“Do you need me for anything else?” was the quiet response.

“We can deal with it.”

“Good. I need to get some sleep. Dumbledore's making me take a test tomorrow – today – to make sure I'm keeping up on my own.”

Potter vanished, without a further word, a pop, or even a single sound. All that was left was the whimpering of the Death Eaters who hadn’t moved from their supplicant positions.

“Well?” Moody demanded of the Aurors. “Grab them, take them back to the Ministry, and prepare them for interrogation!” He paused. “And if any single one of them escapes, you will all be held responsible,” he finished with a growl.

The Aurors moved quickly, two of them each grabbing a prisoner. They stunned them, allowing Moody to lower the wards. As they vanished, he was left with just Bones, Tonks and Shackbolt.

“Sweet Merlin on a Bike,” Shackbolt whispered.

“That was brutal,” Tonks agreed. She took a very deep breath. “That’s why Dark Lords never used to be a serious problem, isn’t it?”

“Aye,” Moody grunted. “Tempting to take some photos for the Prophet. Show people what happens to Death Eaters.” He allowed himself a small smile. “Macnair was the leader. You might want to use that, Amelia, show the I.C.W., they should authorise a check on all Ministry personnel.”

“I’m going to retire,” Amelia suddenly announced.

“What, boss?” Tonks demanded.

“My first reaction is that they didn’t deserve that,” she said, waving a hand at the corpses. “And yet they did. I’m part of the problem, and I don’t like the solution.”

Moody tilted his head. “Hold out until Voldemort is dead,” he barked. “You’re honest, unlike the others, and right now, we don’t need you doubting yourself. You get that luxury when the crisis is over. This is what you worked for, so do your damn job, follow the oath you swore, fix the problems, and then retire with a guilt-free conscience.”

Amelia jerked back as if he’d slapped her. She didn’t move for a few seconds, before she screwed her monocle back into place. “Right,” she ordered, “let’s get on with it. I want these bodies identified, and then returned to their families. We’ll let rumours do our work for us. No one mentions that it was Potter that did the work, he doesn’t want or need that sort of pressure. Make sure you take photos of their arms.”

“Yes, boss,” Tonks said sharply. “And boss?”

“Yes?”

“Good to have you back.”

Alastor took the mask off of one, and frowned. “Amelia,” he called, “we’ve lost Azkaban!”

“Shit,” Amelia swore as she hurried over. She paused, and then she gave a little giggle.

“Boss?” Tonks called.

“A rather ignoble end,” Amelia said cheerfully. “Bellatrix Lestrange, feared Death Eater, cut down as an incidental, after pissing herself.”

“I reckon Potter’s mind game got to her,” Moody grunted. “No one’s sane just after escaping Azkaban.”

“I’m going to have to let Augusta know,” Amelia added.

“She’s trustworthy, you can let her know it was Potter,” Moody suggested.

“Agreed.” Amelia pulled out a camera and took a few pictures, Alastor moved Bellatrix’s head next to her body, and felt it made a rather grotesque scene. Maybe he’d get a copy so he could frame it and keep it in his office, or several copies to show what happened to Death Eaters. Bellatrix Lestrange, her head in a pool of her own urine, next to her body, her eyes showing the utter terror she’d died in.

He couldn’t think of a more fitting end for a terrorist who had caused so much pain, agony, and death.

He paused. "House-elf?" he called, feeling a little silly doing so, as he was essentially talking to nothing.

One appeared.

"Can you get a message to one of Harry's friends; let them know that he might need them?"

The House-elf looked around. "Thems Death Eaters?"

Moody nodded.

The House-elf frowned. "Harry will be beings upsets. We gets help, makes him chocolate, makes sures he's okays." The House-elf vanished.

"Next time," Shacklebolt said into the silence, "I will be in my armour, and Potter won't be alone."

"Me too," Tonks agreed.

"Back to work," Amelia grunted.

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 7

“Miss Daphne?”

Daphne woke up and smiled at the elf. The elf looked solemnly at her. “What’s happened?”

“Great and Brave Harry Potter fought Death Eaters. Death Eaters are being in pieces in Birmingham. Elves that always follow Great Harry Potter say that Rolling-Eye called Great Harry Potter to help protect innocent people. Great Harry Potter is being upset.”

Daphne frowned as her thoughts raced. “Harry killed some Death Eaters?” She asked to clarify,

The House-elf nodded.

“Where is he?”

“In shower.”

“Thank you,” Daphne said to the House-elf, as she jumped out of bed, and dashed out of her room, across their little common room, and into Harry’s room. It was empty, but she could hear the shower running.

She didn’t hesitate as she entered the room and joined him in the shower, ignoring the way her clothing immediately plastered itself to her skin.

His helm was next to him as he sat on the tiled floor, but he was still in his full Death Eater killing armour, and his eyes looked tortured as she looked at him.

She knelt on the hard tile and started to say the words to get him out of the armour, when she paused. Maybe what he needed was to know that someone, namely her, loved him as much as she could.

And she was the only one who knew how his armour worked. She reached out and took his gauntleted hand, and reached under to undo the straps. She eased the gauntlet off of his hand, and placed it down.

The water pouring down was hot, and it wasn’t helping the buckles. She moved up his arm, removing the uncooperative armour piece by piece, and then moving to do the other one. He was watching her, his eyes locked to hers, and eyes showing just how upset he was, but that he wasn’t ready to talk about it. So maybe she should talk about something else.

And so she said the first thing that came to mind. “Fleur’s got amazing tits, and I really really want to play with her bum.” She pulled off his left boot as she said it, falling onto her own bum as she over-balanced.

His eyes changed from pain, to incomprehension, and then to disbelief. He looked straight at her for a second, before he chuckled. “Armour off, immediate,” he said, and as it vanished, he reached out and grabbed her, hugging her tightly. He laughed, but almost immediately the laughter became deep, wracking sobs as he clung to her.

She wrapped her arms around her beloved big brother and offered him all the support and love she could. As his sobs subsided, she turned off the water. “Dry us, please,” she said. The same familiar feeling of his magic blowing hot air hit them. She took his hand and led him into his bedroom, where she placed him in the big comfy armchair he had in there. She moved over to his dresser and took one of her hair scrunchies. She spent enough time in his room that she had left a few pieces in, so that she could still be comfortable during some of their late night conversations. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail. The water and drying meant it was a bit of a mess, but that wasn’t important right now.

She quickly checked herself, and was happy. She looked young and innocent. She walked over to Harry and climbed into his lap, helping his arms to go around her as she cuddled into him. “I love it when we can sit like this,” she said softly, “my big brother protecting me, so very strong and firm. And this evening, my big brother did something that is horrible, but he did it to protect me, and I love him for it even more.”

She felt him tense under her, so she continued to talk, keeping her voice soothing and not giving him a chance to respond yet. “He was out there, alone, killing the scum who want to hurt me, so that I can sleep easy. And that’s what makes my big brother the best, not silly little presents, but going out there and doing nasty things so that rather than hide who I am, I can look at a pretty non-human and wonder what it would be like to kiss her.”

“I killed them, Daph,” he whispered, “and it wasn’t like Quirrell when I didn’t know what I was doing, and didn’t really do anything. I went out there with a sword designed to kill and I used it to kill them. I actually cut someone in half.”

“Good,” she said fiercely, making a mental note to ask for that story later. “You stopped them the only way possible, so that they will never do it again!”

“But...”

“No, no buts,” she said, twisting so that she could look into his eyes. “My brother is the most important person in the world to me, even more than Mum and Dad, and just as you would hurt anyone who hurts me, I would do the same for you! Death Eaters are scum, they were raiding to kill people, break up families, and you stopped them. And there are a bunch of families that are alive this evening because of you, somewhere there is a cute little girl cuddling her teddy, dreaming of growing up to be a princess, still having that dream because of you! There is a boy, dreaming of being a Quidditch Player who still has a chance to be better than Krum because of you!

“There’s a dad who is working hard to provide for a family he still has because of you, and a mum who’s just found out that she’s going to bring another life into this world because of you!

“Yes, killing is bad, but when you kill to protect others, it’s not bad, it’s good. It makes you the most amazing person, and that you feel bad because of it, shows you’re still a great and wonderful person inside. You can feel upset about it, but not guilt. You didn’t make them become murderers, you didn’t make them gather to attack that place. All you did was protect the innocent and try and make a world where your little sister can spend her time trying to work out who she is, rather than worrying for her life!”

Harry’s arms tightened around her, and she sank back into his chest. “I love you, little sis,” he said after a few minutes of silence.

“Of course you do,” she said cheekily. “What’s not to love?”

He chuckled, and she smiled in triumph.

“So when did you get so smart?”

“I’m not that smart,” she replied, “but I know my big brother, and that’s what counts.”

“Thanks.”

She snuggled into his chest a bit more. “I meant it,” she added. “I could never tell my parents what I can tell you.”

“That you have a crush on an older Veela?”

Daphne nodded in agreement. “Are you comfy?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then sleep,” she said, moving his arm slightly. She yawned. “I’m staying with you, so I can make sure I guard your dreams.”

“By taking away one of the hottest girls I’ve ever seen?” he asked dryly.

“I called dibs,” Daphne said with a giggle.

“You are right, though.”

“About what?”

“Fleur does have amazing tits.”

She laughed, and felt Harry’s chuckle echo through his chest, and his head went back. Daphne listened to his heart beat and slowly drifted off into sleep.

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Astoria pounced on her sister’s bed only to find it lacking her sister. Which took a lot of fun out of

the pounce. She'd last pounced on her sister's bed when she was five, so as part of her new plan to get to know her sister again, she'd decided a pouncing was long overdue. And it was exactly the sort of thing that Romi would have done – and Romi got on with her entire clan brilliantly.

She pouted, and then set off to see if she was in the other girl's rooms. She wasn't, so Astoria woke up Romilda and Hermione, to help find her errant sibling.

They eventually found her curled up on Harry's lap, in a position that Astoria would quite like to be in herself, only without the overwhelming feeling of sibling bonding.

“Daph, Harry?” Hermione called.

Daphne stretched cutely, and then immediately looked at Harry as he awoke. “You okay?” the blonde girl asked immediately.

“Kinda,” he said softly. “Thanks.”

“You never ever have to thank me for that,” Daphne replied solemnly. “Besides, I bet it was weird that you could see my boobs once my top got wet!”

Harry chuckled. “It never entered my mind.”

Daphne leaned back and gave Harry a long look, before she nodded happily. “Right, I'm going to sort out this mess of hair, you can tell the others what happened, and then we can go to breakfast.”

“Should we be inviting Fleur to join us?”

Daphne punched Harry on the arm and walked out regally, her nose elevated to show that she was above such insinuations.

“Harry?” Hermione asked immediately.

Harry took a deep sigh. “I tried out the armour last night. Moody found out about a Death Eater raid, and I stopped it.”

Astoria suddenly realised why her sister had spent the night with Harry and she pounced on him, and hid her pout as Romilda did the same thing from his other side. She hugged him with all her strength, and smiled as she felt his hand stroke her hair.

“It's okay,” he said. “Daph helped last night.”

“Are you sure?” Hermione asked. “And if you two don't mind, I'd quite like to give my best friend a hug as well.”

Reluctantly, she pulled back and stood from the arm chair, exchanged a happy little look with Romi, and watched as Harry gingerly stood to embrace Hermione.

“Seriously,” he said, “I was very upset last night, but stopping people from killing families is not such a bad thing. I’ll remember what happens when a large sword interacts with a human body for a long time.”

Astoria felt herself wince as her mind put the pictures in place.

“Oi, leave Harry to get changed,” Daphne yelled from her room. “It’s breakfast time.”

“I am pretty hungry,” Harry admitted. “I didn’t manage to keep my food in last night.”

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said as she hugged him again.

“It’s fine, I’ll get through it,” he promised. “Now scoot.”

They all scooted, and gathered in the common room.

“I’ll bet it was awesome to watch,” Romilda said. “Horrrifying, I know, but watching Harry make the world a better place like that?”

Hermione nodded. “I know what you mean, despite the fact they are scum, you still don’t really want to watch someone die, but on the other hand, all that armour and skill, and a knight protecting the innocent?”

Astoria felt herself blush as she imagined the knight wearing her favour, and then coming to her bed chambers after defeating the enemy, and taking his right with her, holding her arms easily above her head with one of his hands, the other roaming her body as he stared intently in...

“If you two could stop fantasising?” Hermione’s droll voice interrupted her increasingly heated fantasy.

Astoria saw a flushed, wide-eyed look on Romilda’s face, and just knew she had a similar expression on hers. An expression that she now knew was far more embarrassed than it had been in the middle of her fantasy,

“We’re pubescent girls, we’re allowed to fantasise,” Romilda replied with a giggle.

“True,” Hermione replied. “I had such a crush on Cedric last year.”

“Really?”

Hermione nodded. “After Lockhart, I made sure not to let anyone know, but he does have a really cute bum.”

Astoria giggled, “So, let’s change the subject! How about that sports team?”

“Yes,” Romilda said, “I’m sure that one of the team caught a ball or kicked an object or threw something, and one team lost while another won.”

“And another hit something with a bat, and half the crowd cheered,” Hermione agreed, as they all laughed.

Daphne joined them, dressed in a white blouse with tan trousers and a matching brown jacket. Her hair was loose around her shoulders.

“You’re looking good,” Astoria told her.

“Thanks, Tori,” Daphne said with a wide smile. For the first time, Astoria had to swallow some jealousy. Growing up, she’d been the clever one, and had kinda looked down on her sister, and even at Hogwarts, when Daphne had been playing the Slytherin, she’d still felt superior, but now, Astoria realised that Daphne had gained the most from Harry; she could be herself without any issues, and she was a pretty amazing girl.

Her introspection was interrupted as Harry arrived, and they were all popped for breakfast. On their little table was a miniature feast. Every single item of food that Harry liked was waiting for them, charms keeping them piping hot.

“Thanks, guys,” Harry said to the empty air. “I really appreciate it.”

The air quivered happily as they sat down.

“Harry, you mind Viktor and ‘Relda joining you?”

Astoria looked up to see the hulking form of Viktor Krum near them.

Harry waved his hand, and the table and benches enlarged. Viktor sat Esmeralda first, and then himself. “Krum noticed there is better food over here,” he said with a grin. “Food and friendship, is good start to day!”

Harry chuckled lightly.

“I can’t ‘elp but notice that there are two champions here,” Fleur announced her presence with a smile. “I too, am a champion,” she added.

“And far be it from me to miss a hint,” Harry said cheerfully. This time, the wave of his hand created one space, next to Daphne. Fleur sat down quickly, but elegantly. Astoria watched her closely, trying to memorise the movements so she could copy the French witch.

Without looking up, Harry waved his hand at the end of the table again. “Come on, Diggory,” he called.

Cedric dashed over to Cho, and then the two joined them. “So,” Cedric said, as he started to load his plate. More food arrived to fill empty spots. “Is everyone looking forward to the game this afternoon?”

Astoria saw Romilda bouncing excitedly. “Yeah,” the gypsy said. “We could be at the forefront of

British Wizarding sport, we have exactly one, unless you count Gobstones...”

“No one counts Gobstones,” Astoria interjected.

“Exactly,” Romilda agreed, “And if it takes off, everyone will know that we were the first to play. Normally, sports evolve and the origins are lost.”

“Except when William Webb Ellis decided to pick up a ball and run with it,” Hermione said dryly, “but I do agree, I’m looking forward to watching it.”

“And, putting my business hat on for a moment.” Astoria reached into her bag and pulled out a seriously cute hat she’d got her mum to buy just for this opportunity. She placed it on her head, at a jaunty angle, and continued, “If it takes off, we can licence the production of bounce boots to a third party, and make a fortune that way, without Harry having to do the boring work!”

She looked at Harry out of the corner of her eye, to check his reaction. He was smiling at her, and there was a new little something in his eye, not just an amused look, but maybe an acknowledgement that the man’s hat looked seriously cute on her.

Romilda was giving her a grudging glare that had a bit of admiration mixed in which made Astoria give herself a point in their friendly little war.

“Zat is a very cute hat,” Fleur declared, as if that was the last word in the fashion.

“Thank you,” Astoria replied and left it on, as she continued to eat.

The doors to the Great Hall opened, and Astoria looked up to see the familiar vulture hat that announced that Dame Longbottom was in attendance.

“Gran?” the younger Longbottom called, half standing. The Dame nodded and gave her grandson a little smile, before she turned and approached their table. Harry stood and gave a small bow of respect.

Damn Longbottom nodded at him. She paused, and then in a clear voice she said, “Mr Potter, your actions have left the Ancient and Noble House of Longbottom in your debt.”

“Thank you, Lady Longbottom,” Harry said, his posture straightening. “I am, however, unaware of how my actions could have led to such a generous declaration.” Astoria felt a burst of pride as Harry showed that he had been paying attention when they had discussed decorum while he was smithing.

Lady Longbottom smiled slightly, and Astoria suddenly got the feeling that Lady Longbottom was playing politics, and announcing her family’s association with Harry.

“Last night, the despicable Bellatrix Lestrange was one of the Death Eaters that you stopped before they could kill innocent people,” she stated firmly. “You left her dead, her head next to her body, lying in a puddle of her own urine, finally understanding the fear and horror that she had

spent her life inflicting on others. The despicable Lestrangle was responsible for the torture of my son, and his wife, and House Longbottom has long wished for appropriate justice to be dispensed.”

Harry winced, and Daphne hopped over the table, and stood next to him, taking his right arm and wrapping it around her. Harry’s arm muscles tensed, as did his jaw. “While I do not believe my actions deserve a reward,” he said through teeth that sounded very slightly gritted, “I would be delighted to acknowledge a formal friendship between our families.”

“Then let it be so,” the Dame said firmly. There was a feeling of magic that quickly vanished.

“Once again, Mr Potter, I thank you for your actions,” she said. “And in future, you must call me Augusta.”

“Harry,” Harry replied with a nod.

“I shall leave you to your breakfast,” the Matriarch announced as she turned, nodded at the Headmaster, and headed out of the school.

“Hello,” Dumbledore said, as he was next to them.

“Indeed, hello,” Nadya agreed.

“What happened, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

“It’s not really a subject for breakfast,” Harry said as he re-took his seat. Daphne stayed with him, causing Hermione to shift up. “You might be better talking to Mad-Eye.”

“Are you alright, though?” the Headmaster asked. Any follow-up was interrupted as the doors to the Great Hall opened and thirty Aurors, half wearing the garb of the I.C.W. Auror division, with Mad-Eye leading them, entered. As one, they all pulled their wands and focused them on Karkaroff.

“Igor Karkaroff, you are under arrest for being a member of a known terrorist group. You will be taken into custody, and interrogated as to your knowledge of activities relating to the last few weeks.”

“What... but.... The tournament, I have to judge or I’ll lose my magic.”

Professor Moody smiled a terrifying smile. “If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear; you will be back in plenty of time.”

“But I have diplomatic immunity,” Karkaroff tried again.

“It has been revoked,” Professor Moody replied. There was now a disturbingly happy smile on his face. “This warrant is signed by the chief judge of the I.C.W.!”

Karkaroff looked around, and went for his wand. Thirty stunners hit him before he got near to

drawing it, and seconds later he was floated out of the Great Hall.

“Albus,” Professor Moody said with a nod.

“I think I’d like a chat, Alastor.”

The Ex-Auror nodded.

“Especially as to why Lady Longbottom was here earlier.”

“What?” Professor Moody demanded. “Bloody politics,” he grunted. “Sorry lad,” looking at Harry, “I thought she could be trusted to keep her bloody gob shut. I did want to keep you out of it.”

Harry shrugged.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, Daph helped.”

“Good lass.” Professor Moody tipped an imaginary hat at Daphne, who nodded back. “Well, shall we then, Albus?”

The two of them headed out, following the Aurors. Alastor paused at the door. “Potter, come join us when you’re done. I’ve got some other information that will be of interest.”

Harry nodded, and settled back down.

“Harry killed Death Eaters last night?” Krum asked.

Harry nodded.

“Good riddance. Now eat, food getting cold.”

And like that, no one else in the Great Hall seemed able to ask questions, and they all dug into the fantastic food the House-elves had prepared.

---

Daphne stood, and took a deep breath. She followed the elegant French witch out of the Great Hall, and then called out to her.

At the start of the year she’d never have had courage to do what she was going to do; she couldn’t even admit to herself that she liked girls. But back then she didn’t have a big brother to protect her. And even if things went wrong, Harry would console her and make her feel better – so the least she could do was be brave to get what she wanted.

“Fleur?”

The blonde turned, and gave her a warm smile that did funny things to her heart.

“Can we talk?” she asked.

“Of course. I was just about to walk around the lake, would you care to accompany me?”

“That would be great,” Daphne agreed. Together they exited the Great Hall and walked in silence for a while. Daphne liked the silence, it was comfortable. But it was up to her to push this forward, and so she would. “Can I ask a really personal question?”

Fleur turned her head, and scrutinized her as they kept walking. “I think you can,” she decided.

Daphne couldn't think of a subtle way of asking, so she ended up blurting, “Are you gay?”

Fleur's laughter rang out, a peal of laughter that reminded Daphne of church bells in the distance, summoning people home where they'd be safe. Daphne pouted at her, when she got over the effect of the laughter on her.

“Such bluntness I should expect from Harry's sister.” The Veela paused her walk, and looked at her. “Sexuality,” she continued, “is limited as a human. I am not human; I will fall in love with the best person, regardless of the package containing it.”

Daphne frowned as she listened hard, and then allowed it to sink in. “So there's a chance for me?” she asked immediately.

Fleur laughed again. “Such directness,” she marvelled.

Daphne nodded in agreement.

“You are fourteen, no?”

“Nearly fifteen,” Daphne agreed.

“And you are a pretty girl, but at the moment you may be too young.”

Daphne nodded and frowned. She started to walk again, as she tried to work out what her brother would do in this situation. “So, I have until you leave in June for me to get close to you, to persuade you to wait for me?” she asked.

Fleur didn't laugh this time. Instead, she stopped, and turned to face Daphne. Her light blue eyes seemed to be examining Daphne's soul. Daphne met her eyes happily; she had nothing to hide from someone she really liked.

“Why me?” Fleur asked.

“Because you've got great tits and I really, really want to play with your bum,” Daphne replied immediately. She paused, and realised that sounded shallow, “And because you love your sister,

despite her being a brat, because you're the school champion, which means that you're smart and powerful on top of being beautiful, and because when I'm near you my tummy does funny things and I keep thinking that I'd really, really, really like to kiss you."

"I do not know whether to laugh or not," Fleur replied softly, "because I have never had anyone say anything like that to me. Even the physical parts are normally lost in euphemisms, and definitely not the rest."

Daphne smiled. "But then, you've never met anyone like me before," she replied happily. How many people had Harry Potter as their big brother? One. Her. That made her unique.

"Zat may well be true," Fleur agreed. "I would not be averse to making closer friends with you," she continued after a few seconds of thought that seemed to last for several minutes.

"But," Daphne said, "I need something first."

"Oh?"

Daphne moved in and kissed the part-Veela. She felt her heart move, and she pulled back and nodded.

"Oh?" Fleur asked again.

"I had to make sure what I was feeling was worth the struggle it will take to get with you." She paused. "It is," she added, feeling herself blush a little.

"Hmm," Fleur said, and started to walk again. After a few minutes of silence, she tilted her head. She started to talk in a soft drawl, that seemed to emphasise her accent in a way that made Daphne want to curl up with her and listen to her speak all night. "In my experience, the Pure-Bloods in British society are rather 'idebound against alternate sexualities, in fact, zey are very anti-them."

Daphne nodded in agreement.

"So you are not worried?"

"Nope," Daphne said cheerfully. "I told my brother that I thought I might be gay ages ago, and all he told me was to take it easy and to find out who I am, and not to make mistakes. If people attack me, he will defend me and no one will ever dare attack me again, and he will talk to my parents if, and that's a big if, they have a problem, so the only thing I had to be scared of was you saying a straight no."

"And if I 'ad?" Fleur drawled.

Daphne had to hide her shudder of pleasure. "I would have gone crying to Harry, and we'd have eaten lots of ice cream and he'd have made me feel better, and I'd have waited until someone else makes me feel like you do, no matter how long it took."

Fleur nodded. "I 'ave not 'ad someone be so direct to me. Usually, I am asked out sideways, and I have to guess true intentions."

"My intentions, I think, are to get you to stage where I can play with your bum, kiss you lots, and spend lots and lots of time with you."

Fleur laughed softly under her breath, "Exactly, 'onesty. It is refreshing."

Daphne bounced cheerfully. She reached out and took Fleur's hand. "Let's continue our walk, so I can start persuading you."

"Let us do that," Fleur agreed with a chuckle.

---

"I'm going to send Mum and Dad an owl," Astoria announced, and trotted off.

"See you later," Hermione called, and headed out of the great hall.

Romilda walked with Hermione, "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"I don't have to answer, so sure?"

"You don't seem jealous of Daph's relationship with Harry?"

"That's more of a statement with an implied question," Hermione replied.

Romilda paused. "Why are you not jealous of the closeness that Daph and Harry have?"

Hermione nodded. "Much better. Because if Harry was like that with me it would drive me completely insane. I'm pretty convinced that Daph thinks about Harry's opinion before she goes to the bathroom."

Romilda giggled.

"From what I've talked to Tori, Daphne has always wanted someone she can utterly rely on, someone who is the same age as her, so understands things, but is mature enough to give her the advice she craves, and strong enough to protect her.

"Now, don't get me wrong, I like that as well with Harry, but in much, much, smaller doses. So I have my friendship with Harry, one that means the world to me, and to him, I hope, but I am still capable of being myself."

Romilda nodded slowly.

"I'd've gone to Harry last night, but it would have been different. I suspect we would have ended up kissing. We're full of hormones, and that sort of thing would have been an obvious start – we'd have regretted it later, or we might not have, I don't know. I just know that we'd never have that

level of purity that he has with Daph, and again, I'm glad for it." Hermione smiled lightly, "What you want me to tell you is what Harry needs. The problem is, I'm not sure I know. What I do know is that I need something different to him, and he needs something different to me."

"What, though?"

"I have absolutely no idea, and I'm in no hurry to find out."

"That's a weird answer."

"We're in a weird situation," Hermione agreed, and went silent.

Romilda went silent as well. Suddenly, she reached out and hugged Hermione from the side.

"Romilda?"

"I've decided I'm adopting you as a surrogate big sister," she announced. "That's how our group seems to work. Tori has Daph, who won't give her advice about her crush on Harry, and I have you who won't do the same, and I miss having my other sisters around. So you're volunteered."

"Oh," Hermione said, and then chuckled. "I always wanted lifelong friends."

"You have me, Tori, and Daph, and you know you always will have Harry." Romilda paused. "So, want to know why my hair always looks this good, despite it having natural curls the size of a mountain?"

"Yes!"

Romilda grabbed Hermione hand, and dragged her off. Hermione followed her eagerly.

---

"The Horcruxes," Moody said, as Harry took a seat, "Voldemort has them back with him, except the ones that were destroyed, and one other, that was stolen by Regulus Black."

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Sirius's younger brother, a Death Eater."

"One who turned against Voldemort, by the sounds of it," Harry pointed out.

"Indeed," Albus said. "So there is one piece of soul out there?"

"If we can get it, we can kill Voldemort and be done with the whole thing!" Harry said. "No discrediting this time."

"Soul magic?" Alastor asked.

“Yeah.”

“Good, I’ve got a list of every Death Eater, handed it to the I.C.W. this morning, we did a load of raids. We got most of ‘em, and quite a few are still in component parts from your night time activities.”

Harry nodded and didn’t let himself dwell on what had happened.

“Unfortunately, we don’t know where Voldemort is. His Dark Mark actively stops them telling.”

“It would be easier if the enemy wasn’t competent,” Harry said.

“Indeed.”

“So, Fawkes, would you mind seeing if Sirius is available?”

The phoenix nodded and flamed away. A few seconds later, he arrived back with a Sirius who was dressed only in a speedo.

“Sweet Merlin,” Harry said, hiding his eyes,

“You’re just jealous,” Sirius replied. “Morning, all.”

“Allow me,” Albus said, and when Harry looked again, Sirius was dressed.

“Thanks,” Harry said dryly.

“My pleasure, indeed,” Albus replied in an equally dry tone.

“I’m going to have to wash my eye in bleach now,” Moody muttered. “One of the benefits of it is that I can literally do that.”

“So,” Harry said, “any idea where your brother would hide a piece of Voldemort’s soul?”

“I’m sorry,” Sirius said, “all I heard was crazy.”

“It seems,” Albus said, “that your brother regretted joining the Dark Lord, and as such, he stole an object from him, that contained part of his soul.”

“Ahh,” Sirius said slowly. “Erm, Kreacher?”

A filthy elf appeared. He glowered at Sirius, and then at Harry, “Filthy traitorous son calls? In presence of disgusting boy who makes elfe...”

Whatever Kreacher was going to say was ended, as he was on the floor, unconscious, and Dobby stood above him, wielding a baseball bat. Dobby paused, and then hit the elf on the floor again.

“We do need him to be able to answer a question,” Harry said to Dobby.

Dobby kicked the House-elf. "He dares insult human who frees all House-elves, Dobby not standing for it!" The elf clapped his hands, and fifteen old House-elves appeared. They looked at Kreacher in disgust. "Hims having secret."

"Wes being getting secret," the other House-elves intoned. Kreacher floated into the air, and the other House-elves all touched the unconscious elf.

"Harry ask question?" Dobby asked.

"Does Kreacher have any idea of a trinket that his master Regulus had that might contain a piece of the Dark Lord's soul?"

Kreacher started to glow, and a few seconds later, the other House-elves glowed as well.

"Is locket, belong to Slytherin," the House-elves said in unison. They pulled back, and Kreacher dropped to the ground.

"Kreacher is being traitor. All other House-elves listen to council, some give up loved families for all future of House-elves, Kreacher didn't, and worse, Kreacher live in filth!" Dobby exclaimed.

The other House-elves all nodded silently. Once more they reached out, and once more Kreacher started to glow, only this time, when they stopped, he was clearly dead.

"Justice is being done," Dobby said sadly, and the other House-elves vanished with the corpse. Dobby popped away, and was back a second later with a locket.

"Thank you, Dobby."

Dobby beamed and popped away.

"Well, I feel useless," Sirius announced cheerfully.

"Oh, we often feel that way," Albus agreed.

Harry looked at the locket and frowned. "I think we need Nadya."

The older woman was popped in a few seconds later.

"You're on top form today, Dobby," Harry praised the empty air. It quivered happily, and then went still. Harry passed her the locket. "It's a Horcrux, it just feels different."

Nadya looked at Moody and Sirius, and then shrugged, and looked at the locket. "Clever little bastard," she eventually said.

"What?" Mad-eye demanded.

"He's cast it away."

“Huh?” Sirius asked.

“It contains a piece of Voldemort’s soul, but it is no longer connected to him. Voldemort cut it out of himself.”

“So we should destroy it anyway, but there’s not much else we can do with it?” Harry asked, disappointedly.

“Pretty much,” Nadya agreed. “A killing curse could do it.”

“Ooo, ooo, me, me,” Alastor called, waving his hand eagerly.

“Professor Moody, would you like to kill a part of Voldemort?” Harry asked.

“More than anything!”

Harry moved over and offered his shoulder to Fawkes. Fawkes climbed up his arm, and Harry dangled the locket off the side of the perch.

“Avada Kedavra,” Mad-Eye called. The locket flashed as the curse hit it, and a grey mist appeared and then vanished. “Oh, that felt good,” he said with a happy sigh.

Harry banished the remains into a bucket, and offered Fawkes his perch back. The phoenix gave the impression that he was quite comfortable where he was, and as such, wasn’t going to move.

“So, to summarise,” Professor Dumbledore said, “all the pieces of Voldemort’s soul are now either destroyed or have been reunited with Voldemort. And with the I.C.W. raids this morning, and Harry’s actions in killing all the other Death Eaters last night, we have an enemy who is now killable, but in hiding, and when he comes out, Harry can fulfil the prophecy...”

“And spend the rest of his school life perfecting his chosen career, looking after his sister, spending time with all his friends, and having a great summer with his godfather and his crazy step-grandfather, gallivanting around Europe?”

“As good as that sounds,” Sirius interrupted, “does someone want to explain what happened last night, and just how you have a sister!?”

“Oh,” Harry said dryly. “That. Daphne is amazing.” He ducked the hex from Sirius and grinned.

“Ooo,” Alastor said, waving his hand eagerly again. “Let me tell it!”

“Does it end with Harry following Pure-blood traditions?” Sirius asked with a large smirk. “I’ve seen Daphne!”

Harry frowned and tried to work out why that comment hurt so much.

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Harry looked at his watch; he had just an hour or so before the game, so he popped away, and knocked at a door.

The door swung open. "Harry!" Derek exclaimed, sounding delighted to see him. "Come in, come, Cress and I were just about to grab a sandwich; I've got some fantastic smoked salmon."

Harry smiled and exhaled. "Please," he agreed. He followed Derek through to the living room; Cressida was sat, reading from a large book on her lap.

"Harry," she said with a warm smile. "Sit, anything you want to talk about can wait until after we've tried this salmon of Derek's."

Harry sat obediently, kicking his shoes off and curling up. It was moments later that Derek walked in three plates. On each, was a baguette that had been cut in thirds, and filled with salmon, some salad and a bit of dressing.

And the salmon was beautiful, lightly smoked with tea, with a fantastic texture. Harry didn't say anything, he just drank the atmosphere of the room and his hosts, and felt drunk in the atmosphere.

After they had had all finished, Derek sent the plates floating back to the kitchen. "So, want to tell us why you've got a frown on that handsome face?"

"You've heard about last night?"

"Yes," Cressida said, "And that you were smart enough to get a warrant first. Mind you, if anyone had suggested anything other than honouring you this morning in the session, I think Augusta would have beaten them to death with her hat."

Harry laughed. "Daph was amazing last night, she was really there for me, and helped me out."

Both parents smiled proudly.

"So, it's not that. It's, well, Sirius."

"Go on," Derek encouraged.

Harry sighed. "It's just, well, I don't know," he said, feeling frustrated. "It's..." He took a deep breath. "I don't know," he finished weakly.

"Okay," Cress said softly. "It's okay. Take a deep breath, relax, we're not going to judge."

"Unless you call me ugly, then I'll judge you to have zero taste," Derek added lightly.

Harry chuckled. "It's just, Sirius was here earlier, and you know what I realised?"

"No?" Derek said softly.

“That I hardly know him, at all. I mean, I’ve heard stories, and interacted with him a few times, but that’s it.” He ran his hands through his hair. “And he was talking about his main house, and how we could do it up, and it didn’t feel like home, it didn’t sound like home.” He looked down. “Here feels like home, Christmas, and before, you know, first I just fell asleep, I never do that, ever! And then, Christmas day, it was the best day of my life.” He felt a tear form in the corner of his eye, and he brushed at it, irritated that it existed. “And you know, despite the fact that I’ve not spent that much time here, it’s here that I feel like I can relax.”

Now he’d started, he couldn’t stop. “I like the Weasleys, really, I do, but it was always tense, and it’s the same with Sirius, I get the feeling half the time that my reactions to events confuse him, like he’s expecting me to do something else, or be someone else, and I’m not.

“And I know he’s incredible, I know he broke out of Azkaban, and he’s done so much, but I was so desperate for family, any family, that I grabbed on to the first thing I found, but now, later, I’m comparing it to a guy who uses his narcissism to break up tense moments and make everyone feel better, and a woman who is smart, professional, and warm and caring and intelligent, and beautiful, and how they’ve always treated me as me, not as Harry Potter, not as James Potter’s son, not as anything other than the person they’ve met and interacted with personally.

“I’ve spent so much time being me this year, and it’s been the best year of my life, and I don’t know if I can go back to being someone else, even for Sirius.”

Harry found himself being lifted from the chair, and hugged by Derek. For the second time that day, he cried on the shoulder of a member of the Greengrass family.

When he had finished, Derek waved his wand and cast a muttered spell.

“Handsome again?” Harry asked with a small smile.

“But of course, tears age me terribly,” Derek replied with a matching smile.

“Last night was bad, wasn’t it,” Cressida said gently.

“When I died,” Harry whispered, as he turned to her and knelt next to her chair. “I met mum. And she was wonderful, amazing, so pretty and clever and she loved me. And I really, really miss her right now, and there was nowhere else I could go.”

Cressida slipped off of her chair, and hugged him tightly.

The hug was different to the ones he had got from his mum, but in a way, it was the same, so he relaxed, and just stayed with her until he felt like he was back under control.

“Do you want advice?” Cressida asked softly.

He looked up at her. “Please,” he whispered.

“The very first thing you have to know and understand is that we love you. We look at Daphne and

Astoria, and see the joy and happiness in their eyes, that is entirely due to you. Astoria and Daphne have the best relationship we've seen between them, thanks to you, and Derek and I, well, you've let us see Harry, and we're honoured to have met him."

"Damn right," Derek added gently.

"So no matter what time of the day, where we are, there is always a place for you here. There is a bedroom upstairs with your name on it."

"And a place next to me in the gym, and in the kitchen," Derek continued.

Harry took a deep breath, and nodded.

"That said, I do think you should try with Sirius, but only if you are willing to try as Harry."

He tilted his head and looked quizzically at the older woman.

"If something is making you uncomfortable, tell Sirius, be honest. We don't doubt that he loves you, but if you don't tell him about problems, how can he know?"

Harry nodded softly.

"He is your godfather, a great friend of your parents, but none of that matters if you can't be yourself. So try it, help change his place into a somewhere you can call home, and if it doesn't work, you are welcome here."

"And remember," Derek added, "we are just a Pop away. If you need a break or want to see Daphne or Astoria or Cressida or of course my exquisite self."

Harry nodded again. "So I should try, work with him, and see what happens?"

"I think so."

"Of course, that's why Cress is the best person to talk to. I'm much more selfish," Derek announced. "I'd encourage you to stay here, and increase the good looking in this house by another hundred percent."

Harry laughed as Derek winked at him. He hugged Cress again, before he stood and re-took his seat. He sat on the edge. "I feel a lot better," he admitted, and he did. He hadn't even consciously realised that he wasn't looking forward to the summer – once the original euphoria of having family had worn off.

"Excellent. Now, I might happen to have some ice cream and some home-made raspberry sauce?" Derek suggested.

"Sounds wonderful," Harry said.

Derek walked out, and the room was silent. And Harry closed his eyes and drank it in some more.

“You’re an official friend of the family, and Daphne’s completely adored big brother,” Cressida said after a few moments. “So don’t worry about it.”

“I won’t,” Harry agreed. “It’s much easier to jump with a safety net.” He opened his eyes as he heard Derek walk back in, and took the proffered bowl. “Tori made our first sale yesterday.”

“Oh?” Derek asked.

“Nine custom knives, at seventy five galleons each. Took me a couple of hours to make them for the clients.”

“Six hundred and seventy five galleons for an afternoon’s work?” Cressida demanded.

Harry nodded. “Vik told me it wasn’t just that, though, it was all the work and materials that went in to being able to make the knives that fast.” Balancing the bowl in one hand, he took out his own knife, and held it out.

Cressida took a spoonful of ice cream, and then took the knife, examining it carefully. “There are some runes on here?”

“Stay sharp, deny stain, that sort of thing, about as many as we could fit on each part,” he confirmed. The ice cream was fantastic, but the raspberry sauce was better, it made the ice cream into a sauce delivery substance.

Cressida took another bite, and then hefted the blade, before she balanced it on one finger. “I knew you were good, but this is amazing,” she marvelled.

Harry blinked as he looked at Cressida. “I’ve just realised who taught Daph and Tori how to use knives.”

Cressida chuckled. “My father taught me many years ago. He was terrified of some pretty boy sweeping me off my feet.”

“Which I did,” Derek said with a happy grin, as he reached over and took it, before he shook his head and smiled. “I’m suddenly far less nervous about our daughters’ chosen career path,” he chuckled.

“Me, too,” Harry agreed. He paused, and hoped he wasn’t about to give serious offence. “Would you be insulted if I said that was an awful painting?” he asked, pointing above the fireplace.

“No,” Derek laughed. “It was painted by one of my ancestors who thought he was an accomplished artist. It’s been there all my life.”

Harry nodded. “Daph said the same. Excuse me for a moment, please.” He placed his empty bowl down and quickly popped away, returning with a large, square item, covered in a red velvet

curtain. “So, Daph and I were talking, and I wanted to do something that wasn’t a weapon, so we came up with this.”

He placed the item in front of the fireplace and removed the curtain, and then looked for their reaction. Stunned stupefaction seemed to be the immediate one, and he found he quite liked that.

Daphne had designed an updated version of the Greengrass coat of arms, and he’d made it out of a combination of different metals, to give it some real depth. The shield part was burnished gold in the upper left and lower right quadrants, with a deep red in the opposing quadrants. Over the quadrants a lion, with all four paws lowered, and a falcon faced each other.

Underneath, the legend was burnished steel, with the Greengrass family motto engraved in calligraphy.

The crest stood on an intricate iron framework, wrought to look like a rose bush.

“Oh, Harry,” Cressida whispered.

Harry looked at Derek, who was smiling, even as tears poured down his face. “I can feel my family, stretching back eons, and every one of them is amazed and awed,” he said unsteadily, and he moved closer and ran his fingers over the front, examining it closely. He turned and looked at Harry, before he reached up and unhinged the painting, and carelessly plonked it behind Cress’ chair. He levitated the crest into place, and hung it on the same hook the picture had hung on. He used his wand and cast a sticking charm to help with the weight, before he stepped back.

“I have a feeling, Harry,” he said softly, “that you are going to end up very very rich.”

Harry blinked.

“Because I’m looking at this, and trying to put a price on it. And I can’t. I’d happily pay thousands of galleons for this. More. This is my entire family’s history summed up in a beautiful work of art that just brings it all to life!”

“We’ve got a dinner party next week,” Cressida said, “and when we show this off to our friends, you are going to be inundated with commissions.”

“Yes,” Derek agreed, before he turned and hugged Harry. “This gift is utterly priceless.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Don’t forget that Daph designed it.”

“Oh, we haven’t,” Derek agreed. “But a design is one thing. This? Making this is another thing.”

Harry’s watch beeped, and he sighed. Then he perked up, “Come and watch the new game?” he half asked, half pleaded.

“Of course,” Derek said, “we were planning on that anyway.”

“I’ll just put some comfortable shoes on,” Cressida said, and moved out.

“Seriously, Harry, I really can’t tell you what this means to me. It honours my family in a way that will last for a thousand years. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry said, as he put his own shoes back on. Derek grabbed some boots from the corner, and they were soon ready. Harry popped them straight to the new pitch.

Derek looked around, before he dashed forward and hugged Daphne, who was in a group of their friends near where they had appeared. “It is amazing,” he told her.

“You like it then?” she asked nervously.

Derek nodded eagerly.

“What?” Astoria asked, as Derek quickly hugged her as well.

“We didn’t show anyone else,” Harry said. “It was a surprise for you.”

“A surprise like no other,” Cressida said, as she hugged her daughters.

“What is it?” Astoria asked again.

“Dobby, can you and some House-elves pop Tori, Romi, and Hermione to the living room of Greengrass mansion?”

The House-elves popped away, and Harry moved over to Daphne. “You look happy.”

She nodded eagerly, and gave him a hug. “I’ve got some good news,” she whispered up at him.

He kissed her forehead, and grinned as Viktor, Esmeralda, Cedric, Cho and Fleur walked over. The three champions were all holding their bounce boots in one hand.

The girls were popped back, and Astoria launched herself, hugging him and Daphne incredibly tightly. “It’s incredible amazing brilliant,” she gushed, as fast as she could, “it almost looks alive.”

“Krum is interested, what looks good?”

“Daph and I made a present for Derek and Cress.”

“Father was right, Derek is good looking man. Scary so.”

“Thank you,” Derek replied with a grin.

“And with parents like that, it’s no wonder Daphne is so pretty,” Fleur murmured with a sideways look at Daphne.

“Hi, Mrs Greengrass, Derek,” Cedric said, offering his hand. They both shook it.

“Krum’s question was not answered,” Viktor said, “And while Krum’s wallet is protesting, as Krum has suspicions it might be emptied more, Krum still wants to know.”

“I’m sure your parents would love one, like we love ours,” Cressida said to the Bulgarian.

“Ooo, business hat time,” Astoria said, and once more put her incredibly cute hat on. “Can Krum, Esmeralda and I please be popped back home?”

“And I have a suspicion that I couldn’t afford it,” Cedric said with a grin, “whatever it is.”

“I am curious though,” Cho admitted.

“Me, too,” Fleur agreed.

“Do I get employee discount?” Romilda asked with a cheeky grin. “Because a smaller version on the caravan would drive the rest of the clan insane with jealousy.”

“Like the small one I’ve done for Nadya, for all her help this year?”

Romilda squealed and crushed him in a hug,

“Now I’m very curious,” Fleur pouted.

“Can Fleur and I be popped?” Daphne asked, and they vanished, as Vik, Esmeralda and Astoria arrived back.

“Krum will talk to manager,” he announced, “transfer Krum’s wages direct to Harry, cut out middle man.”

Harry laughed.

“Seriously, though, we both want to commission one for our families. I’ll need to get approval, for this sort of money, but I can guarantee my mother will pay.” Esmeralda wrapped an arm around Viktor.

“Krum will talk to Daph,” Viktor mused. “Krum has ideas for combined crest for new family. Viktor has money, Harry has talent, is good match.”

Harry opened his mouth, but shut it again as Astoria elbowed him. He nodded at her, acknowledging her unsaid point.

Fleur and Daphne arrived back.

“Esmeralda, do you think you could do me a list of families that might like that?” Romilda asked. “I’ve got a list of the English ones, but nothing for abroad.”

“Da,” Esmeralda said. “As long as my order is at the top of the list.”

“Me, too,” Fleur agreed. “Harry, did you know that House-elves can’t pop internationally?”

Harry blinked. “Really?”

Dobby popped in, “House-elves are speaking elvish, but power is still required, Harry Potter sir remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, as he realised that he was personally powering every House-elf in the country, and still had plenty to spare.

Dobby grinned and popped out again.

“So, can you pop me ‘ome later, so I can grab my parents and show them that masterpiece? I want it set on the entrance arch to our ‘ome?” Fleur said, her accent more noticeable than it had been recently. Harry noticed Daphne give a small shiver and smiled to himself.

“Sure,” Harry agreed. For the first time, he really looked around. They were in an elliptical field, and, to his surprise, there were bleachers along each side, filled with students.

“Why are they here?” he asked.

“Do you expect Harry Potter and Viktor Krum to be involved in a new sport and people not be interested?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged.

“Press weasels are over there,” Krum added.

Harry turned, to see what looked a like a genuine press box. “Dobby?”

The House-elf popped in immediately.

“Did you and the other House-elves build a complete stadium, complete with a press box, for a game that you guys have invented, to watch me and the others make fools of ourselves?”

“Dobby has no idea what Harry is talking about,” the elf replied with an excited bounce. “Dobby was only hearing crazy.”

Harry gave the elf a foul look, for it to have absolutely no affect. “You guys are disturbingly competent,” he added. “And paying far too much attention to Sirius.”

Dobby nodded in agreement. “Give House-elves trust and freedom, House-elves do anything.” Dobby paused, and then looked at Harry nervously. “House-elves are enjoying this sport, and House-elves are wondering, House-elves can be bidding for contract to produce bounce boots?”

“Excuse me,” Astoria interrupted. “Why don’t we talk about that later, Dobby? I’m sure that Harry has no objections, so we can discuss all the details.”

Another House-elf appeared. This one was hunched over, his weight supported by a cane. He had a long white beard that almost touched the ground. “I is old elf McFooie,” he announced. “I is doing negotiating, old elf McFooie has suspicion Dobby being negotiation for socks. And we likes socks, but we’s needing money as well.”

Astoria giggled. “I’m delighted to meet you, old elf,” she said solemnly. “Shall we meet tomorrow evening after class?”

The elf nodded cheerfully and popped away. Dobby clicked his fingers, and his clothing morphed into a yellow and black referee’s jersey. “Rights,” Dobby said, “all non-players to be leaving pitch!”

Daphne gave Harry a hug for luck, shot a little regretful look at Fleur, before trotting off with her parents, leaving him, Romilda and Astoria, facing Cedric, Fleur and Viktor.

“First, is uniform.” He raised his hands, and two large cubicles with huge doors appeared out of the ground. “Is boys and girls in there.”

Harry and the two girls entered, and then separated. In a dressing room, Harry found his own bounce boots, and his uniform. With a shrug, he stripped and pulled on the undersuit, then the shorts and t-shirt, in a deep red, and then the soft body armour. As he donned it, he was starting to doubt the wisdom of letting House-elves come up with a sport. Finally, he put his boots on, and grinned as he realised the doors were high enough to let him out without ducking.

He walked out, to see that Romilda and Astoria had tied their long hair back, and were wearing very similar clothes to him.

“I can’t decide if I should be nervous or excited,” Romilda exclaimed. “Excitement is winning,” she added.

He grinned at her, appreciating the enthusiasm she was showing.

“Are we ready to kick some arse?” she added.

“Yes!” Astoria said. “Even if they do have a height advantage, and I’m actually quite small.”

“Makes you harder to hit,” Romilda pointed out, “might give us an advantage.”

“Ooo, true. Right, let’s go!”

They bounced out of the locker rooms, and heard the first cheer from the crowd. The other team were dressed the same, but in blue, that happened to match the colour he’d made Fleur’s boots in.

Dobby snapped his fingers, and the changing rooms sunk into the ground. “Game is being simple,”

he said, "Take ball, throw into goal." At each end of the stadium, a single hockey-sized goal appeared. After a few seconds, it floated up so that it was twenty feet up in the air, and then down again. Both goals kept a steady alternate rhythm.

There was some more noise from the crowd as they started to get really interested, and probably recognised that the difficulty had increased with moving targets.

"Tackling is being allowed," Dobby continued, "fights is not! Punishment is lose points. No tackle without ball, tackle after bounce okay, even if player passed ball. Ball passing allowed, but," he added with a grin, "pass must bounce! Scoring is one point per score. Is simples, yes?"

Harry nodded, it did sound simple, and he could see the others agreeing.

"Is sounds easy, too?" Dobby asked.

They all nodded.

Dobby cackled. "House-elves, create pitch!"

Twenty House-elves appeared and cast spells on the pristine grass. Transparent shapes with a green tinge emerged, of practically every type. The entire pitch was enclosed within one piece, with balconies and angles jutting inwards.

All over the ground, and up to twenty feet in the air, platforms of different shapes were locked in place. The pitch was separated into two halves, and was completely symmetrical in both halves.

In four symmetrical places the platforms turned red. They were about twenty metres from each goal, and angled away from them.

"Be scorings from red zones, get five points," Dobby called. "Now, readys to being plays?"

"Merlin," Astoria whispered. "The angles are going to make controlling things difficult, and bounce passes?"

"This looks challenging," Romilda agreed, and then she grinned, "but so much fun!"

Harry nodded in agreement. He looked over, to see a light in Viktor's eyes. He looked at Cedric, to see him grinning, although he had a look of trepidation in them. Fleur, who had tied her hair back as well, had a small smile on her face.

Dobby held up a Quaffle-shaped ball. "After score, conceding team gets ball. Go!" He threw the ball directly down, causing it to bounce.

Harry bounced to a side, onto an angled platform, and dived off. The angle launched him toward the ball, and he caught it, somersaulting. Looking up, he prepared to throw at the goal, when he was hit by the weight of a professional Quidditch player. The impact didn't actually hurt, and he dropped the ball as they both fell down and landed. The surface wasn't nearly as hard as it looked.

“You okay?” he asked Viktor.

Viktor stood up and lifted him up. “Vik not hurt, Harry not score, is good start.”

Harry laughed, and bounced off, looking for the ball. It was in Astoria’s hands as she bounced to the side and up. She looked around as Cedric closed her down. He launched himself at the smaller girl, but she tucked into a ball, and while he knocked her off course, she didn’t drop the ball. She looked around, and threw the ball at a platform. It bounced off, heading kinda toward Romilda.

The gypsy ran up the side of the outer wall, and caught it, before she bounced toward Fleur, who was bouncing in front of her. In the air, Romilda rotated so that as she crashed into Fleur, she was able to get a shot off that flew straight into the net.

Harry cheered, as he bounced over and hugged her, Astoria joining them seconds later. They broke, and retreated, as Viktor and Cedric used their distraction to equalise.

“Tori, go high, Romi and I will defend and get you the ball, then take off forward,” Harry said, as Romilda retrieved the ball from the net and passed it to him.

Both girls nodded, and Astoria ran up the side of the pitch, before perching on a platform.

At the other end, the opposing team were shouting orders at each other. Harry slammed the ball of a wall to Romilda, only for Cedric to jump and knock the ball away to Viktor.

Viktor bounced forward, keeping along the ground, using the shapes to make his bounces unpredictable.

He jumped forward, and then bounced the ball directly behind him, where Fleur had come down from a platform and used an angle to launch herself forward at high speed. Romilda jumped up to tackle but Fleur lobbed the ball over Romilda’s head toward the goal.

It was following the downward slide of the moving goal perfectly, when Astoria flashed down, headfirst, and blocked the ball with her body, before twisting to land, her boots taking the impact just before she slammed down.

There was a pause, before a roar came from the crowd.

“Great move, Tori,” Romilda called.

Astoria bounced the ball to her, “You two attack, I’ll defend!”

“Fleur, Krum, I’ll defend ours,” Cedric called.

Harry grinned, tactics were being made up on the spot, and he could already see how challenging saves were going to be, as the keepers had to keep moving to match the height of the goal.

Their next attack failed, and with a double flip, Viktor equalled their goal. And from there, the

game took off. Harry lost count of minutes and bounces as he immersed himself totally in the game.

They all stopped, startled, as a whistle blew. “Is half time,” Dobby announced.

Harry found that he was panting, and as he looked around, the others were similarly out of breath.

The score was fifteen-fourteen to the three champions, although no one had scored from one of the special points yet.

He sat down, with his legs out, as the pitch was returned to just grass. He took the drink an elf offered him. “Having fun?” He looked at the crowd and smiled. A lot of them had charmed their clothing to show their support of each team, and it looked pretty even.

“Yeah,” Astoria and Romilda agreed. Strands of their hair were plastered to their foreheads, and they were both a little red from the exercise. “I’m pooped,” Astoria added.

Harry frowned, before he moved forward and grabbed both girls’ shoulders. He sent some of his magic into them. The girls both closed their eyes and their faces seemed to go calm, although their breathing didn’t slow down.

He finished, and they opened their eyes and smiled at him.

“That’s better,” Romilda said.

“Yeah,” Astoria agreed.

“You’re doing a great job in goal, Tori, don’t let the fact that we’re a little behind tell you otherwise. Fleur and Viktor are playing really well together. Romi, you’re doing great as well, you’ve scored two more than me! So I have to up my game.”

“You’ve been knocking Krum and Fleur out of the air,” Romilda pointed out, “so you’ve hardly been the weakest link.”

Harry grinned at her, and looked around; House-elves were moving up and down the stands, selling items from trays they were carrying. The crowd hadn’t thinned at all, and in some places, it looked heavier. The rumble of noise also suggested that they were having a good time.

There was a series of pops and twenty House-elves appeared, each in identical green tunics, and started to play the instruments they were holding. Their musical choice was obviously geared toward the audience, as they started with Jerusalem, and then headed in to some Elgar before doing a spirited rendition of the William Tell overture.

There was a round of applause from the audience as the last notes of the first Pomp and Circumstance March faded. The crowd had started to sing along, by this point, and were definitely into it. The House-elves then finished with Rule Britannia, and Harry found himself booming the chorus out along with the crowd.

Harry jumped to his feet as Dobby reappeared and blew his whistle enthusiastically. He looked at crowd. "What we say?" he yelled.

The crowd looked a little blank, before some shouted.

"House-elves, create pitch," Dobby reminded them. "Now, what we say?"

"House-elves, create pitch," the crowd roared back.

The House-elves appeared, only, the pitch they created was different.

"Did Dobby forget to mention?" the House-elf cackled. "Pitch is random each time!"

Harry shook his head, as he prepared to start. The ball was bounced, and Harry bounced to the side, up, and then against the far side of the stadium. Then he shot off, at the perfect angle to smack into Viktor at full speed.

"Vik is used to being able to change directions in air," he shouted as they dropped down.

Harry took off as soon as he felt the resistance that signified ground was within reach of the charms on the boots. Romilda had the ball, but was being shepherded to the side. He followed her, and she swung around and threw the ball off of the wall, he bounced, caught it, and immediately launched the ball as he landed. It shot past Cedric and clinked in off of the right post.

There was a huge cheer, and Harry celebrated with a double back flip, as he realised he'd been one of the special zones.

"Merde," he heard Fleur whisper, before she retreated to get the ball.

"Great throw!" Astoria yelled. She was bouncing enthusiastically from a platform that was around halfway up the height the goal could go.

"Thanks," he yelled back, before exchanging a high five with Romilda. They turned, and the match took off again.

Toward the end, Romilda started to rotate with Astoria, so that she could get her breath back, and Cedric and Fleur were doing the same. Harry and Viktor kept going; they were in the best shape, and were able to continue the high pace.

Harry found himself matching and sometimes exceeding Viktor. There were some similarities to being on a broom, and they started to push the boots to the limit, treating gravity as a minor inconvenience.

Most of the time, like with Quidditch, he phased the crowd out, but occasionally he would acknowledge them, as they cheered an outlandish pass or a ridiculous twist to score a goal.

He had lost count a long time ago, but felt the game was still close, and played with everything he

had.

Dobby's whistle blew, and Harry turned to look at the nearest person – Fleur. “Who won?”

“I don't know,” she replied, looking around as well.

“By thirty one points to thirty, the winners, Krum, Delacour and Diggory!” Dobby yelled.

Fleur screamed in triumph, and bounded over to hug her teammates. Harry bounded over to his teammates, and smiled at them. Both girls looked completely devastated at their loss. He gathered both of them up, and hugged them tight. “I am so proud of both of you,” he told them. “You played your hearts out, against three adults, and we came so close! It's incredible, and we did so well!”

“But we lost,” Romilda pouted.

“But we played fantastically, we played fair, and we gave it everything, there can be no sadness in loss when you gave everything!”

“Really?” Astoria asked in a little voice.

“Really,” he said, and then he kissed each girl on the cheek. “Now, let's congratulate the other team.”

They bounded over and offered their congratulations.

Fleur reached forward and hugged him tightly, and then moved down to hug the other two. Cedric did the same, congratulating them back.

Viktor pounded him on the back. “Viktor had great fun!” he said, “Viktor have second sport now! Viktor play in summer, rule world!”

Harry laughed.

Viktor let him go, and moved down. “Is Viktor now,” he told the two girls. “Girls play hard, play well, Viktor impressed!”

Astoria and Romilda both beamed at him, the looks of disappointment vanishing.

They all turned to acknowledge the crowd, who were on their feet, with the biggest celebrations coming from the blue half.

The enchantments dropped, and the pitch faded. Harry reached down and took off his boots, and it felt strange to be back on *terra firma*. The others did the same.

“Halt!” Viktor yelled. Harry looked up, to see that the press was approaching them like a plague of rats seeing a leg of lamb.

The press, remarkably, did so.

“We vill answer few questions,” Krum continued. “Then get changed, this fun for friends, not professional match!”

The press gathered around. Harry sighed, and waved his hand, creating a bench for them to sit on. As they sat, it hovered up a metre off the ground.

“Hands!” Krum barked.

Every journalist raised their hand at once. Krum sighed, “Typical,” he grunted. “Rules. Questions about Podska only, not about Harry last night or anything else.”

Harry shrugged as Viktor named their new game; it was as good a name as any, assuming it wasn't a rude word in some language he didn't understand.

“Right, you.”

“Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet,” she introduced herself. “My readers want to know if anything is going on between you and the girls...”

“Dobby, please have some House-elves eject Skeeter,” Harry interrupted. The shocked journalist was popped away. “Viktor told you the rules,” Harry said.

The Bulgarian twisted his head, and then grinned at Harry. “You,” he pointed to another one.

“What was it like playing the first game of Podska?”

“Fun, big fun. Like Seeker, Chaser and Beater wrapped in one.”

“Yeah,” Cedric continued, “Three of us have played Seeker here, and the skills came in useful when doing some of the tricks. Fleur was a Chaser, and you could see that from her long shots.”

“For me,” Fleur said, her head back. “I preferred it to Quidditch as one person could not skew the result so much.” She shot a playful glare at the three seekers sitting near her.

“I liked that you had to think,” Astoria continued. “You could use basic geometry to make the ball bounce where you wanted to.”

Romilda was next. “For me, I think it was the tackling, it was more physical than Quidditch, but without any pain.”

Everyone turned to look at Harry. He leant back slightly. “For me, I think the game was fun, but what really stood out were two things. First, was the sportsmanship. We played for forty minutes without a single foul. We all played fast and hard, but fairly. We all started from a level playing field, and we all found the game easy to pick up, but difficult to master. Even now, I've got some ideas that I want to try out.

“Secondly, it was obvious just how much work the House-elves have put into this. Not just inventing a game, but coming up with a full stadium design, the half time show, and our fantastic uniforms.”

From the watching crowd, a spontaneous round of applause erupted, and Harry wondered if that was the first ever applause for an elf. The House-elves in question popped in and bowed to the audience, before popping back out again.

“You,” Krum said, pointing to the next journalist.

“Where do you see this sport going?”

Astoria raised her hand. “I’ll take this one. Tomorrow, we’re going to be talking to the House-elves to discuss licensing Harry’s Podska boots to them, so that they can start to commercially produce them.

“We would like to start supplying shops within a month, where people can buy their own, even if it’s just for the fun of them.

“Once production is in place, well, we’d hope that there would be plenty of people who would want to play. We’ll see where it goes from there.”

“Astoria is right,” Romilda continued, “and for those that really enjoy the games, custom bounce boots will be available to order, for a price.”

“But,” Krum said, “Krum wants to play again before leaving Hogwarts.”

“Rematch?” Harry asked.

“Da,” Viktor replied.

Harry grinned. Dobby popped in, and stood next to Harry. “As for sport, House-elves will be available for students here who have already practiced with Podska boots to play their own games, and we’ll get some official rules in place for the students to study and understand.”

There was a loud cheer from the students in the audience. “Stay, Dobby,” Harry said, “You’re a part of this.” The House-elf looked honoured, as Harry bunched closer to Romilda so that he could sit on the end. Romilda flushed lightly, but didn’t move away from him.

“You,” Krum said, pointing to another reporter.

“Will I be ejected if I ask about the House-elves?”

Krum looked at Harry. He paused. “One question,” Harry replied.

The journalist looked thoughtful. “Okay,” he said, “I’m making this question up as I go, bear with me. House-elves, they used to be domestic servants, cooking, cleaning, and now they’re free, and

producing a great sport to watch, and working with Potter closely. What happened?"

Everyone turned to Dobby, who looked shy and slightly frightened suddenly. Harry touched his shoulder reassuringly.

"House-elves always having potential," Dobby said slowly, his face screwed up in concentration. "And maybe are now more. Elves, no longer House-elves." Dobby paused and nodded to himself. "And when Elves had power source, all of sudden, Elves didn't need to accept bad behaviour that had crept in over thousand years of agreement. But Elves uncertain, so Elves turn to great Harry Potter and Harry Potter listens, encourages, guides, and is friend to all Elves. And more, Harry Potter trusts Elves to do more than clean and cook, so Elves start to plan future, future where Elves not punished because master in bad mood, where Elves no beg for tiny magic, where Elves matter again." He paused. "Elves begin remember pride, remember time before Elves lose magic source to dragons, Elves, Elves start to matter to Elves again. Elves never go back, Elves are free now."

There was an awed silence.

"Some Elves like cook and clean, they willing to work, but thems working, not slaves. Thems work for money, with contracts, if families want. Elves work hours, have days off, being employees."

"So people will be able to hire Elves?" the reported asked.

Dobby nodded. "Is ten galleons a month."

The reported blinked. "I'll take one!" There was some laughter from the other journalists.

"Is limited amount of Elves," Dobby warned, "and Elves not going back where bad treated!" Dobby paused, "But conference not about Elves, is about Podska." And with that, he popped out.

"Two more questions," Krum said. "You."

"Ryan Jones, Witch Weekly. Can we have your names so that we get them right?" he asked, pointing at Astoria and Romilda. "We know everyone else."

"Romilda Vane and Astoria Greengrass," Romilda replied, pointing to herself and then to Astoria.

"Last questions. You."

The other journalists grumbled as they put their hands down.

"Lisa Monarde, Le Mondial. Now that you're all friends through Podska, will this affect your performances in the final task?"

"Is close," Viktor mumbled, "but Krum will allow. As Tournament began, was about glory first, relations second. Now is other way around."

“Besides,” Cedric said, “I think we’ve all admitted that the man who can kill a dragon on his own is probably going to win!”

There was some laughter.

“I’m with Viktor,” Fleur said with a small smile. “I’ll compete to win, but I’m happier with the friends I’ve made.”

“As for me,” Harry said, “I never wanted to be in this stupid tournament, but at the start of it, Tori and Romi, closely followed by best friend Hermione helped me get through it, and from there, we all decided that holding back wasn’t going to help, so we attacked every problem as hard as we could, and I think we’re all better for it.”

“Conference is over,” Krum stated. “Harry, to smithy?”

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 8

Harry decided not to go the smithy, and instead popped Romilda and Astoria away, returning quickly to get the other three. As they all arrived, Elves were popping in the rest of their group. They were outside Greengrass manor. “Derek, Cress, I thought we could have a bit of a party? I’ll take care of the food and drink.”

“I’ll open the ballroom,” Derek agreed happily.

“You mind if the six of us quickly shower and change?” Harry asked. “Cleaning charms can’t cope with the stink I’m giving off at the moment.”

“Of course not,” Derek said. “Daph, could you put towels in the guest rooms?”

“Dobby will be getting fresh clothing,” Dobby said as he popped away.

Twenty minutes later, Harry was clean, comfortable, and could no longer smell himself. He walked downstairs, and was joined by Viktor and Cedric. It was another twenty minutes before the girls trickled in.

Harry walked over to Fleur, and popped her back to her house in France. Her mother, father and sister were gathered around a wireless.

“Harry, Fleur, welcome back,” Apolline Delacour said. “We listened to your exciting match.”

Gabrielle said something French very fast, in an excited voice.

Fleur chuckled and replied, speaking at what sounded like the same speed.

As she finished, Harry said, “Fleur wanted to show Alphonse something I made, and as we’re having a bit of a party, I wanted to see if you wanted to meet everyone?”

Fleur clapped her hands together, and then hugged him. “Tresbien,” she exclaimed, before looking at Gabrielle. She said something in French sternly. Gabrielle nodded in response, and then crossed her finger over her heart and gave an angelic smile.

“Should we change?” Apolline asked.

“Nah, it’s casual, we’ll be eating Muggle food.”

“Pizza?” Fleur asked.

Harry nodded, and Fleur grinned. “Good. I’m hungry.”

Apolline stood and lifted Gabrielle up, and stood with her husband. Harry concentrated, and

popped all of them to the Greengrasses' residence. "Okay, can some Elves pop Cedric and Cho to their homes, and invite their parents and siblings?" he asked, as he headed to Viktor. "Your family?"

Viktor beamed and nodded. "Da!"

"I'll be back for you next, Esmeralda."

The girl smiled at him, as Harry took the directions from Viktor's mind and popped them both away.

They arrived in a grand entrance hall. A preteen girl with flowing silky black hair was walking toward them, through an open door. She was dressed in a smart white blouse and a pink calf length skirt. She blinked, and then yelled, "Viktor!" She sprinted the length of the hall and leapt at him. Viktor embraced the small girl in a huge hug.

"Harry," he said after a few moments, "is Sophia, bestest little sister in world!"

"Hello Mr Potter," she said in accented English. "Is gud to meet you."

Harry slowly smiled her. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Sophia," he said, speaking slowly and clearly. "Your brother speaks of you often, and loves you very much."

Sophia gave him a beaming smile. She looked to be around ten or eleven, with only a faint resemblance to Viktor.

"Mum and Dad are where?" Viktor asked, sticking to English. "Harry is inviting to party, and Viktor wants to show Dad new thing for family."

"A party," Sophia gasped. "I am not dressed properly, I did not expect important guests, you should have warned, Viktor!"

"You're fine," Harry assured her, "Vik and I are going to be changing out of our uniforms into jeans and t-shirts."

She nodded solemnly as she looked at him with huge brown soulful eyes. "Mama and Papa are in parlour. We listened to Podska. Big brother won again!"

"He did," Harry agreed with a smile.

"Come," Viktor walked off, still carrying his sister, and they headed into the door that Sophia had entered through.

It was immediately obvious that Viktor took after his father, and Sophia their mother, as the adults were older models of the two.

"Harry, is Ana Krum, beautiful mother, and Borislav Krum, loud and large father." Viktor placed

Sofia down gently next to his mother.

Harry blinked at the father's introduction.

"Oh dear," Ana said, in softly accented English. "Please do step back once or twice, Mr Potter."

Harry did as he was told, as Krum's father jumped out of his chair, tore his shirt, revealing a hairy barrel chest, and started to wrestle Krum. Viktor kicked his legs out, and the two fell to the ground, and started to roll back and forth as they tried to get the upper hand on each other.

Sofia was giggling, as Borislav gained the upper hand, for Krum to tense and push his father off, before sliding out from underneath him.

Viktor turned, and leapt back onto his father, his foot flying up and knocking the table. The table had an expensive looking vase on it. The vase flew in to the air, and Harry reacted. He moved forward, placed one foot on Vik's back, and dived for the vase. He managed to catch it, twist in mid-air, and land on his back. He exhaled sharply and wondered why he hadn't used magic.

"Viktor, Boris!" Ana yelled.

The two men stood immediately, and hung their heads as they spotted Harry on the floor, cradling the vase.

"Oops," Vik mumbled.

"Yes, oops, you are acting like Cossacks, in front of guests! And Mr Potter has just saved you from several nights on the couch, Boris!" Ana continued, and Harry was both impressed and touched that she continued in a language he understood. The Delacours had not.

"Is Harry," Viktor protested, "is Vik's best friend."

"And what have I told you about speaking in the third person?" Ana demanded.

"Is fun, and should continue?" Viktor asked.

A small smile flashed on Ana's face, before it vanished. "If not for him, you would be in so much trouble!"

"Which is why Viktor has such good friend!"

"At least your English has improved," Ana sighed. She reached forward and hugged her son. Harry climbed his feet, and handed the vase back to her, as she stepped back.

Borislav was looking at him with a tiny grin on his face, and an eager look in his eyes. And Harry suddenly knew what he wanted. He looked around the room, to check for other breakables, before taking three steps to the right, away from the furniture.

“Boris?” Ana said slowly.

“Na nosh,” he yelled, and jumped at Harry. Harry managed to wink at Ana, before he was hit by two hundred and twenty pounds of enthusiastic Bulgarian.

Harry braced himself, caught the man, and then slammed him down – not too hard.

“Ouch,” Boris mumbled as he climbed to his feet. This time, he reached out and poked Harry. “Is he made of stone, Vik?” he asked, in an English accent more suitable to Chelmsford than Gabrova.

“Is Blacksmith,” Viktor replied, “We are here to take you to informal party, meet my other friends, and parents. Harry, is Boris, likes wrestle. Dad, is Harry; bring wallet, will need when see work of Harry.”

“And do put a shirt on,” Ana said dryly. “And Viktor, you can change too.” She made shooing motions with her hand. The two shoo’d obediently. “Mr Potter, please sit,” she said, indicating the chair Boris had been sat in earlier. The vase was back on the table. Sofia stood next to her mother’s chair.

“As much as I try and bring some civilisation to this family, Mr Potter, my husband still goes through several shirts a day when Viktor is around,” she said with a straight face, although her eyes betrayed both her amusement and her acceptance.

“Please, call me Harry, Mrs Krum.”

“Thank you. I am, of course, Ana. Welcome to our home.”

“Judging by your decorations, you’ll get on well with the hosts. Derek and Cressida Greengrass.”

Ana clapped her hands. “I’ve not seen Derek and Cress for years,” she said delightedly. “My son did say informal?”

“Yeah, I just kinda grabbed everyone and decided we’d have a laugh, a few beers, a pizza and get to know each other. I’m going to grab Esmeralda’s family next.”

Ana nodded. “Viktor’s letter’s home have mentioned you with some enthusiasm and that turned into an almost upbeat letter last night.”

Harry smiled. “I kinda realised today that Vik’s actually my closest male friend.”

“And how did my proto-caveman of a son make a friend with a seemingly well-adjusted young man?”

Harry chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. “We went for a fly and bonded?”

“Da,” Viktor said, as he re-entered the room, having changed into black trousers tucked into black boots, and a white shirt.

“Of course, how silly of me to think otherwise,” Ana said quietly, causing Sofia to giggle softly.

Harry shot an encouraging grin at the quiet and dignified girl.

“Please, Harry,” Ana said with a teasing voice, “I have two barbarians. Allow me one child who understands good behaviour.”

“Harry should take Sofia for fly later, show her different style.”

Ana’s mouth opened in shock, as Sophia looked at her big brother with wide eyes. “You don’t let me fly with anyone but you,” Sophia said.

“Is Harry,” Viktor said, “Harry is trust.”

“Never fear, Boris is here!” Boris announced loudly, as he entered the room, wearing an un-ripped white shirt.

“I wasn’t afraid,” Ana murmured.

“Pish posh,” Boris replied. “Right, let us party!”

Harry stood, as Viktor told the Krums to hold hands, and he popped them to the Greengrass residence.

As soon as they arrived in the ballroom, Boris’s eyes lit up. He charged over and grabbed Derek, heaving him into a huge bear hug.

“Cressida,” Derek wheezed, “The barbarians have breached the gate. Get Harry to don his armour!”

“Ahh, pretty man jests!” Boris said, completely ignoring the growing crowd of people he’d interrupted.

Derek burst out of the hug, and theatrically gasped for breath.

“Ana, dear, it’s been too long,” Cress said, as she kissed Ana on both cheeks. “And Sophia, how wonderful to meet you now that you’re old enough to carry on a conversation.”

“Delighted, Lady Greengrass,” Sophia said, with a perfect curtsy.

“Astoria, Daphne,” Cressida called, as she smiled at Sophia. The two girls arrived. “These are my daughters, Daphne and Astoria. And this is Sophia Krum.”

Astoria gave a proper curtsy, but Daphne simply reached forward and hugged the younger girl. “Come,” she ordered, “you can meet our friends.” Daphne smiled at Harry, before they moved off with Astoria.

Ana looked a little surprised. Cressida pointed directly at Harry. “Not guilty,” Harry replied immediately.

There was a round of laughter as other guests moved closer

“And before anything else, I need to pick up Esmeralda’s family,” Harry said, and took the proffered hand of the girl, and popped them to Bulgaria after getting the location from her. The hallway they arrived in was remarkably similar to Viktor’s house.

“I know, our ancestors were not original,” Esmeralda explained. She marched to the same room Viktor had, and walked straight in. An older woman was sat, drinking tea from a silver set placed on a small table next to her chair. She had long curly hair that was mainly white, with the odd touch of brown here and there. She managed to radiate a feeling of breeding and class.

“Esmeralda!” the woman said happily, before saying something in Bulgarian.

“Mother, guests,” Esmeralda chided. “This is Harry Potter, Viktor’s best friend, and the only man in the world who doesn’t even notice centuries of wards.”

Harry rocked backwards in surprise as the words hit him. He hadn’t thought about wards at all. He made a note that that this meant that if they ever found Voldemort’s base, they could go straight there.

“Oh, I do apologise,” the elder woman said in accented English that was still quite understandable.

“We’re here to invite you to an informal party at the Greengrass stately home in England. Harry’s transportation skills mean he could hire himself out at thousands of galleons a go, for long distance and through wards, and people would pay. Anyway, Harry, this is Countessa Georgieva Draganova, my mother.”

“Lady Draganova,” Harry said, with a small bow.

She smiled at him. “Informal?” she asked her daughter.

“Boris has probably lost his shirt already.”

“Ahh, Harry, do call me Georgie,” she said with a slight smile. “A party does sound better than an evening of listening to the wireless and reading.”

“You should get out more,” Esmeralda chided gently.

She smiled a little. “I am coming to this impromptu party.” She stood, and rang a bell. A butler appeared, and after a quick couple of words in Bulgarian, he vanished and returned with some shoes.

She placed them on her feet, and said a few more words, before looking at them. Harry reached out and took both their hands, and popped them back.

He looked around, and did a quick headcount, he could see an Asian couple that were clearly Cho's parents, and an English-looking couple that he guessed were Cedric's parents. He could see Dumbledore and Nadya discussing something with Ana, and then looked around for Romilda. He moved over to her after excusing himself.

"Hey," he said, "Want to get your parents?"

She gave him a big smile and shook her head. "Nan's here," she explained. "That's enough family."

"Okay. Pizza."

"Can I help?"

"Sure, let me get changed, and then I'll pop us both there."

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Romilda looked around the pizza place with interest. It was nowhere near as exciting as she'd thought. Numerous spotty youths of questionable cleanliness were following picture guides robotically to assemble the food.

They queued, and once at the till, Harry said, "Five vegetarian, five pepperoni, five with everything, five Hawaiian. All in extra large, please."

The boy looked at Harry weirdly. "Twenty pizzas, mate?" he said in an accent Romilda had never heard before.

"Yes," Harry said dryly.

"That's three hundred and nineteen quid, eighty, geezer. Nice one."

Harry pulled out a lot of Muggle money and handed it over. The boy serving them shrugged. "Will be about thirty minutes."

"We'll be back," Harry said. "Name's Potter."

"Sorted!"

They walked out, and to Romilda's delight, he took her hand. Sadly, it was only for crossing the road, but she'd take what she could get.

They entered a shop that claimed to be an off licence, and as much as Romilda had spent time in the Muggle world, she had no idea what that meant. She shrugged. "What does the name mean?"

Harry looked at her, and tilted his head. "I have no idea." He walked over to the counter near the entrance. "What does 'off licence' mean?"

The man, a fifty something with no hair and poor dress sense, laughed. “Means we have a licence for selling alcohol that is consumed off our premises.” He looked at them, “And yeah, with the girl with you, I’m going to have to see some I.D.”

Harry reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small piece of paper. As he gave it to the man, he waved his hand. “That’ll do,” the man agreed. “As long as you’re not buying for kids.”

“We’re having a party at our friends’ house; the parents are already a little too inebriated to drive. I turned up late so I was volunteered to do a beer run,” Harry lied with startling ease. “Romi volunteered to help carry everything.”

“Ahh, gotcha. You want anything special?”

“I do,” Harry replied. “But it would be completely wasted at that party.”

The man laughed. “I know that sort of party,” he agreed. “Right, the crap is down that side. You can borrow the trolley to take it to your car.”

“Thanks.” Harry took a metal trolley, and headed down a cramped aisle. He loaded it with eight large boxes of beer, each with the shield emblem on the side, and headed to the front. As he approached the counter, he snagged two more bottles. “That’s a hundred and three, eighty, mate.”

Harry pulled out more notes and handed them over. Romilda followed him out of the store, and into an alley, where they popped away.

Back in the ball room, there were plenty of signs of people having a good time, and lots of informal groups.

Harry created a huge trough, created some ice, and started to pack the beer into the ice. Romilda quickly assisted him.

“Boris,” Harry yelled. “Got one especially for you, will fix the lack of hair on your chest.”

Boris bounded over, ripping his shirt. “Boris has manly chest!”

“Oh, Boris,” Romilda faintly heard Viktor’s mum say.

Harry grinned and passed him a bottle. Boris looked at the top, and then used his wand to remove the cap. He then took a deep gulp. His eyes widened. “Is man’s drink!”

Viktor appeared next to him. “Then Viktor should try it. Save father’s liver. Be good son.”

Boris cradled it and turned away. “Vamoosh, Come back when man, baby Krum!”

Viktor growled, and reached out.

“I got you one too,” Harry said dryly, holding out the bottle to Viktor.

“See,” Viktor said turning to his mother. “Is why is Vik’s best friend!”

“The fact he can handle both of you is endearing him to me as well, and Boris, could you please talk properly?” Ana Krum asked.

“He!” Boris replied instantly. “Is fun!”

“Right, we’ll be back in a bit with the pizza,” Harry said, and popped them both back to the alley.

They returned the trolley back to the off licence, and then walked through a local park together, to waste the time.

“Did you see the Diggorys?” Harry asked, as they rounded a rather disappointing concrete fountain.

Romilda thought back. “Not really,” she admitted.

“They looked really uncomfortable.”

“Ohhh!” Romilda said, and smiled. “I know why!”

“Why?”

“Because they are upper middle class.”

“Huh?”

“Right, okay, they’ve been to the sort of soirees that the upper class normally have, posh, elegant, everyone tries really hard to impress everyone else with how much of a stick they’ve fit up their rears.”

Harry laughed, and lightly touched her shoulder in approval. Romilda felt her insides glow a little. “But everyone here tonight is really, really, really old money. The Delacours, Krums, Draganovas, Changs, and of course our hosts, they can all trace their families back to the dawn of magic. They don’t have to act a certain way, because there is no one really for them to impress.

“They can, but I know that the Krums and Greengrasses hate that sort of thing, Alphonse married a Veela, which shows how much he cares about other people’s opinions, and it looked like Lady Draganova was a friend of the Krums, so it makes sense.

“So the Diggorys don’t know how to handle people who are doing what you asked, and just having a casual party, and would much prefer it if there was a ten course meal and enough formality to stuff a teddy bear.”

Harry laughed again, but didn’t touch her shoulder this time; she pouted briefly and schemed how to get him to do it again.

“Okay, I understand. Want to have a rite of passage?”

“Oh?” she asked curiously.

“Yeah, sitting mindlessly while waiting for your order.”

She giggled. “Sounds dull.”

“It is.” They headed back, to see that the shop now had a queue.

“I’m sorry,” the youth at the till was saying to a fat man, “we’ll do yours as soon as we can; we had a large order, alright, geezer?”

“My poor Dudley is waiting for his food,” the man roared.

Harry’s aura darkened significantly.

“Hello, Vernon,” he snarled. “How pleasant to see you.”

Romilda gasped. This was him? Vernon turned, and Romilda took him in. He was looking unhealthy, like he had lost a lot of weight and his skin hadn’t kept up. It also looked, from the way his trousers bulged, that he was wearing a nappy. In his eyes, she could see that he suddenly recognised Harry, and was going to blame him, rightfully, for the curse he was under. Well, she wasn’t going to have that, so she kicked him as hard as she could in the crotch, using every technique she knew to ensure that every erg of energy was delivered to her tensed toe.

Vernon went red, then white, and collapsed in a blubbering heap. “That’s for being a child abuser, you disgusting freak!”

The youth behind the counter looked down at the man on the floor, and then laughed. “Nice one, sorted,” he announced.

Romilda smiled at him, and then was extra happy as the boy blushed, and Harry gave him a warning glare. The other clientele, as one, appeared to shrug, and while there were a few tuts, no one paid the whimpering man any attention at all.

“Yeah, your pizzas are nearly done; last two are coming out now. Nice one. Comes with ten free bottles, you want?”

“I’ve got a tonne of beer, so we’ll just take five.”

“Sorted. What do you want?”

“Two Coke, two Fanta and a R Whites.”

The boy put them in two bags with several handfuls of napkins, and balanced them on top. He then started to pile box after box on the counter.

“I didn’t think this through,” Harry mumbled. He took a bag in each hand, and then held his hands out. Romilda took a second to admire how his biceps looked, before she started to pile the pizzas on his hands. He managed to carry fourteen boxes, allowing her to grab the other six. They weren’t heavy, just bulky.

One of the other customers opened the door for her, and they stepped around the still whimpering Vernon, and left without another glance. Once back in the alley, Harry called for some Elves to transport them.

In the ball room, there was a cheer as they arrived.

Harry walked over to some tables that had been set up, and unloaded them. “Right, for those that don’t know, this is pizza. Think of it as proof that Muggles have their own brand of magic.”

“Looks interesting,” Boris said. “How do you eat?”

“Boris,” Georgie sighed, as she stomped forward. “All true ladies know how to eat pizza.”

“There are no knives, forks,” Boris pointed out.

Georgie opened a box, took a slice of pizza, tilted her head back, and took an un-lady-like bite – to some shocked silence.

“Mother!” Esmeralda gasped.

The white haired woman smirked. “Children,” she sighed, “think they invented everything.”

Boris roared with laughter. “Georgie, you are a good woman.”

“Here, Boris,” Harry said, “I got some spicy pepperoni!”

Harry was immediately lifted in a huge bear hug, which broke the ice, and a minute later people were standing around with a napkin holding a slice of pizza in one hand, and a drink in the other. Romilda was thrilled that all the youngsters had been allowed one bottle of the beer.

Hermione looked to be in heaven, as she chatted with Cho’s parents, and sipped on her beer. Astoria was with Ana and Sophia, chatting away. Cho, Derek and Cedric were with his parents, who appeared to have relaxed a little. Daphne was with Fleur and her family. Harry and Romilda were with the male Krums, as they had what appeared to be a silent eating contest.

“Sorry, Boris,” Romilda said, “But I think the boys are going to win. I was ravenous after the game, and I didn’t work as hard as they did.”

“Yes, old man, slow down,” Viktor said, as he finished his beer and summoned another.

Boris pouted. “Is only because I had large lunch,” he pointed out.

“Only light lunch before play,” Viktor replied. “No get stitch.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. He finished off another slice of pizza, and summoned himself a glass of the orange fizzy stuff. He swallowed it, and then gulped. “Excuse me,” he said, as he belched behind his hand.

“Call that a belch,” Boris demanded. He put his head back.

“Oh, just once,” she heard Ana moan, “I’d like to go out with it turning into a belching contest.”

Viktor elbowed Boris firmly in the stomach, disrupting his stance, so he only managed a faint noise. “No, or Boris will be on couch, get bad back, no more wrestling!”

“Da, Da,” Boris muttered. “Was not good idea.”

“So,” Harry said, a little loudly, clearly changing the subject. “We were picking up the pizzas, and guess who was in there, shouting about his Dudley wanting food?”

“Oh, no,” Hermione sighed. “Vernon?”

Harry nodded. “I got his attention, and well, I don’t know what I was going to do,” he continued. “When Romi here kicked him so hard in the balls that I’ll bet that Dudley is now infertile!”

Romilda had fortunately finished her beer, as she found herself in a huge congratulatory hug from Daphne.

“And then she told everyone else that she’d done it because he was a child abuser, and no one else batted an eye!”

“To give some context,” Hermione called out, “Vernon Dursley, and his family, are currently under Auror investigation for child abuse.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “On me. But I’m one of the lucky ones, as I have people that love and care for me,” he nodded at Derek and Cressida, and then his friends, “so it’s all in the past. And the point of this was not to focus on the down side, but the upside of Romi taking down a guy eight times her size in one move!”

There was some more relaxed laughter.

“Thank you, Harry,” Romilda turned as she was released, to see that Ana had moved over.

“You’re welcome.”

“Is Viktor’s turn to break ice,” Viktor announced. “Sophia, come.”

The black haired girl walked over to her brother, who knelt, and offered her a small brightly wrapped package.

The girl's face lit up. "You did not have to," she protested. "You always buy me presents, but I never get chance to get you one!"

"Is Viktor's job to try and be best big bruver in world. Open."

She did, delicately using her nails to unwrap it. Inside, was a familiar walnut case, which when opened, held the custom knife Harry had made for her.

Her mouth opened in surprise. "Is beautiful!" She hugged her brother hard, before examining it closely.

"Is custom blade, designed by Daphne, made by Harry."

The girl slid the knife back into the sheaf, before she turned to Daphne and curtsied. She then turned to Harry, and ran a few steps forward and hugged him tightly, her arms going around his waist, and her head against his chest. She looked up after a few seconds. "Thank you very much, Mr Potter."

"Hey, it's Harry," he said softly.

She beamed at him.

Romilda glanced at Viktor, to see an approving smile on his face, and she groaned. Great, that was just what she and Astoria needed. Another sensible girl who saw what was on offer. She met Astoria's eyes, to see her friend was sighing as well. If it was anyone else, they'd be planning on how to sideline her, but the sister of Harry's best male friend was going to be trouble.

"Well, if we're giving away presents," Fleur called. She summoned two packages with her wand, and gave them to Gabrielle and Apolline.

Gabrielle squealed loudly after opening hers, before sprinting over to hug Harry; she did, at least, hold the knife safely.

Apolline followed her daughter, peeled Gabrielle off of Harry, and then hugged him herself. "Thank you," she said.

"They did pay," Harry said bashfully.

"If it was under three hundred, they underpaid," Georgie announced, as she looked closely at the knife her daughter had given her. "These runes are impressive alone; I've paid several hundred galleons to get some things enchanted before."

Romilda looked around, to see that Cho was showing her parents her knife, and that Viktor was giving Ana her knife.

"That's horrendous," Harry exclaimed. "When Tori and I came up with them, we made them on to a template sheet, so I could quickly chisel them without needing to start from scratch!"

“Harry, there are only about two hundred people world-wide who both know runes well enough to do this sort of thing and have the desire to sell their creations,” Cressida told him.

“But that’s ridiculous! They’re not that hard!”

“Harder than waving a wand and saying a few words?” Cressida asked. “You could cast a sharpening charm, and a cleaning charm, and everything else. Also, only about forty or fifty people graduate from school having taken them each year, from Beauxbatons, Durmstrang and Hogwarts. And of them, the majority go into other careers that don’t use runes. Wand waving is much easier than spending the time needed to make something permanent.”

“Wizards do tend to be lazy,” Boris said. “A very weird form of lazy, though. Rather than take a long time to do it once, right, they would rather do it many, many, many times the other way.”

Harry nodded slowly and then shook his head.

Georgie made her way through the crowd, past the two Veela, and hugged Harry as well. “A truly excellent piece,” she said. She stood to one side, as Ana hugged Harry as well.

“Well, while we’re praising Harry,” Derek said, as he waved his wand, “tell me what you think of this!”

The crest that Harry and Daphne had worked on floated into the room.

“Ahh,” Georgie said, “this is why my daughter told me to bring my wallet.” She moved over and examined it, tracing the runes with her finger, as she looked closely, before she turned to look at Harry. “I’ll take one.”

“Erm, they’re kinda expensive.”

“Of course they are,” Georgie agreed with a small smile. “I’ll take one,” she repeated.

“How did you get the history in it?” Ana asked, in an awed voice. “I can feel your ancestors, Derek.”

“I know,” Derek said proudly. “I even shed some extremely good looking tears when I first saw it.”

“I’ll have one, of course,” Georgie announced.

“Not to one up,” Alphonse said, “But I’m going to need two, one for my family, and one as a present for Apolline’s.”

The elder Veela pounced on her husband and gave him a large kiss.

Romilda turned her head, to see Cedric talking quietly to his parents, his hand on his father’s arm, stopping him from going forward. She hid a wince, and hoped they didn’t feel too out of place.

The sort of money being talked about was far removed from the salary of even a high-ranking ministry employee.

The Changs moved over next, and examined it closely. The man was wearing a full suit, but as it was a relaxed party he'd removed his tie, while the woman was wearing a three-quarter-length dress in a nice brown. Both had the characteristic Asian black hair, with the woman's long and straight, and the man's short and spiky.

"I now understand why Cho wrote home for money," the man said. He turned and looked at Harry directly. "I clearly don't know you as well as Derek and Cressida, but I know quality when I see it. How about a deal?"

Harry immediately pointed at Romilda. "I suck at business," he explained. "I'd forget to charge most of the time. Romilda's our sales girl."

The man nodded slowly, and looked at Romilda, who placed her shoulders back and looked at the older man directly. Her clan was famous for their bargaining, and that was a responsibility as much as it was a benefit. She wasn't going to let anyone down. "How times change," he said to himself. "Miss Vane, the deal I was going to offer Harry was, if you do me three at full price, and one free, I'll display one at each of our homes in China."

"Deal," Romilda replied immediately. "On the condition that all four are the same, and they are placed in an extremely prominent position, and that you host at least two of your famous balls over the summer."

The man nodded and looked for his daughter. "You are paying attention?"

"Yes, father," Cho said.

"Then explain this transaction."

"Exposure, Romilda understands our prominence in China, and the insecure nature of our country. The fact that you have something so valuable, historic and unique will mean that others will rush to order one as well."

The man smiled and nodded. "Good, Cho. And you are wise for your age, Miss Vane."

Romilda curtsied politely.

The man chuckled and bowed back.

"Now," Boris called, "Business is over, let us go back to the beer!"

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Derek allowed a tiny frown to crease his forehead, as he looked at his elder daughter. He wondered if he was reading the situation correctly.

“You’ll crease that perfect forehead,” Harry’s voice said next to him.

He grinned at the boy. “I’m allowed one or two frowns a day,” He retorted.

“Is there going to be a problem?” Harry asked, looking on, as Fleur and Daphne were sat in a love seat, leafing through a picture album.

“I am reading it correctly then?”

“Well, you should think of all the good things. Fleur will increase the pulchritude in the family by another hundred percent.”

“Pulchritude?”

“Great physical beauty and appeal,” Harry explained.

Derek chuckled as his own words were handed back to him. Most people humoured him when it came to his narcissism. “I have to admit that I’m thinking about my ancestors and my descendants,” he admitted.

“First, you still have Tori, who I’m pretty sure isn’t interested in girls.”

Knowing his youngest daughter’s intimated preference for beaus, Derek smiled and nodded.

“True,” he agreed. “She is extraordinarily beautiful.”

“And Fleur’s not bad, either.”

Derek laughed and put an arm around Harry. “Cress does want grandchildren – eventually.”

“Veela are a matriarchal society that has an eighty percent female birth rate,” Harry said dryly, “and they’ve been that way for eons. Want to bet they’ve found a way around that problem?”

Derek perked up. “True,” he agreed. He looked at Harry quizzically.

“I read a book,” Harry answered the unasked question. “Hermione gave it to me when we first saw Fleur. I’m not doing regular classes anymore, and definitely not wasting my time with History of Magic, but Hermione nags me if she thinks I’m not keeping up on learning things.”

“Excellent. Thanks, Harry.”

“I couldn’t let that frown get any worse,” Harry replied cheerily. He paused. “I will have a talk with Fleur later, just to make sure that she’s acting responsibly. I will have to change my Big Brother speech, though. I don’t think threatening her with a beating if she breaks my sister’s heart is right.”

“Good man.” Derek wrapped an arm around Harry in a completely manly hug.

Harry returned it briefly, before hearing his name yelled had them both turn. “Keep the pizza, it’s great for breakfast, as long as we hit the gym afterward,” Harry said. “I’ll catch you later.”

Derek found his wife, and followed the younger ones outside, where Viktor had two brooms, and had been yelling for Harry.

“Is exhibition time,” Viktor announced.

Harry grabbed the broom. He shot a teasing grin at the Quidditch star. “Do try and keep up, old boy,” he said, before the broom took off with Harry being dragged behind it, one hand grasping the stick as it shot straight up.

Viktor roared out a laugh, and took off the same way, and the two were away and into the sky. They both let go at the same time, and as they tumbled down, their brooms arced around and allowed them to seat themselves.

“Cedric, not joining them?”

“I’m good, Dad,” Cedric said, and Derek moved near the guests he didn’t know that well. “But they’re magic.”

Both flyers did a fly-by, jumping onto their brooms, so that they were riding them like carpets, and then flipped them around, in the same move Derek remembered from watching highlights of the Quidditch world cup.

Both of them flew up in tight formation, corkscrewing around each other before they dropped away.

“Harry!” Derek saw Hermione standing, her wand to her throat. Harry dropped down immediately, and hovered in front of her. Hermione moved her wand as she said something quietly to him.

Harry grinned in response, and flew back up to Viktor, where he repeated Hermione’s wand movements. Viktor laughed and saluted Hermione.

The two shot off again, but this time red smoke came out of the back of Harry’s broom, while blue came out of Viktor’s. And as they did aerobics in the air, the smoke added a beautiful trail behind them, leaving a reminder of the route the boys had taken.

The demonstration ended with the two boys flying at each other, then both back-flipping off and landing on each other’s brooms.

Derek applauded as the two hovered in front of them, and bowed.

“Harry, grab best looking, take for fly?”

“Good plan,” Harry agreed, as Viktor flew down and picked up Esmeralda.

Harry show down, and a second later, Derek found himself flying with Harry.

“He meant female!” Derek yelled over the air.

“I know,” Harry replied. “I chose to take it literally. There are things I don’t want to deal with this year, and this allows me to continue to play ignorant.”

“Sometimes, Harry, I think you are the smartest boy in the world.”

Harry laughed. “Hell no, if that was the case I’d know what to do about this whole thing, rather than keep putting it off as long as I can. Honestly, I don’t even know if I like them like that!”

“If you decide you do, you don’t mind if I root for one in particular?”

“I thought you might.” Harry paused. “There’s also the fact that I’m only fourteen, and as amazing and mature as Romi and Tori are, they’re still only twelve, and we all have a tonne of growing up to do before we need to make any decisions.”

“Steady, old boy, I do like my liver in its place,” Derek said as they did a tight corkscrew.

Harry laughed and landed, allowing him to get off. Harry then flew over, and snagged Georgie, taking the matriarch for a fly. The countess screamed in pleasure.

Derek chuckled as he wandered back over to the Diggorys. Viktor was now flying with Cressida. “That was exciting,” he said cheerfully.

“I wonder if I can get Harry to take me up,” Cedric said.

“You are extremely good looking, so there’s a chance,” he replied.

Cedric laughed and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Thank you for having us,” Amos said with a stiff little grin.

“You’re more than welcome, Amos,” Derek replied grandiosely. He had a reputation at the Ministry as a bit of a playboy, and he wasn’t above ensuring it stuck. It allowed him to avoid a lot of the formal events that someone of his status usually had to attend.

“Cedric has been extremely impressive in the tournament so far,” Derek added into the slightly strained silence.

“He has,” Amos said, swelling with pride. “And he played extremely well today.”

“I have no doubt he’ll be Head Boy next year,” Derek said, pleased to have found something that allowed his guests to relax. He did wish that Margaret Diggory would be more than a wallflower, but one couldn’t have everything.

“We hope so,” Amos agreed.

“Dad!” Cedric protested.

“Do you have any plans for when you leave Hogwarts?”

“Cedric’s going to join me in the Ministry!”

“Maybe,” Cedric said dryly. “However, there are other options available. I’ve got another year before I have to worry about that.”

Amos frowned.

Derek chose to be silent, rather than give his opinion that Cedric would be utterly wasted at the Ministry. He could tell that Cedric already held that opinion.

Cho was dropped off by Viktor, and she slinked herself under Cedric’s arm. “They really are both magic on brooms.”

“Yeah,” Cedric agreed. “Any ideas how we get like that?”

“Practice, practice, practice?” Cho suggested.

“That, or we try and badger them into lessons.”

“You’re the Puff, and you’re friends with them,” Cho pointed out with a smile.

“True,” Cedric agreed. “I’ll raise it next week.”

“Did you enjoy your fly, Mr Greengrass?”

“Oh, Derek, please, Cho,” Derek said. “I can feel you adding years to me!”

Cho giggled appreciatively. “Derek.”

“I did,” he agreed. He watched as Harry swooped down, and caught Daphne and Fleur in one go, and as the broom shot off, he landed in a crouch next to the Delacours – leaving the two girls to fly together. Derek made a mental note to have a small chat with Harry about subtlety. Gabrielle immediately attached herself to Harry’s waist.

“Good to see that they are paying attention,” Cedric said, as Alphonse said something to Gabrielle, which made her pout as she released Harry.

“Oh?” Amos asked.

Cedric waved his hand airily. “Gabrielle can be a little clingy,” he explained casually.

Derek nodded subtly at the boy. He was pleased that Cedric knew when to keep his mouth shut.

“What about you, Cho, any plans for after school?”

“If I can improve enough, I’d like to play Quidditch. If that doesn’t work, Dad wants me to start learning the family business.”

“And how does that sound?”

Cho shrugged. “Not as exciting as Quidditch,” she said with a smile, and they watched the two brooms for a few moments. There was a noticeable difference between Viktor’s flying and Fleur’s.

Cho had a look of disbelief on her face as Harry reclaimed his broom, and had Cho’s mother with him. She was laughing as her long hair flew in the breeze. “Only Harry,” she sighed. “Anyway, I’ve got ages to fit into something I like.”

“If it helps, I’m older and I still don’t know what I want to do.”

Boris bounded over. “Pretty boy, how’s your whiskey?”

“Superb, you Bulgarian peasant.”

“So I don’t need to go home and get something decent?”

“Nah, I have plenty.”

“When the boys have stopped entertaining everyone, I thought we could Irish up a coffee or two and chat all evening. You mind putting us up?”

“You’re welcome, of course.”

“I’m afraid that we’ll have to go,” Amos said. “I have a meeting early in the morning.”

“I’m staying,” Cedric stated instantly.

“Right,” Amos agreed.

Two Elves popped in immediately. “You is needing lift?”

As Amos nodded, he and his wife were popped out.

“Oh, Thank Merlin,” Cedric said, as he pulled Cho tighter against him. “Sorry, Derek,” he added.

“Nothing to apologise for.”

“They were dragging down the entire party, they refused to smile and relax, and were judgemental as hell,” Cedric responded. “Everyone’s been really nice, and they were scowling!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Boris said with a hearty slap on the boy’s back. “We all have relatives that

insist we act like the titles we were stuck with at birth. Life only happens once, and it is far too short to keep your shirt on.”

Cedric nodded. “I’m not joining the Ministry; Cho’s dad has told me he can get me a job if I do well in my exams.”

“Which you will,” Cho said proudly.

“Actually, I should go and talk to Fu and Mei,” Derek said. He paused as a thought hit him. “Did Astoria write your name as Cho Chang?”

Cho sighed and muttered something in Mandarin.

“Stupid wizards,” Cedric translated after a few seconds.

Cho beamed and kissed him. “Exactly. When we applied for my place, we wrote my name properly as Zhang Qiu, but they translated it badly. And it was too late to change it. I should be pleased that at least it is roughly phonetically correct.”

“So I should endeavour to call you Qiu?” Derek asked, trying to sound out the subtle difference.

“I’ve accepted Cho for now,” Cho said with a shrug. “The Q sound isn't one you make in English and without that and the correct tone, 'Cho' is good enough.”

Derek nodded, and made his excuses, as he headed to Fu and Mei Zhang.

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Harry woke and stretched, and glanced at his watch. It was still early, but considering it was a Monday, and everyone else had classes, he should do something nice for his friends to get them all moving. He headed down to the kitchen, and started to make some English muffins, heating the milk first.

While the dough was proving, he napped in the living room. He entered the kitchen to cut the dough in to the shapes he wanted, and then left them to rise again. Rather than head back to the living room, he headed into Daphne’s bedroom, and sat on the side of her bed. He reached out and lightly stroked her hair. “Daph.” He was grateful she was alone, or it would have been extremely awkward.

She opened her eyes slowly, and blinked at him. She smiled. “Good morning,” she whispered.

“We have school this morning,” he reminded her. She pouted briefly.

“Get a shower and changed, and then meet for breakfast” he said, and hopped up. He headed into the next guest room, and woke Hermione up the same way. To his amusement, she had the exact same facial expressions. From there, he headed into Astoria’s room, where she was sharing with Romilda.

He paused for a second, and looked at both sleeping girls. Romilda was on the left side, on her stomach, her body buried under the duvet. Astoria was on the right, close to the edge, on her side, curled up slightly.

Like Hermione and Daphne, they both pouted at the thought of school. With the two moving, he headed out. “Dobby?”

The elf bounced in cheerfully.

“Where are Cho, Fleur, Esmeralda, Vik and Ced sleeping?”

“Flowergirl is in there, with sister,” Dobby pointed. “Viktor is there with Esmeralda, Cedric is there, Cho is there.”

“And Sophia?”

“She is in that room, parents are in other rooms.”

“Brilliant, thanks Dobby. And now I’m going to punish you for being cheeky,” Harry added with a grin.

“Oh? Brings it!” Dobby challenged.

“I’m going to make breakfast, and you’re not allowed to help, you’re just going to have to eat.”

Dobby pouted and looked down, his ears drooped. “Harry brings it,” he admitted.

Harry laughed, and headed into Cedric’s room. The teenager was snuggled deeply into the duvet. “Wake up,” he called. “We’ve got school this morning.”

“Bugger off,” Cedric groaned.

“Yeah, well, you hit whiskey after beer, you deserve it,” Harry said with a complete lack of sympathy.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Cho’s in the room to the left of yours. You need to wake her, or I will.”

Cedric was out of bed in a flash. He stumbled and grabbed his head.

Harry sniggered. “Right. Meet in the kitchen when you’re ready.”

Cedric nodded, and followed him into the corridor. Harry followed him, and shook himself. He wasn’t good enough with silencing charms, as he would like to cast a few now so he didn’t wake up the adults whilst doing the remaining people. He pushed Fleur’s door open a crack.

“Fleur,” he called *sotto voce* . “Are you decent?”

“Oui,” a sleepy voice replied.

He walked in, to see Gabrielle flat on her stomach, snoring cutely, and Fleur next to her, with one eye half-open.

“We have school today,” he told her, standing by the side of her bed.

“Merde,” she complained.

He chuckled. “We’re meeting for breakfast as soon as we can, and then heading into school.”

“Thank you,” she replied, as she sat up. She was wearing the frilliest thing he had ever seen on a girl, and he couldn’t help staring for a second. “Daph was definitely right,” he blurted. “You do have amazing tits.”

Fleur blinked, and then gave a laugh that woke Gabrielle up.

“Shh, it’s alright, go back to sleep,” Fleur said, her hand glowing as she touched Gabrielle’s face.

Gabrielle’s eyes closed, and she was asleep a second later.

“That izze bluntness your seester has,” Fleur said with a grin, her teasing accent reappearing. “I do like it.”

“I should perhaps filter a bit more,” Harry said. “Sorry.”

“So I have two siblings who like me?”

“Actually,” Harry corrected, “While I do agree that you’re beautiful, and would probably quite enjoy playing with your bum, it would just be my hormones and not my heart.”

Fleur tilted her head slightly as she examined him. “Tell me something. If I did accept Daphne’s advances, would I gain a big brother as well?”

Harry met her blue eyes evenly. “Possibly,” he said after a few seconds of thought. “It would depend if you wanted one. Dating my sister would be the quickest way to that sort of relationship.”

“Thank you for your ‘onesty.”

He nodded. “Right, it’s time for me to brave the barbarian in his cave.”

Fleur giggled. “Not sending an Elf?”

“I love Dobby, and the other Elves,” Harry said, “but honestly, first thing in the morning?”

Fleur laughed again, and Harry headed out. As he had with Fleur, he called out through an open door, and waited for an acknowledgement. That given, he entered to find Esmeralda draped over Viktor's chest, her eyes open and looking at him. Viktor was stroking her hair lightly.

“Good, we have school this morning,” he told them. “We’re meeting for breakfast shortly.”

“You’ve woken everyone?” Esmeralda asked.

Harry nodded.

“Do you think you could teach people how to pop?” she asked.

“I think so,” he said, as he thought about it.

“My mother, she is often just alone in her house. She had a great time last night, as did my hero’s parents. She doesn’t like the sensation of Apparition or Portkeys,” Esmeralda added.

“Da,” Viktor rumbled. “Is good for them to have friends who understand. Lot of Bulgaria is barely out of dark ages.”

“And there is also the fact that Vik spends too much time travelling, and not enough time with his sister.”

“Or his future wife,” Vik added.

“That too, although you still have to propose properly,” Esmeralda said, poking him with one painted red nail.

“Da, Da,” Viktor mumbled.

“So, point is, I’m thinking of basing myself in England next year, and it would help a lot if certain people could travel easily.”

Harry nodded. “Sounds like a plan,” he said with a smile.

“Good, because you’re a big reason for that,” Esmeralda added. “Last night you just broke through every barrier of protocol to have a laugh.”

“And it was,” Viktor agreed.

Harry grinned. “I value my friends,” he said simply.

They both nodded.

“Anyway, I’m going to start cooking. We’re meeting for breakfast.”

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“What are you doing?”

Hermione looked up and blushed. “Morning, Viktor, Esmeralda,” she greeted the two. “I’m trying to put a grumpy face on.”

“Why?” Viktor asked after a few seconds.

“Because Harry is clearly a bad influence who has me wanting to actually miss classes, so I have to tease him about it.”

“Ahh,” Esmeralda said.

Hermione waved her hands and grinned. “Don’t worry about it,” she said airily. “He’ll understand.”

“If you say so…”

Hermione laughed again at the sceptical expressions the two Bulgarians had on their faces. “And you two can stop it as well.”

Esmeralda giggled as Viktor smirked.

“I just have to be careful of Daphne,” Hermione added. “I love her to bits, but sometimes I worry that she’ll slip a dagger between someone’s ribs if she feels they’re attacking Harry.”

“She is a little protective,” Esmeralda agreed.

“Would love to stay and banter,” Viktor interrupted, “but smell is coming.”

Hermione inhaled. “Well, that was a waste,” she announced and swept into the kitchen. “I had this big spiel about you being an egregious bad influence,” she said to Harry as she took a seat next to Astoria, “but no, you just have to make something that smells that damn good.”

“Good morning Hermione, how utterly wonderful it is to see you again this morning, you are looking truly radiant.”

“Yeah, bite me,” Hermione responded cheerfully, as Viktor and Esmeralda took the seats next to her. They were the last three to arrive, with even Dobby sitting between Romilda and Cedric. She looked at the stove. “Did you get up early to make muffins for us?”

Harry gave her his little grin; it was her favourite expression on her friend. It was the slightly shy one he gave when he was proud of something. He nodded.

“I swear, whoever you marry is going to have to accept that she is going to have share some of your talents. I don't know about anyone else, but I'm not giving you up.”

He blushed cutely, as he turned, and grabbed a load of plates. He laid each one out, and cut a

muffin in half for each, letting out a puff of fresh steam with every cut. He added some Parma ham, and then grabbed a large pan, where he ladled out perfect-looking poached eggs on top of the ham. Finally, he poured some herby sauce over each plate from a bowl that was sitting on another pan, and handed them out.

Fleur inhaled deeply, before she shot Harry a look. “A béarnaise sauce?” she asked in disbelief.

“Eggs Provençal,” he said, as he handed out the plates.

Fleur was the first to taste, as she cut through her egg – it oozed a deep yellow colour – and she took a deep bite. She seemed aware that she was the centre of attention, as she took her time. “I seriously doubt that I could get better at ze finest restaurant in Paris.”

Harry blushed a little. “Don’t stand to attention, eat.”

Hermione did, and it was amazing. The tarragon and chervil were a bit unusual, but it all went together so well, and the muffins were so light, she could eat her weight in them, she was pretty sure.

“Dobby is wondering how good Harry Potter Sir is at cleaning,” the House-elf said.

“Pretty good, why?”

“Well, Harry Potter cooks better than Elves, can pop better than Elves, and can clean. Means Elves shall make Harry Potter their king.”

Viktor broke the silence with a loud laugh. The others joined in as they realised Dobby was joking.

“Dobby scores back,” the Elf said smugly.

Harry poked his tongue out at the Elf. “Just for that, I’m cleaning up.”

Dobby was at the sink a second later. “Let’s not be being silly now,” the Elf said sternly. “I doesn’t have class.”

“Neither do I.”

“You’re on pop duty,” Dobby retorted. “And has test later.”

“Fine. Right, shall we meet in the hall in five minutes?”

Everyone nodded, and exited, praising the food as they did. Hermione stayed behind and hugged Harry. “That was fantastic,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“Sometimes I wish I had what you need, and you had what I need.”

“I know,” he said, his green eyes meeting hers, as open as they had ever been. “I’ll just have to settle for having the greatest friend a boy could have. It’s not a hardship.”

She reached up and brushed his hair back, looking at the faint scar that was the remnant of a piece of Voldemort’s soul. “No,” she agreed, “not a hardship.”

He hugged her, and for a moment, she closed her eyes and allowed the dream to wash over her. And when they broke, she wasn’t sad, a little regretful, but not sad. And she could see that he wasn’t either, and that was how they knew.

“It would make things so much easier if we did,” Harry said with a wistful smile.

“You’ll make the right decision. You won’t jump into it, and you know that you are not limited just because they feel that way about you.”

“I know,” he said, but his voice betrayed his doubts. Hermione knew what was going on behind his eyes. Damn those Dursleys! She, and Daphne and Derek and Cressida and everyone else, would have to work to convince the abused little boy that he wasn’t worthless, that he was worthy of being loved and respected.

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Derek yawned as he stumbled into his kitchen. His nose immediately twitched. On the table, under a charm, was a tray of muffins. Next to the tray was some of his finest Parma ham under a different charm. On the stove were two pans, one of which was being used as a bain-marie as it had a bowl on top of it.

He shook his head. Even after their late night, Harry had managed to make muffins. He looked up as Boris and Ana entered. The former looked a little rough. Trailing after them was Sofia, who had fallen asleep on her brother’s lap long before the evening had ended.

They sat, and he made them coffee, and passed Sofia some orange juice.

Boris took a swig of the coffee. “You still keep your hand in the kitchen?”

“I wish,” Derek replied. “Harry left this for us. He probably thought that we’d like something better than pizza for breakfast.”

“Good morning,” Alphonse Delacour called, as he entered with his wife and youngest. Gabrielle sat next to Sofia, with her mother next to her. Fu and Mei were next, closely followed by Georgieva.

He poured coffee and tea as required, and smiled as Cress was the last to appear.

“Harry left us breakfast,” he explained, as he made up the eleven plates needed. “He must have got up early to make fresh muffins.”

He sniffed the sauce, and looked at the French guests. “He also appears to have made Eggs Provençal.”

Apolline looked surprised, and took her plate as he added the sauce to the muffins, ham and egg. “This is really good,” she announced.

Derek served everyone, and took his own seat. “Yes,” he agreed, after taking a bite of the buttery-soft muffin. “Do you think we’d win a custody battle?” he asked his wife.

She laughed. “I’m sure Harry would still make us breakfast regardless.”

Derek perked up.

“Harry really made this?” Sophia asked. Derek nodded. A very faint blush appeared on her cheeks, as she looked deep in thought.

“It is really good,” Mei agreed. “Maybe we should send our chefs over here to get lessons from him.”

Fu leaned back. “Let the boy do what he loves,” he chided. “Blacksmithing.”

“But that’s so...” she said, and trailed off.

“Maybe he will be the one to bring it lustre,” Fu said. “Besides, as much as I like this, I want my crests.”

“True,” Mei agreed.

“And I’d end up fat if I ate this for breakfast all the time,” Georgie interjected with a very dry tone.

Derek laughed. “I shall put an extra effort in the gym later.”

“I must admit, I did expect to find our children still in bed,” Ana said.

“During the summer, I normally have to use a shovel to get Daph out of bed,” Cress agreed. There was a round of agreement. Gabrielle lightly tugged on her mother’s shirt, an irritated look on her face.

“Come, Gabrielle,” Sophia said in passable French. “We shall explore the garden.”

Gabrielle’s irritated expression faded, and she hopped up. A large smile appeared, and Sophia was soon dragged out of the door.

“I don’t suppose you’d swap, would you?” Apolline asked Ana.

“Sorry, it’s a full time job looking after Boris.”

“Hey,” Boris protested, as everyone else laughed.

“I understand now why I am an only child,” Apolline continued. “What were we thinking, dear?”

Alphonse sipped on his coffee. “I was thinking, ‘Damn, I love that dress’.”

“Ahh, yes,” Boris agreed. “That’s how we have Sophia.”

“Cress had this little green dress. I’m just glad my mother was looking after Daphne at the time.”

“For me,” Fu said, “Mei had this formal red cheongsam and red heels. Nine months later, Xiu.”

The ladies in question looked faux indignant, yet pleased at the same time.

“The worse thing is,” Alphonse continued, as if he weren’t paying attention, “is that if she put that dress on now, we’d have a third daughter.”

“That dress is being burnt,” Apolline said firmly. “That, or birth control.”

“I’ll order the potion,” Alphonse replied.

“Right, moving on from our husbands,” Apolline said.

“Dear, enjoy it,” Georgie interrupted softly. “Because it gets far too quiet otherwise.” There was a pause. “And don’t you lot start looking down,” she added. “I don’t grieve, as I will see him again, I was just making a point that you youngsters shouldn’t complain about the fact that you have loving husbands.”

Derek was amused as his wife murmured an apology. It wasn’t often he got to see her talked to like that.

“I think that the bigger question,” Derek said, taking the attention back, “is where do we go from here.”

“You mean the fact that we all have a lot in common?” Boris asked.

“Yeah.”

Boris leaned back in his chair. “My son does not make friends. The life of a Quidditch star is one where you get stabbed in the back a hell of a lot. He learnt that lesson years ago. It was only because Esmeralda knew him beforehand, and has always treated him the same, that he trusts her like he does.

“So Georgie is going to be related to us sooner or later.”

Georgie smiled.

“But you can imagine our surprise when he makes a good friend in Hogwarts of all places.”

“For us,” Apolline said, “it was finding that Fleur was joining in with things, with boys and girls. And she even explained how no one turned on her after she had an accident with her control. I could read the giddiness in her writing.”

“Actually,” Fu said, “My daughter did, but Viktor and Daphne set her straight. And that was it for me, my daughter is growing up. The big issue has been the state of the Government over here, and the whole Dark Lord thing. But clearly that is changing.”

“Da,” Boris agreed. “We read the reports, about Harry destroying a lot of Death Eaters, and putting fear into the rest.”

“I had a little chat with Amelia,” Cressida said, “They are pretty sure that Voldemort is lying low at the moment. There are all sorts of rumours floating around about Harry, Albus, Nadya and Alastor that have her convinced that if Harry defeats the Dark Lord again, he won’t be back.”

“The question then becomes,” Fu said, “do we gamble? If we move fast, we could get a lock on a lot of things.”

Boris leaned forward. “What are you suggesting?” he asked.

“Well, the first thing that comes to mind, is that there are a lot of mansions coming on the market, due to the patriarchs of families being either arrested or dead. And with the fines incurred for being Death Eaters needing to be paid for in cold galleons, these families are having to hock their mansions to survive. With the right magic, we could ship them whole to China.”

“Where they would sell for four or five times their value,” Mei added.

“Interesting,” Boris agreed, his nose twitching.

“If Zhang Fu buys them, there is an uproar.”

“But if the incredibly good looking but more than slightly dumb Derek Greengrass buys them, no one cares,” Derek added.

“And for Georgie and us?” Boris asked.

“We use Bulgaria as a staging point.” Fu held up his hands. “I’ve not thought up any further than this,” he explained. “It’s just the first thing that came to mind.”

“Bulgaria does have some interesting custom laws,” Cressida said, “but as it is also part of Europe, we have favourable laws for importing and exporting to them. But the French – Bulgarian relationship is even better.”

“And of course, the *Entente Cordiale* allows for free movement of practically anything,” Alphonse agreed.”

“What is the goal?” Georgie asked. “I can bathe in melted gold without noticing it, so money is not that interesting to me.”

“No, but power is,” Alphonse said, his eyes flashing. “I can think of a bunch of things that we can create over this side of Europe, and export to China, and vice versa.”

“People who control the goods, and create jobs because of it, are always very much listened to,” Cressida agreed.

“What about you, Derek?” Boris asked. “I’ve always liked you, but you’ve run from work for years.”

Derek chuckled at the bluntness. “True,” he agreed without rancour. “It’s taken me longer than most to grow up.”

“Actually, it’s taken you a long time to regain your confidence in your other abilities,” Ana said.

Derek winced slightly. “Yes, thank you.” He sighed. “Seriously, though, Derek Greengrass is not dangerous to anyone, not even to Death Eaters, so Derek is pretty much ignored, as are his kids.”

“Ahh,” Boris said, suddenly shaking his head, pausing, and nodding while a helpless look drifted over his face. “I understand.” Ana elbowed him sharply in the side. “Da, da, I was going to. Sorry.”

“No problem.”

“Actually, this could be an interesting idea,” Alphonse said. “Derek is a gadfly, Apolline is a hostess, Ana does charity work, Mei is the wife to the ambassador, and Georgie is retired. At the same time, you have Boris who runs half the beer production in Bulgaria, apart from owning a large percentage of the arable land. Cressida who is the most feared solicitor in this country – from the perspective of Pure Blood males – Fu, who is the ambassador from China to the United Kingdom, as well as the Chinese representative on the I.C.W., and me, who apart from a lot of political rubbish makes some damn good wine.”

“That is true,” Derek agreed. “It is good wine.” There was some laughter, which is what he had wanted.

“Anyway,” Alphonse continued, “All of us big strong men, and Cress, obviously never talk to our spouses, their pretty little minds can’t handle all the big words, doubly so for me, because ‘Poli isn’t even human, why her brain must melt into mush whenever I mention work.”

“That’s because it’s mind numbingly backwards and parochial,” Apolline said sweetly.

“Hush,” Alphonse said with a grin, “So, in casual conversation, we let it be known that we are all friends, and that our pretty little partners are going to go into business.”

Fu smiled slowly. “It’s just a little thing,” he said pompously, “but it keeps her busy and her nose

out my affairs, if you know what I mean.”

“And it keeps him happy,” Cress continued, “and as long as he doesn’t lose all the fortune, it will be good for him to have a little responsibility.”

“My Ana, she’s a good girl,” Boris boomed, “She loves to play the business woman, hardly costing me anything. She’s even got her friend, you remember Kuzman’s wife, don’t you, to make sure they don’t lose too much.”

“Right now,” Ana said with a huff, “if you were not acting, you’d be in the dog kennel, never mind on the couch.”

“Seriously though,” Georgie said, “Alphonse’s idea is a good one, we can literally blow what would look like a lot of money, but isn’t really to us, getting what we want, with no one really paying much attention to us, until we have everything in place.”

“Oh, my,” Derek said. “I’ve just had a thought. I just happen to know a single male in his thirties, with a fortune as large as mine, who, if we framed it correctly, would be a wonderful person to bring on board.”

“Who?” Alphonse asked.

“Sirius Black, the head of the Black family.”

“The one who was framed, spent years in prison, and is now recuperating?” Boris asked.

“He was also a very talented prankster at school,” Cress added.

“And he’s Harry’s godfather?” Alphonse asked.

“Yes. Most people are going to think that he’s damaged. In fact, he’s receiving Muggle therapy at the moment. If we tell him we’re playing a prank on the Wizarding World, and basically taking a lot of power in four countries, he’ll be interested. The idea of revenge over the Pure-bloods who left him to rot will probably be a good one as well.”

“He’s also a Lord of an Ancient and Noble family,” Cressida added. “Same as us.”

“He’s going to be staying with us for a week in the summer.”

“You know what also strikes me?” Georgie added. “If we do a good job, it leaves something interesting for our kids.”

“Ours are already tied up,” Cressida said. “But yes, for the others, it would be fun to work with them.”

“So,” Boris said, “Do we start getting the lawyers involved?”

“We’re in,” Derek said, after a quick look at his wife to ensure she was on board. “I’ve been convinced one can be ridiculously good looking and successful at the same time.”

“I, too, am in,” Georgie said. “I’m bored.”

“We are in,” Apolline said, “Seriously, if I don’t get something else in my life apart from my wonderful, beautiful, sweet, absolute brat of a daughter I will end up losing it and cutting the part responsible off.”

“I’m in,” Alphonse said very quickly.

There was a round of chuckles.

Fu was rubbing his hands and looking delighted.

“I am definitely in. If I have to accept being leered at one more time, I might just end up cursing them during one of our little soirees,” Mei said.

“I am quite definitely in, and so is Boris’s wallet,” Ana agreed.

“Da, da,” Boris mumbled with a pout.

“In which case,” Georgie said, “I’ll work with the public faces of our new venture to come up with something. When I’ve received feedback, I’ll get my family lawyers in it, keeping them at the utmost secrecy.”

There was a round of nods.

“I’ll get a hold of Sirius,” Derek added. “I should be able to do that pretty quickly.” He paused, as another thought hit him. Deep inside he was quite excited; it was good to be using his brain properly. “I dislike using familial relationships for profit,” he explained, “but when there is gold involved, and everyone is happy, that is different.”

“Go on,” Cress encouraged.

“How about we pay to licence the new “pop” spell Harry has come up with, so that we learn it, and no one else does.”

Everyone leaned in, their eyes eager.

“Oh, yes,” Apolline agreed, “Fast and accurate international travel, it will mean we’ll be able to move faster than everyone else.”

“The girl, Romilda, she is a Vane, is she not?” Fu asked.

“She is.”

“A while ago, an enemy of mine did a deal with them. At the time, he boasted about how he’d got the best end of a deal with them. He got some valuable jewels; they got magically enforced permanent rights to travel China with anything inside their little carriages. Twenty years later, they can still carry what they like in and out of China, and my enemy is no more. She understands a deal, so we will not need to offer gold, but it will have to be something valuable.”

“Never mind that, I wonder if the Vanes would want to work for us,” Apolline works.

Fu shook his head. “They don’t really care for much we could offer. I’ve tried talking to them about imports and exports before. They were polite, but they love their lifestyle too much.” He paused and raised his hands. “I could not argue, nor disagree. But yes, we should try and see if they will work with us, definitely.”

Derek settled back, pleased his idea hadn’t been thrown out. He was about to enter a new exciting period of his life. And he could still be the ridiculous good-looking idiot when he wanted to be.

*Jeconais*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Blue Steel

## Chapter 9

It was with a small amount of surprise that Harry realised that he had truly never been happier.

Back at Hogwarts, things settled down into a regular routine that was pretty similar to the way things have been before. The only difference was that there were more people involved. People just seemed more comfortable in his smithy. Fleur, Viktor and Esmeralda practically lived in there with him.

Whenever they didn't have classes, they would do homework, study, or just relax. Harry didn't mind, especially as the girls did tend to wear light clothing as it was always hot.

Cho, who was studying for her OWLs, and Cedric had more classes, so spent less time with him.

They all ate together; they now took up most of the bottom of the Gryffindor table. Every couple of days Viktor would badger him into going for a fly. And at least once a week, over the months, Cedric and Cho would join them, and Harry and Viktor would show them moves – moves that were instinctive for both of them, and thus difficult to teach.

That morning, he went to breakfast, and waited after it had ended.

“Harry?” Romilda asked.

“Hedwig's coming,” he explained.

“How do you know?”

“She always comes when I want her to.”

“Really?”

There was a bark, and Hedwig glided in, alighting in front of him. She tilted her head and barked again.

Harry put his hands out, and used the elvish form of magic to summon a small parcel. Hedwig looked pleased as she held out an ankle, showing her eagerness to deliver it for him. Harry grinned at her and undid the package.

Hedwig peered at it curiously, and then her eyes flashed. Harry took the tiny silver helm, and gently placed it on her head. It fit neatly, as it was shaped to fit over her ears tufts, and had an eye guard. Hedwig shook her head briefly, and then barked her approval as it stuck to her head. Harry looked at it. The pointy helm fitted her personality and looked like a crown, which suited her perfectly as his owl was always regal.

Next, Harry lifted some delicate chain link armour, and wrapped it around her chest, leaving her

wings free. After that, he held out some three-pronged boots, that Hedwig stepped into. Finally, he had some wing protectors that were charmed to be weightless and massless.

He leaned back and examined his work. Hedwig looked awesome.

“Right,” he told her, “three quick barks will remove it, and then three more to put it on again.”

Hedwig barked thrice, and the armour vanished. The owl paused, and then barked thrice again. She examined her wing as it returned. She looked at Harry and barked a question. Harry obediently made a mirror. Hedwig turned and looked at herself a few times, before she took off, and glided around the Great Hall. She dived from the rafters, before pulling herself up.

She swooped up, aileron rolled, and landed in front of him. With three quick barks, she vanished her armour, before she launched herself forward, and Harry found Hedwig rubbing her face all over his in thanks, as she barked her approval and gratitude.

Harry reached up and stroked her back, before helping her back on to the table. “You are very welcome,” he told her.

Hedwig raised her wings and curtsied to him, before she barked thrice and launched herself, in her armour, up and out the door.

“You made armour for your owl?” Fleur demanded. The others were still recovering from obvious astonishment.

Harry nodded. “Hedwig’s awesome, of course I’m going to make her armour.”

“She certainly seemed to approve,” Hermione pointed out. “Somehow I doubt that Crookshanks would wear armour.”

“I don’t think my owl would, either,” Daphne said. “But then, I can’t talk to my owl.”

“Sure you can,” Harry encouraged. “You’ve just got to listen to her!”

“I do,” Daphne said, “but he’s not Hedwig.”

Harry paused. Hedwig was an exceptional owl, so maybe other owls weren’t as good. He shrugged. “As much as I have enough work to do to please an Amish farmer, I have to go to the Ministry today.”

“Why?” Daphne asked with a small pout at the idea of him not being near her.

“The Aurors are ready for their armour, and I need to make sure they understand how to put it on properly the first time. Professor Dumbledore will be there, so there will be nothing to worry about.”

“Okay,” Daphne said, and leaned against Fleur, drawing the girl’s arm around her.

Harry stood, and immediately received a hug from Hermione, which was nice, and that was followed by hugs from Astoria and Romilda which he steadfastly didn't think about, and by that time, Daphne had made her way around the table so that she could hug him too, which was again nice, and she was quickly followed by Fleur which was also nice. All in all, it was an extremely pleasant way to end a breakfast.

“Ready, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry reached out and put a hand on the Headmaster's shoulder, and popped them both.

They arrived in a large hall, with Amelia Bones and the Aurors waiting patiently. They gave a small start at the sudden appearance. The Aurors were all standing in a line, looks of anticipation on their faces.

Harry looked at them. They were all standing straighter than they had been six weeks earlier, and some of them even looked bulkier. “Armour on,” he called. He watched as the armour assembled in front of him, bits flashing in from all points on a clock. There was a flash, and he was then inside his armour. He allowed himself a grin, now that it couldn't be seen.

He drew his favourite sword, and held it out like he had before. Mentally, he counted to forty five, before he allowed it to drop. His arm muscles ached, and he had a bead of sweat on his face. He felt a cool breeze flash over his face, as his armour took care of the problem for him.

Still without saying a word, he handed carefully grabbed the sword by the blade, and handed it to the first Auror. The female one's body changed slightly, as she held it up. He tilted his head curiously. As she held it, her pink hair slowly changed colour to a more natural looking black.

“Done,” he called after thirty seconds. “Pass.”

“Alright,” she cheered, her hair going purple, as she lowered the sword. She put the tip on the mat, and handed it to the large gentlemen next to her. “Go on, Shack.”

‘Shack’ lifted up the sword, and held it in place. After thirty seconds, Harry called out, but the man kept it there for another fifteen seconds, before he lowered it. Down the line, all of them managed his little task.

“Excellent,” he called, as the last finished. He called forth the six standard suits of armour he'd built on Daphne's design. They appeared behind him, each on a stand under a red velvet curtain.

“Your armour will protect you against most curses. They will allow you to move fast and to hit hard. You will be able to breathe underwater, and the swords have runes to ensure they are sharp, and will fight dark creatures as if they were made of silver.

“The swords will not be able to be used against me, or any other Auror-level armour.” He passed Amelia Bones a letter. “Madam Bones now has the remote commands for the armour. If she activates it, the armour will seize, and you will not be able to move, let alone get away.

“As much as the armour is for your protection, it is also for the protection of the British Magical Community. They are not tools of war; they are not to be used by politicians to seize power.

“Any questions?”

“Do we get a cool way of putting them on?” the female asked eagerly.

Harry chuckled. “Unless you want to spend an hour getting in and out of it, a ‘cool way of putting them on’ is required. It is why I needed all those measurements, and that’s why I had you all come back to Hogwarts last week, so I could magically connect each of you to your own armour. Right, you can go first.”

“Armour on,” the female called immediately.

The effect he had chosen was the first one he had designed, and it was interesting to watch the armour crawl up from the ground and melt into place.

With the helm finally in place, the Auror pulled out her sword, and swung it a few times, before she placed it back in the scabbard, and started to jog around the room.

“This is awesome,” she called. Her voice was harsher, deeper, as the runes on the helm made it sound more official. “Awesome voice,” she cheered. She raised her arms and managed a full cartwheel, before she jumped. “This is brilliant!” As she landed, her sword got caught between her legs, tripping her, and sending her flying into the man next to her.

“Can we go?” ‘Shack’ asked, as he steadied the female Auror.

Harry nodded.

“Armour on,” the other four called at once. Seconds later, they were all dressed in their armour.

“Atten-shun,” Amelia barked.

The Aurors lined up, and Harry got a good look at them together. The armour was brightly polished silver, with the Auror crest on the right breast. It was very much modelled after ancient armour, with none of the extrudements Daphne had designed for him.

The helms had faceplates that could swivel completely up. He had given them all easily detachable cloaks, in Armour parade uniform crests.

They looked recognisable as Aurors, and that was the effect he had wanted. “Night mode,” he called. The bright silver faded, and the entire armour turned dark. He nodded to himself and handed an instruction manual that Astoria and Hermione had written for them.

Amelia moved in front of them. “Helms up.”

They moved as one, revealing faces with broad grins.

“The armour is fitted for each of you, but the ability to wear it on duty is a privilege, and not a right. You will be expected to uphold the highest standards of the Auror division. Failure to meet this standard will result in dismissal, and the armour repurposed to another candidate.

“You will be the first contact for Death Eater raids, and you will be expected to attend one public meeting a week, so that the members of the public understand that you are still Aurors under the armour.

“As you are the first members of the new Auror Armoured Division, congratulations, you all get a twenty percent pay rise. You report to the Head of Magical Law Enforcement only, and you will never be a part of the Minister’s protection.”

The grins turned into huge smiles. “I never thought I could be so happy with my clothes on,” the female Auror said reverently.

“Mr Potter, do you mind attending a Press Conference?” Amelia asked.

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who shrugged.

“Okay,” he agreed, thinking of the publicity this could generate for their planned business. He followed Amelia as they headed through a door. There was a velvet curtain that the other Aurors stopped behind. As they moved, Harry allowed his armour to silently melt away. He was not going to meet the press in his Death-Eater-killing armour.

There were easily a hundred people gathered in the room, with at least thirty of them having cameras. Flashbulbs immediately started to pop.

Harry threw out his hand, and silenced them. He tried not to let a scowl show on his face.

Amelia moved in front of a lectern, and Harry took a seat behind her. Dumbledore sat next to him.

“Thank you for coming. Today, we reveal an exciting new turn in Magical Law Enforcement. For the first time since the 16th century, we are pleased to reveal the new Auror Armoured Division.” She waved her wand, and the curtain dropped, revealing the five Aurors. They had returned their armour to day mode, and had their helms down.

There was some applause from the journalists. The now-silent photographers were taking pictures frantically.

“Reporting to the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, these are our brightest and best Aurors, and they will be dedicated to your safety. The armour will protect against the Killing Curse, as well as the Cruciatus.”

Harry coughed slightly. Amelia turned and raised an eyebrow. “And the other one.”

Amelia’s monocle fell out. “H-how?”

Harry shrugged, and pointed to the press.

Amelia turned back. "I have just been informed that the armour will protect against the Imperius Curse as well. To demonstrate, I have given retired Auror Alastor Moody permission to demonstrate the three illegal curses."

Moody walked in from the side, a terrifying grin on his face.

"Let's start easy. Tonks," he called. Harry wondered if all of the Aurors had nicknames, as he'd yet to hear something that sounded like a real name.

The female Auror took a step forward, and then faced Moody. "Imperio," he called. "Sit down on the floor." Nothing happened. He turned, and Amelia took a deep breath, before she nodded. "Imperio." Amelia didn't move. "Sit down on the floor."

Amelia instantly lowered herself to the floor, and sat. Moody cancelled the spell, and she climbed back to her feet. The press applauded again, some shouting questions.

"Silence," Moody roared. "This is the demonstration part." He pointed his wand at Tonks again. "Crucio," he roared.

The sickly red light flashed out of his wand, and struck the armour dead against her chest. She didn't move. "Alright, Tonks?"

"Sir, yes sir," Tonks replied, her voice sounded even, through the distortion runes.

"And finally," Moody said. "Avada Kedavra."

The green light impacted harmlessly on the chest, and Tonks moved back a little. "It's like a strong push," she said.

Amelia spoke next. "The most deadly curse we have, reduced to a strong push. I have also seen the armour absorb a fully-powered cutting curse."

There was another round of applause.

"Thank you, Armoured Auror Tonks."

Harry made a mental note that her surname was Tonks, so the other's surname was probably Shack.

"Right, questions, and do be sensible."

"Andy Smudgley, Daily Prophet," the first managed to beat his colleagues. "How does the Armour work?"

Amelia turned and looked at Harry. "Trade secret," he called back, giving them a grin. There were

a few chuckles. Harry stood. “Seriously, through a series of specially designed runes, proprietary manufacturing techniques and based on an idea originally proposed by Professor Dumbledore, the armour exploits some of the base tenets of the Unforgivables to offer the wearer full protection.

“The five suits of Armour are a gift from the PVG Smithery to the British Public, to ensure their continued safety and prosperity.”

There was another round of applause from the journalists.

“Is PVG Smithery the name of your company?” Smudgley asked.

Harry nodded. “At the moment, we are small, and are still concentrating on initial designs and commissions; however, in a few years’ time, when I’ve left school and I can work full time on it, we will be opening our first store and accepting commissions from the public.”

“Jack Trebut, The Wizarding World News. Will other countries be able to order armour?”

Harry paused. He shrugged. “I would really rather avoid international politics, so I’d probably take the advice of the I.C.W.” Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Albus nodding his agreement, and he felt relieved.

“Simon Simonson, Wizard Monthly. With a lot of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s supporters arrested or dead, how is the search for him going?”

Harry retook his seat, allowing Amelia to answer his question.

“Before I answer that question, I should point out that there is no record at all of a peerage being bestowed on the self-titled Dark Lord. That is a moniker self-devised and self-appointed. While we know That Wizard’s real name, and understand how his moniker was derived from his own name, we are aware of the general public’s unease at his anagrammed name.

“As such, we will be referring to him as That Wizard. Now, to answer your question, working with the I.C.W. we have followed international conventions and have frozen both his and his allies’ bank accounts.

“We are now aware of three possible locations for him. They are protected by the Fidelius Charm, and we are working closely with our colleagues in the Department Of Mysteries to see about working around this charm.

“When we do, our Armoured Auror division will be the first to apprehend That Wizard.”

There was another round of applause from the journalists. The questions from there turned quite dull, and Harry stopped paying close attention.

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A few days later, it was just Fleur left with him, as he was finishing off a new piece, and it was

really late. He checked his watch, or really early, that should be. He put the particularly fine piece of casting, an arm bracer, down and allowed his magic to stop powering the forge.

He held out his hand to her.

“It is going to be chilly walking back to the carriages,” she said softly.

“Are you comfortable here?” he asked.

She looked at him thoughtfully. “I am.”

He dropped his hand, and reached over the desk to grab a stool, and perched on it.

“Oh,” Fleur said, and gave a small pout. “It’s time for zat conversation?”

He chuckled. “It is. Talk to me, Fleur.”

Fleur inhaled deeply, and started to speak, slowly. She was clearly concentrating on each word and making sure she enunciated them correctly.

“I think I am falling quite deeply for your sister. And for me, that is a serious statement. I do not just look at one thing, I look at everything. First, is she strong enough to deal with a Veela? That answer is yes. She approached me, and asked me out, despite being younger.

“Is she mature enough to deal with me? Not only did she accept that I might not be interested, she protected me when my control slipped.

“Is she attractive? I know it sounds bad, but that is important to me. And she is, she has wonderful eyes that look at me like I’m the most important thing in her life. They sparkle.

“Do I like her family? Derek is wonderful, and Cressida is very nice. Astoria has been nothing but welcoming with me.

“Does she like my family? She has charmed my parents, and my little sister thinks she’s wonderful.

“So my last question is, can I handle sharing her heart with someone else? In her heart is her brother, her rock. And just recently, I have been spending time with him, alone. He has talked to me, listened to me, teased me, and now, he is interrogating me. He is exactly what a big brother should be.

“I will not promise eternity, or that she will not be hurt. I can promise that it will not be deliberate.”

All during her little speech, she kept her eyes firmly on his.

He hopped over the table, and pulled her into a hug. “That last bit was all I wanted to hear,” he

told her, “but I’m happy to hear the rest.”

“I do not mind if I get a protective big brother as well,” she whispered.

Harry smiled and popped them both straight to Daphne’s bedroom. Daphne was sat on her bed, one of the *Wind in the Willows* books on her lap. She looked up eagerly.

Harry smiled at Daphne.

“Yes!” she cheered.

Fleur laughed.

“It’s quite chilly outside, and I’m pretty sure there are wolves out. I think Fleur needs somewhere to stay.”

Daphne raised her hand eagerly. “She can stay with me!”

“Looks like you won’t get cold,” he said to Fleur. She giggled and nodded. He headed to the door, and paused, without looking back, he called, “That’s not to mean that you need to do anything other than sleep.”

“Sleep is good,” Daphne agreed. “And maybe a bit of snuggling.”

“Yeah, I’ll leave now,” he said, and quickly got out of the room. He shut the door behind him, and leaned against it. “I must be fucking insane,” he mumbled. “Two of the best looking girls in the world and I’m slightly freaked out and want to protect them from each other.”

“Thank Merlin they can’t get pregnant!” He paused, as he remembered his reassuring words to Derek about that subject. He shuddered, and tried really hard to get the idea out of his mind.

He shook himself, he could really do with some sleep, but he had too much to do. It was only a week until the final task, and he had so many people he cared about now.

He popped back to the smithy, asked for an Elf to bring him a pot of coffee and a stamina potion, and got back to work.

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The next morning, Fleur greeted him with a pounce and hug, before she shifted so that Daphne could do the same.

“You should know,” Daphne said to their gathered friends, “that Fleur and I are now dating.”

“Congratulations,” Tori cheered, and hugged her sister. Romi agreed, and hugged Fleur, before the two younger ones switched.

“So, how bad was it, Fleur?” Hermione asked.

“I think he knows that Daphne likes me, so he just let me talk. I said the right things, I think, so there was no problem.”

“Really?” Hermione asked Harry.

He nodded.

“In that case, you may interrogate my future boyfriends.”

Harry laughed. “Really?”

Hermione nodded. “As much as I think the shotgun speech is stupidly over the top, I have nothing against someone I know loves me ensuring that I’m not getting into trouble.”

“Deal,” he agreed. “Breakfast?”

Daphne reached out and took Fleur’s hand. Fleur looked at her. “I’m not hiding,” Daphne said. “I love you, and I don’t care who knows it.”

“You live in a parochial society,” Fleur said softly. “I don’t mind.”

“I do. I’m proud that I’m dating you.”

Fleur slowly smiled. “And it is things like this as to why you are,” she said, before kissing Daphne gently on the lips.

“Besides,” Daphne said, “who will really care?”

“Dobby, can you take them to the Hall?” The two girls vanished. “Armour on, fast,” he called. Rather than a dramatic display, his armour came into existence straight onto him. “Daph might be optimistic, I’m not,” he explained, and popped out.

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“Oh, my,” Astoria said. “We better get there as well.”

“Indeed,” Hermione agreed. “Probably best to wait a few seconds, just to let the tension rise. Someone will be stupid enough to say something.”

Romilda giggled. “He’ll be standing in front of them, ready to tear anyone apart who suggests that Daphne is unnatural.”

“All Harry cares about is that she’s happy,” Astoria agreed. “He told her she could date the entire Bulgarian Cheerleading Team, if it made her happy.”

Hermione gave a pleased smile. “He’s grown so nicely. Right, let’s get to the hall. Transportation for three, please.”

They were all popped, and arrived to an utterly silent Great Hall, apart from Harry's intimidating breathing.

"Problem?" Hermione asked.

"Some people intimated that my sister was a *freak*," Harry grunted.

Hermione winced. That was one word that really got to Harry.

"And that somehow, my sister, or Fleur, are stealing girls from their rightful position, which I presume means available for their limited charms in the kitchen and the bedroom.

"Or that she should have accepted the unwashed and unlettered attentions of her fellow Slytherins, and forgone happiness to breed the next generation of inbred powerless prejudiced idiots with hyper-inflated opinions of themselves.

"But surprisingly, not one of these people are willing to say that to Daphne and Fleur's big brother."

"Yay," Fleur cheered, as she pounced out of her seat and hugged Harry, armour and all. "Public acknowledgement is a good thing," she said to Harry, and kissed him on the cheek. She took possession of his arm. Daphne moved over and took possession of his other arm. She reached up and kissed his other cheek.

"Same sex relationships are not common in the Wizarding World," Nadya said from the Professors' table.

"As long as it is consensual and harms no one, I really don't care," Harry said. "My sisters' happiness is what I care about.

"So I will make it very clear. Fleur is my sister's girlfriend. Daphne is my sister. While not official, I also claim Fleur as my sister. Any attempt to slander, insult, degrade, or interact negatively with my sisters will be handled under the existing laws of the Ministry of Magic. A duel, at dawn." He paused. "And there is nothing in the law to stop me wearing my armour."

There was a strange gulping sound from listening students.

"Am I, in any way, unclear?"

No one said anything.

"Good." He guided the two girls over to their table, and sat, a little clunkily. Fleur and Daphne happily moved with him.

Hermione pinned Fleur with a gaze.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to have a boy who admits that you are really attractive, but

doesn't want to do you?" the French witch asked.

"Yes."

"Well, until recently, I didn't. So if I get to act all girly, you will 'ave to forgive me."

Hermione suddenly chuckled. "I should try it," she admitted.

"I am going to need my arms to eat."

"We could feed you," Daphne offered eagerly.

"No. I love you to bits, Daph, but that's a step too far."

"Meanie," she pouted.

"Always," he agreed. "Right, I've got a load of work that needs doing, so please release my arms."

"Only if you remove the armour so we can snuggle."

"This better be a different sort of snuggling to last night," Harry grumbled, as his armour melted away, and the two girls had matching grins as they leaned against his arms.

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Hermione snagged a hold of Fleur's arm, and pulled her into a classroom.

"Hermione?"

"Okay, I love Harry, he's my best friend, and probably a different kind of brother to me. I want to know what you are doing."

"With Harry?"

"Yes."

"I am chasing the fairy tale," Fleur said, and then smiled a relaxed and beautiful smile.

Hermione blinked. "Okay. Erm, what?"

Fleur laughed, and her accent returned to the better English she had been using recently. "Harry's view and actions with Daph are not a brother and sister in the real world; it is the relationship of a fairy tale. He is the big, strong and caring brother, she is the dainty, beautiful little sister, and they love each other. There is no squabbling, no boredom, nothing of what normally existing between siblings. He loves her, like in a book. And she loves him the same way, she sees her own role as the little sister to the king, giving her protection, and in return, she will protect him, even if it means slipping a dagger between someone's ribs, because that's what princesses do.

“So for me, I want the same feeling of safety and protection, the same unreal devotion, affection and caring. I want to feel sad and get a hug from him, if Daph’s not around, and know that he loves me to bits. I want to know that if I am not around, my love can go to him and be picked up in mood. And I love to know that I never have to be jealous.

“So yes, I will be encouraging Harry to treat me like he does Daphne, because it means that the next time a boy calls me a whore because I am Veela, I have a strong big brother to protect my name and reputation.

“My Father has always tried his best to protect me from potential molesters and kidnappers. From the people who want to abuse me because I am gorgeous. I have always been aware of this, it has forced me to study, to practice, to be good enough to become the Beauxbatons champion.

“But my father is not Harry, he does not make these potential abusers wet themselves with fear at the thought of touching me, or my sister. And in return, like Daphne, I will happily slide a dagger between the ribs of anyone who needs it.”

“I understand, but do not abuse it, Fleur,” Hermione said sternly. “I do not want Harry hurt. I honestly don’t think Daphne could do so.”

“I could,” Fleur agreed, “but I won’t, because I wouldn’t just lose Harry, I’d lose Daph as well. And I am quite falling for her.”

“Okay,” Hermione smiled.

“This is the first time I have been interrogated as to my feelings for a boy that I am not romantically interested in.”

“I love Harry, but in a more real-world way.”

“Yes, like I love my sister,” Fleur agreed. “Please, do not hold that I want the fairy tale against me.”

Hermione moved over and hugged Fleur. “I won’t.”

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Amelia Bones headed into the Ministry of Magic, and then paused. She tilted her head, before she slid her hand to her hip, and she pinched herself. It hurt, and therefore, she was definitely awake. It also squished more than she was happy about, so she resolved to skip snacks for the rest of the week. She looked over her shoulder at a noise behind her. “Tonks?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Describe what is in front of us.”

Tonks’s voice was unsure. “It appears to be our armour, Ma’am. It appears to be hanging upside-

down from the ceiling. My armour also appears to have someone, who is quite definitely not me, inside it.

“She does have an extremely red face, so I would guess that she has been there for a while. If my memory is serving me correctly, she’s Alecto Carrow.”

Amelia nodded. “Her brother is in Shacklebolt’s armour next to her.”

“I wonder if Harry put something in to clean filth from his armour.”

“He did,” Amelia confirmed. “I’m trying to decide if I want to actually let them down.”

Tonks moved forward and touched the neck of one, inside the helm. “Unconscious, Ma’am.”

“Department Override, Armour Off,” Amelia called.

As the armour vanished, the five Death Eaters fell to the floor in ungainly heaps. She actually thought that she heard several bones break.

“Tonks, get some help, hand them over to the I.C.W. to get them out of the country, quick.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Amelia headed on to her office, and allowed herself a smile. It was fun actually doing her job properly, and this time, she hadn’t felt any sorrow for the enemy.

She whistled under her breath as she sat down, and got to work.

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Harry pounded the alloy he was currently experimenting with, his mind drifting. He was tired, really tired, and wanted nothing more than to sleep, but he had too much that needed doing. He was very suspicious that something was going to happen at the end of the last task, and he wanted to be ready.

No matter what happened, he was going to be in the lead, so he was reinforcing his armour with anything and everything he could think off.

His initial estimate that a piece could only accept two enchantments was correct. However Astoria had wondered why, if the limit was two enchantments per piece, they couldn’t just make the armour have more pieces. His armour was now made of more bits, each with the maximum enchantments.

Sure, some of the joints weren’t as strong physically as he would like, but the additional magical protection and additional features more than made up for it.

And that was just his armour.

He glanced down at his to-do list and sighed softly.

He wasn't the only one working hard; Astoria had come up with a way for the Elves to do the enchantments on the boots, while Romilda had talked to a cousin who was able to supply Muggle boots. The money was pouring in. Whether it was sustainable growth he didn't know, people might simply be interested short-term because of the match. But he felt it was fun, and judging by the solid bookings of the pitch, he wasn't the only one who thought that.

Romilda had also sold another ten crests, and was working with Daph to visit the families so that the new crests could be based on their originals. On top of the eight he was already committed to make, this would fill his calendar for the next year, leaving just enough time to make daggers, put enough time into his school work to keep Hermione (and his sisters, now that the evil Hermione had convinced them to join forces with her) off his back, and, oh, kill Voldemort if anyone ever managed to track him down.

Hermione had discovered just how hard it was to write a proper research paper, and had decided to re-join her classes and work in her spare time – as she didn't want to miss too much school work.

He could understand that, and it was one of the many reasons he had been more than happy to pass his idea on to others. That sort of work seemed rather dull.

He gave a yawn, stretched, and then forced himself to concentrate. He started on the next piece, and as he did, he started to think about how magic actually worked.

He had another week before the last task, and he would be ready, no matter what. And as soon as it was over, he was going to sleep for a week, and then never again touch the focusing, sleep replenishing, and energy potions he was having Dobby buy for him.

He had explained his reasons to Dobby, and the Elf had reluctantly agreed with him, with the warning that if Harry didn't stop, he would tell Daphne about them.

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The morning of the final task dawned far too early. In fact, it was so early that Harry decided he needed more sleep, and turned over and went back to the blackness he had been enjoying.

The second time he woke up, he felt far more willing to face the day, even if it was already ten. He got up, showered and washed, dressed, and yawned as he entered their little common room. It was empty, so he popped down to the Great Hall. All his friends were gathered around the end of the Gryffindor table, nattering.

He slid down, and thanked the Elves as a breakfast was put in front of him. He listened to the conversations, not joining in, until he had finished.

“Hey, Daph,” he called. “You mind if I borrow your girlfriend?”

“Of course not,” Daphne replied.

“Transportation for everyone to the smithy please,” Harry said, as he moved over and took Fleur’s hand. While the others appeared behind the desks, he and Fleur appeared in front. He reached out and removed Fleur’s robes, handing them to Daphne, who quickly folded them neatly.

Fleur was grinning at him, “You are more of a pure blood than I thought?” she asked playfully.

“Maybe I am leering at my sister’s girlfriend.”

“That does not work, when you claim me as your sister as well.”

“Cedric, Vik, close your eyes,” he ordered. “Fleur, blouse off, please.” Her bra was a lot more practical than the thing he had seen last time he had seen her topless. He picked up a padded t-shirt, and helped her put it on. He pulled it into place, knowing just how difficult it was to do so the first time you wore one.

“Erm, Harry?” Fleur asked, looking confused, but with a glimmer of hope in her eyes. She moved and pulled off her skirt, kicking off her shoes at the same time. Harry pulled out some padded shorts, and helped her into them.

It just wasn’t fair that Daphne had called dibs. Fleur’s body was so utterly perfect.

To get the pads into place, he had to tug at it from various different angles. At the end, he looked at his sister. “You have amazing taste.”

Daphne beamed at him.

“Right, ready?”

“Really?” Fleur asked. She nodded, hard, her long blonde hair bouncing.

“No, wait. We need to put your hair up so it won't get caught in the metal.” That task was swiftly accomplished as Harry had plenty of practice dealing with Daphne’s hair. “OK, Armour on, Fleur.”

The padded underwear forced Fleur’s arms and legs apart, and armour started to attach itself to her. Fleur squeaked as it wrapped into place, her eyes widening as she felt just how intimate some of the straps could be.

As it finished, Harry looked, before walking behind her, and slamming his fists down on her shoulders, to straighten it. He walked around her front, and nodded. As he’d done this without Daphne’s help, he was very pleased with how it had come out.

The armour glistened with its highly polished steel plates, each plate having a light blue inlay. There was a small gap between the cuirass and the loin guard, showing the much deeper blue underneath. He’d covered that gap with careful runes, to ensure there was not a weak point.

The cuirass itself was carefully sculpted to ensure that the fact that Fleur was a healthy female

Veela was not hidden.

The thigh protectors and greaves matched the top half. The finishing touch was the royal blue cape he'd designed. It would detach with any significant pressure, but looked awesome.

Daphne made a loud *squeeing* sound, and a second later he found himself locked in the most excited and tightest hug he'd received from her.

"How do I look?" Fleur demanded.

"You could never look less than perfect," Daphne called.

Hermione created a mirror, and Fleur examined herself. When she turned to look at him, she had tears in her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. "So very much."

"I'm so proud of you," Daphne said, as she kissed him on the cheek. "Just when I think you've done everything you can for me, you do more. She looks fantastic, you've done so well." She hugged him again, before she put her hands on her hips. "And that's why you got me to knock up the designs for other schools and Hogwarts houses," she added with an amused shake of the head, "not as a prospective gift!"

Daphne then bounced over to Fleur. She jumped up and hung from Fleur's armour-clad neck, and kissed her.

Harry politely turned away.

When he looked back, Daphne had one of Fleur's arms wrapped around her, and they'd moved to one side.

"Right, Vik, you're not dating my sister, so I'm not going to tease. Strip."

"Da!" Viktor exclaimed happily, as he vaulted the table and stripped down to his boxers. Harry helped him on with his padded undergarments, just as he had Fleur, before he called for Viktor's armour.

The armour he'd designed for his friend was far more masculine, and was inlaid with the Durmstrang red, and had a matching cape. Viktor looked in the mirror, and Harry found out that having a Cossack hug you exuberantly in full armour was not the world's most pleasant experience.

As Viktor put him down, and moved over to Esmeralda, Harry yelled, "Be careful hugging her, you maniac, you're coated in steel!" He then moved to the last champion and repeated the process with Cedric's yellow and black armour.

When they were all armoured, he looked at them. "As you are not Aurors, I've enchanted the armour so that it will stop a Killing Curse, as well most other curses, and to be light weight, so you can move in it properly.

“The armour is now locked to your magical signatures, so the commands to put on the armour and remove it will work for you. My armour has the padding built in. I couldn’t do that for you because I would have needed every single measurement, and that’s A, really intimate, and B, would have ruined the surprise.”

“I measured Harry,” Daphne announced, “and he’s right.” She smirked suddenly. “And some witch is going to be really lucky,” she added with a sing-song voice. Harry ignored the blushes that appeared on Astoria’s and Romilda’s faces.

“I’m probably being paranoid,” Harry continued, “But I want us all to survive whatever might happen today.”

He moved over and pulled out three swords he’d made for them. “Just in case.”

Viktor pulled his out of the scabbard. With casual ease he swung it a few times. He nodded and moved over to the side and stood before Harry’s practice dummy. With a suddenness that was surprising he attacked. The head of the dummy fell to the ground.

Viktor sighed audibly. “Goodbye poor Vik’s money,” he called. He looked at Harry. “Vik wants custom swords.”

Harry chuckled.

“Typical barbarian,” Fleur murmured teasingly, as she walked over. Unlike Viktor’s power strokes her thrusts and strikes were far more precise and delicate, despite the weight of the sword.

She turned and grinned. “You think that the children of families like ours are not taught to fight?” she said at Harry’s bemused look.

“No,” Harry answered. “I thought it was going to be used as a last resort, and I was going to mention that the pointy end faces away from you.”

“Good advice,” Cedric mumbled. “I’ll stick with my wand, I think.”

---

“Sirius,” Derek called, as he headed toward the man.

“Derek? Man, you are still far too good looking for your own right. It’s a damn good job that you graduated long before me, because I’d’ve struck out if you were still around.”

Derek laughed. “I wanted to catch you about two things. You mind a quick chat?”

“I’ve got ten minutes,” Sirius agreed.

“Right, I’m probably overstepping some bounds here, but frankly, I love Harry to bits. What do you see when you look at him?”

A flash of something appeared in Sirius' eyes, before he took a deep breath, and conjured a bench. Derek sat next to him.

"For a long time, I saw a miniature James," he admitted. "Even the last time I saw him, I was still thinking of him as Prongs Junior, but, I said something, and he gave me this bewildered little look, and it hurt. I talked about it, and realised I didn't know Harry that much.

"I know I love him, I know I always have, but, actually know him? Not much. So, the answer is, when I look at him now, I will see Harry."

"Excellent," Derek said, trying to keep the slight disappointment hidden. "Now, if you don't mind some advice, tell him that."

"I will," Sirius agreed.

"Now, on to more fun things. How do you fancy joining the little wives of several important people and the gadfly of a husband of a respected divorce solicitor in a play business venture?"

Sirius tilted his head. "I'm listening."

"Well, we all have access to lots of money, and are based in four different countries, and we realised that, for example, we could buy country manors over here, export them to China, and make at least three hundred percent profit."

"I'm interested."

"Of course, no one will take us seriously, what, with Derek Greengrass, Ana Krum, GeorgievaDraganova, Apolline Delacour and Zhang Mei already involved. Adding the poor and obviously loony Sirius Black would make us that more laughable."

Sirius frowned and stood, he started to pace in front of Derek. His nose started to twitch. "This sounds like the biggest prank in the world," he pointed out.

Derek nodded. "We thought that you might put it that way. We want power, for many reasons, most of them to do with the fact that my daughter is dating a Veela, and that I love Harry to bits. And if I have to grow up a bit to ensure that, once Voldemort is dead, Harry can have the career he wants, free of entanglements and people trying to use him, then I will do that. And, cards on the table, if my help in making the world better for Harry inclines him further toward my youngest, then all the better."

Sirius stopped his pacing. "Harry doesn't want to fix the world?"

"He wants to be the best blacksmith in the world, and why shouldn't he?"

"So I'd be pranking the world, and helping ensure that Harry can live his dreams in the sort of world he deserves? I am absolutely in."

Derek stood, and shook the man's hand. He grinned. "Apolline has mentioned that she has quite a few Veela friends who are looking to settle down." Derek then found himself hugged exuberantly.

"That's chocolate icing on an already amazing cake!"

---

Harry met the other champions in the Entrance Hall to Hogwarts. Dumbledore walked over to them. "Before we start the task, we've arranged for your families to spend some time with you."

Eagerly, Harry walked out with the others, and into a scrum of people. Viktor's parents were there, along with Fleur's.

He looked down as someone tugged on his shirt. There was a girl there, dressed in a light blue long sleeved summer dress, with black curly hair and huge brown eyes. She had a pleading expression on her face, and a smile that was missing one of the two front teeth. "Hi, Hawwy," she lisped, "I'm Isabella, Womilda's cousin, can I has hug please?"

Harry bent down and picked her up instantly, her legs instantly moved around his torso, her arms around his neck, and she relaxed.

"Thank you, Hawwy," she whispered. "There's lotsa people here, and I was scawed."

He hugged her tighter.

"I turn my back for thirty seconds," Romilda grumbled, as she approached him. "You've met my pet leech."

"Don't be a meany, Womi," Isabella called.

Romilda sighed and rolled her eyes. "Come on, you can meet my parents, we figured that we'd get everyone together for you, because we're all family." She paused. "And make sure you're speaking properly, Issy, you're no longer five."

"I'd love to meet them," he said. He looked down to see Isabella pouting at Romilda.

He walked around Viktor, who was already play wrestling with his father, and stopped. "Sirius," he yelled.

"Harry," Sirius said with a large smile. He offered his hand, and Harry shook it, carefully balancing Isabella as he did. "It's great to see you."

"You too, you're looking good."

"Exercise, can't have a fourteen-year-old having bigger muscles than me," Sirius teased. "That, and eating right. Still, as good as the island was, I'm happy to be back in Blighty. I'm going into business with Derek."

“That’s brilliant,” Harry said, feeling lighter all of a sudden.

Sirius’ smile seemed to grow in intensity. “Of course, if he wasn’t married, I’d be worried, I don’t need that sort of competition. All those years in jail have left me seriously out of practice!”

“You just need to play up the innocent hero who managed to escape Azkaban,” Harry suggested, ignoring the attempted pun.

“You’re teaching your grandmother to suck eggs,” Sirius replied. “Come on, Romilda’s been waiting patiently.”

Harry sent an apologetic look at the girl, who didn’t look in the slightest worried. “I took you this way on purpose,” she said. “But as we’re all going to be traipsing around Europe, Tori and I thought it would be a good idea for you to meet them for that reason as well. Anyway, Mum and Dad, this is Harry.” She pointed to a woman who looked like both an older version of Romilda and a younger version of Nadya, and Harry could not help noticing the low cut peasant blouse and the impressive way she filled said blouse.

The man next to her was very dark, with short curly black hair that was wild, tanned skin, a small black goatee, and a gold hooped earring. He had on white shirt with a red neckerchief and grey trousers.

“Harry, this is Rosella and Israel Vane, my parents.”

Harry stuck out his hand, to find that Israel had a very firm grip. “Romilda has told us a lot about you,” Israel said, as he turned Harry’s hand over, and smiled at the burn marks and calluses. “The hands of a craftsman!”

“Thanks.”

“And you’ve met Isabella,” Rosella said, as she leaned in and kissed him on both cheeks. “We’re so looking forward to this summer.”

Harry shot a smile at them both. “So am I,” he enthused. “I’ve never even seen the ocean, never mind another country, and I really can’t wait to explore.”

Sirius made a growling sound, Harry turned his head. “Relax, not only did Romi help me curse them, when we stumbled across them, she kicked Vernon so hard that Dudley will never be able to get it up.”

Sirius barked a laugh, as Rosella and Israel looked amused.

“Yes, we heard about some truly inventive curses,” Rosella agreed. She had a slightly foreign accent that Harry couldn’t place. “And some new ways of using them that we’d never thought of.”

“Yes,” Israel agreed, “but that’s a fireside story.”

“It’s really great to meet you both, as I love Astoria’s parents so much; I really wanted to meet Romilda’s as well.”

“Well, we’ve heard so much about you, and well,” Israel reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small diamond, and chucked it at his daughter, “we want some of those knives.”

Romilda pulled out a small jewellers’ eye loupe, and examined it.

“No faith,” Israel called playfully, striking the back of his hand to his forehead.

“This is my career we’re talking about,” Romilda retorted. “And yes, this will get you two.”

“We don’t carry much gold,” Israel explained.

“Give it back, Romi,” Harry said with a sigh. “Daph and I have already made your parents a knife each for having us this summer.” He put a playful scowl on his face. “It was supposed to be a surprise.”

Romilda pouted as she handed the diamond back. Israel looked delighted as he looked at his daughter. “I’m sure there will be other things we want,” he consoled her.

“Don’t forget bargaining is important,” Harry agreed, “but you’re the expert.”

Romilda smiled at him, and looked at her parents eagerly.

Israel made a cross with his fingers. “Back, evil child.”

Rosella smacked him, quite hard, in the arm.

“Is there room to increase the pulchritude in the group?” a familiar voice called.

“Derek,” Harry said happily, and gave the man a one-armed hug. He sniggered at the dumbfounded expression on Astoria, Daphne and Cressida’s faces. “And Cress, thanks for coming.”

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Cressida exclaimed. “Rosella, Israel, it’s good to see you.” Astoria moved over to Romilda, and stood next to her.

“It’s been close to a year, far too long,” Israel agreed. “We need to get together and have a party.”

“How about you park your clan on our lawn again, at the start of summer. We could have a welcome home party for the kids, before everyone separates.”

“Wonderful idea,” Sirius agreed.

“Yo, Boris,” Harry called, “we’re planning a party, you want in?”

Boris appeared in a flash. “Is Boris,” he introduced himself, “is Vik’s dad,” before he dropped the playful accent. “So, the last time we had a party, Harry got up early and made the best breakfast in the world. And that was after introducing us to pizza and some manly beer.”

“This is Israel and Rosella Vane,” Harry introduced the two, “of the Vane Gypsy clan, and Romilda’s parents. We’re talking about celebrating the end of the school year with a large barbeque, sacrificing a large pig and a cow to the cause, and ordering in several crates of alcohol.”

“Here, have money,” Viktor introduced himself to the group, handing Harry his wallet. Esmeralda moved next to Boris. “Harry does lots, time for Viktor to do little.”

Harry laughed. “If you insist.”

“Vik does! Hello, parents of Romilda,” he added.

“Okay, even we’ve heard that you are an exceptional Quidditch player. Congratulations on your hard work and dedication.”

Vik turned to his father. “That, is nicest greeting professional player Vik has received.” He moved forward and bear-hugged Romilda’s father, and then kissed Rosella on both cheeks. “Vik so glad he came to Hogwarts this year!”

“Hello, Harry,” Ana said, as she appeared next to her husband. Sophia walked forward and looked up at him.

“Good luck in the task today, Harry,” she said, “I do want big brother to win, but would not mind if you did.”

Harry leaned down a bit, and hugged the young girl with his free arm. “Thank you, Sophia.”

She gave him a beaming smile with a faint hint of a blush on her cheeks, and then retreated to half-hide behind Viktor.

“Gathering over here, are we,” Apolline said, as she and her husband joined the crowd. Daphne and Fleur, who was carrying Gabrielle, appeared next to them, with Hermione next to Daphne. Harry looked around, and waved for Cedric, Cho, and Cedric’s parents to join them.

Cedric rolled his eyes, with his back to his parents, and shook his head.

Harry winced, and sent an apologetic look.

Cedric shrugged, mouthed, “Not your fault,” and turned back to his family.

Harry turned back as everyone finished introducing each other.

“So, do we have something special to look forward to?” Israel asked, “Nadya sent some wonderful descriptions and photos of the first two tasks.”

Fleur giggled. “Oui,” she said. “And as always, the true champion is the one leading it.”

“Cedric?” Harry asked.

“No, you, silly,” Fleur replied. “Daph, be a love?”

“Sure,” Daphne said, and bounced over to Harry, and kissed him on the cheek. “Hush,” she said sternly, “just because you consider yourself a fake champion, doesn’t mean the others do.”

“Okay,” he gave in, and decided to keep his opinion to himself.

“As sorry as I am to break this up,” Professor Dumbledore called, “it is time to start.”

Harry looked as Isabella tugged gently on his side. “Thank you for duh hug,” she said, and kissed his cheek. He lowered her to the ground, and she moved away, and joined Romilda.

Harry moved forward, and knelt. He showed her his bare hands, and then twisted them, and used elf magic to silently summon one of the leather Hedwig dolls he’d worked on. He offered the white leather and lamb fleece owl to the girl. He’d used amber for the eyes, and it was startlingly effective.

She gasped, and took it reverentially, before she hugged it tightly. She looked up at him, her eyes bright with excitement. “Thank you, Hawwy,” she said. “She is bootiful.”

Harry smiled at her. There was a commotion behind him, and he knew exactly what it was. He turned, to see a silenced Gabrielle at what appeared to be a start of an epic tantrum. He summoned another, and moved over and offered it to her. Immediately the tantrum ended, and she beamed happily. He had the feeling that she didn’t really care for the owl, she just didn’t want to be left out of something.

“Thank you,” Fleur said, and he knew she was thanking him for ending the tantrum, rather than the actual toy.

“Erm, can I get one?” Daphne asked hopefully.

Harry laughed, and summoned one for her as well. And then more as Hermione coughed, and held out a hand. It was a good job he’d had enough leather and fleece to make twenty of them. The first ten hadn’t been that good, but the last ten had met Hedwig’s standards. After handing Romilda and Astoria one each, plus one for Derek, who was grinning with child-like anticipation, he finished with Sophia.

“Thank you, so very much,” she whispered, and moved forward and hugged him again.

He stood. He moved over and hugged Derek and Cress, before offering a shy hug to Sirius, who grabbed him and whispered, “Good luck, Harry.”

He moved away, only to be pulled back by Hermione, and then Romilda and Astoria who both

gave him good luck kisses on the cheek. He pretended he didn't see their firm looks at Sophia, or the slightly defiant look she had as she stood behind her father.

Fleur kissed her parents and handed over Gabrielle, before kissing Daphne. Viktor hugged Ana, and then gave a bear hug to Boris, before giving Sophia a tight hug. He kissed Esmeralda. Together, they joined Cedric and walked toward the entrance to the maze.

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“This is exciting,” Ludo Bagman’s voice echoed around the stadium. “Now, for the final task, the champions must enter the maze and fight their way to the centre. The first to the centre will find the Triwizard Cup and win the tournament.” He paused, as the crowd roared their approval.

Above the maze, the same floating screen from the second task appeared.

“Harry, you’re first, then Viktor, then Cedric, and finally Fleur. Ready?”

He blew a whistle, and Harry took a few steps forward, and then waited. He was joined by Viktor, and then Cedric, and finally Fleur.

“Ready?” The three other champions grinned. “Ladies first.”

“Armour on,” Fleur yelled. She shrugged off her robes, revealing the padded clothing, just in time for the armour to slide up her body, locking into position.

“Armour on,” Cedric and Viktor called, following the same motions.

“Armour on,” Harry whispered, last. He’d done this many times, and hadn’t want to stand out, so he’d made sure his armour grew on him the same way, and looked similar to theirs – the only difference, of course, was that his was in Hogwarts’ colours.

“Ready?” he asked, drawing a sword.

The other three nodded, drew their own swords – Cedric almost fumbling his – and together they entered the maze.

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“Only Harry,” Derek called, amusement evident in his voice.

“He made the armour as a surprise,” Daphne announced. “He probably skipped a lot of sleep to do so.”

“Probably,” Hermione agreed with a sigh. “But part of this tournament was to bring the schools closer, and there you have the four of them working together.

As the four turned a corner, a Blast-Ended Skrewt appeared in front of them. It paused, and then, to the watching audience’s surprise, backed away slowly.

“Smart creature,” Astoria said approvingly.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t try and go through those four,” Sirius agreed. “Notice how Harry is still in front.”

“Well, he does know how to use the sword,” Romilda said. “We got some golems for him to practice on, and plenty of experience potions.”

Boris chuckled. “Mind you, with that amount of sharp steel and the muscles he’s built up, I’ll bet that even normal strokes are deadly.”

“They are,” Hermione said. “Harry always puts runes on them; he dropped one once, and it cut through a table.”

There was a round of laughter. “As impressive as this is, it is a bit dull,” Romilda pointed out. “But then, the second task was as well.”

“True, true,” Derek agreed readily.

“I don’t mind, though,” Esmeralda said, “I get enough grey hair watching Viktor play Quidditch.”

There was another round of laughter. “But Esmeralda, your hair is always so very pretty,” Sophia called.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” the elder witch replied.

“Ooo, this could be interesting,” Derek called. “A boggart!”

Everyone looked, as it faced Harry, who was still in the lead. Slowly it turned into Harry, inside a cupboard. “Gone, all gone,” the fake Harry whimpered. He was lying on the floor, curled up, rocking back and forth.

The armoured Harry paused. Suddenly, he jerked forward, striding past the creature and as he did, he twirled his sword and slammed the point down into the head of his doppelganger. His sword glowed as it did, the runes activating. Without looking back, Harry walked on.

“Oh, I am so proud of him right now,” Hermione said. “He’s over his childhood, and moving on to being an adult. Dobby?”

“You is calling?”

“Can you grab that dead Boggart, quickly? They were thought to be amortal, but that is definitely some sort of remains.”

“Dobby will,” the elf said, and popped away.

“Any idea what the runes on his sword are?”

“Which ones?” Astoria asked. “We’ve put all sorts on the blade and each piece of the handle. If you mean the glowing, that would be the undead-fighting runes that we put on in case of zombie attack.”

“Zombies are not going to attack,” Romilda pointed out.

“They might,” Astoria replied. “It’s far better to be safe than sorry.”

“It was a movie!”

“I don’t care. Zombies don’t stop. I had some spare space, so I was not going to be put in a situation where I would regret not adding them,” Astoria finished with a self-satisfied nod, her point having been incontrovertibly made.

Derek reached out and hugged his youngest. She didn’t protest, as she leant into him.

“There’s only really the sphinx to go,” Boris called, “And I think that Harry is in a bit of a bad mood now.”

“He is,” Daphne agreed. She giggled, as Harry moved in front of the sphinx, and held his sword out between the creature’s eyes.

“I have to ask you a riddle,” the Sphinx said quickly, raising her front paws defensively. “What is two plus two?”

“Four,” Harry replied.

“Right,” the Sphinx said, hopping out the way. Harry marched forward. “I have not been paid enough for this,” The Sphinx muttered. “See the world, they said. Get out of your musty pyramid, they said. Yeah, right. See a giant-ass sword right in your face, is what they didn't say.”

They arrived in a clearing, and Harry pulled his helm back. “Cedric, you’ve got your wand. You mind checking the cup?”

“Sure,” Cedric agreed. He removed his left gauntlet and pulled out his wand. He cast a few spells. “It’s safe.”

“On zero?” Harry suggested.

The others nodded.

“Three, two, one, go!”

The four grabbed the cup, and nothing happened. As everyone started to applaud and cheer, the ground underneath them suddenly erupted into a blood red pentagram, with fire down each line, and the four vanished.

Less than a second later, Dumbledore was there, casting spells, around them, adults vanished over to Dumbledore.

“Fuck,” Romilda swore. No one castigated her.

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“Helms down,” Harry snapped, as they landed. “Armour off. Combat armour on.”

Harry felt his armour melt and reappear, putting him back in the armour he’d used to kill the original Death Eaters. He looked around; they were in a large room that looked like a prison cell. The walls were all stone, with only a barred door in front of them.

“Any idea where we are?” Fleur asked.

“None,” Cedric responded, looking around. “Apart from in prison,” he added.

There was a hissing sound, and Harry looked down, to see a green gas pouring in. It was clearly heavier than air, as it was slowly filling their cell.

“When I get out of here, I think I’m going to have to give Tori and Romi a kiss,” Harry muttered.

“Why?” Viktor asked.

“Astoria’s paranoid about Zombies, which is why I had the runes to kill the Boggart.”

“And Romilda?”

“Drowning. Romilda insisted that we kept the enchantments I used for underwater breathing charms on all my helms, just in case.” He paused. “Anyone want to go back?”

“We’re safe at the moment. Although perhaps,” Cedric suggested as the gas rose, “we should pass out, anyway.”

Harry chuckled, and dropped to the ground noisily. He winced as something dug into his hip. The others dropped down as well.

Harry was prepared to transport them all to safety and the first hint that his helms were failing to filter the gas.

It was another five minutes of boredom, before the gas started to vanish. And another two minutes before the doors opened, and two Death Eaters entered. Harry sprang to his feet, and decapitated them both with a single stroke.

Fleur turned, and raised her helm, before she vomited. The other two raised theirs, and breathed hard.

“Sorry,” Harry winced. He moved over and put a hand on Fleur’s shoulders. “If it helps, imagine

what they would do to a pretty little Veela child, like Gabrielle.”

Fleur suddenly looked enraged, as she glared at the corpses.

Harry cast a spell to clear her mouth, not mentioning that it was for his (and maybe Daphne’s) benefit as much as hers. “Do you three want to stay here, while I sort this out?”

“No,” Viktor said. “Harry is Viktor’s best friend. Viktor will have Harry’s back.”

“There is no way in hell I’m leaving,” Cedric said firmly.

“And I could not bear to lose my big brother, when I’ve only just found him,” Fleur said, as she got a determined look on her face.

“Right, then stay behind me. If you have to use your swords, be careful of each other, and me! And yourselves; the armour is good, but you can cut into your own leg if you try hard enough.”

The others nodded, and they headed out of the dungeon.

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Fleur felt her heart slowly return to normal, as she focused more on Harry’s black armour, than the corridor in which they were travelling.

She’d been fine, even through the gas, as Harry had been visibly relaxed, but then the sudden violence with which he had reacted brought it home that this was not a game.

Daphne had told her of the night that he had first killed the Death Eaters, but it had never really seemed real, and it had been more important at the time to hear how Daph had discussed Fleur’s bum. And how much Daphne had liked it.

Fleur had liked that bit.

But now, she was realising just how real it was, and the fact that she would be dead if it wasn’t for Harry.

But she wasn’t, she had friends who she could be herself with, a girl who was cute, innocent, sexy and yet somehow downright ruthless, who looked at her with love and affection, and a man in front of her who would protect her with his life, tell her she was attractive, and all the while, not want to do her.

She swore to herself that she would prove to herself that she was worthy of Daphne and his love, by protecting him now.

Curses flashed past her, one impacting but doing nothing. In front of her, Harry sprinted, and the curses stopped.

She ignored the arm on the floor as she walked past the two dead Death Eaters. She looked to her

left, to see Cedric and Viktor. Although she couldn't see their faces, she could sense the same resolve from them.

Despite everything, this is what she had always wanted: love, family and friendship.

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As they ascended from the dungeons, Harry looked around, and wondered if this was Malfoy manor. There was a set of ornate double doors ahead of them. He walked forward and gave an armour-enhanced kick to them. They flew open, ripping off their hinges.

They were in a small ballroom. There were closed doors to the left and right, and another directly ahead of them. A skylight above let in the light that illuminated the room and glinted off the armour of the man in front of them.

He was tall, taller than Harry, and had a ragged red beard that jutted out of his helm. His armour looked old, ancient even, but well cared for.

“Mulciber,” Cedric whispered. “Pure-blood lord, from the Wizengamot.”

“Potter,” Mulciber roared. “Your progress ends here. My lord has allowed me to kill you.”

Harry didn't say anything.

Mulciber pulled out a bastard sword and swung it a few times, before flicking it in the air dramatically, and catching it. He span it around his body at an impressive speed. “You think you're the only one with armour?” he asked. “My father insisted I learn, as he learnt from his father. So I challenge you, no magic, just me and you.”

All the reasons he should say no span through his mind. But this was possibly the only chance he was ever going to get to have an actual fight with someone else who wore armour and knew how to use a sword.

“I know this is stupid, so don't bother telling me,” Harry said softly. “I accept.” He yelled the last bit.

Mulciber roared his approval. “My Lord is through there,” he pointed behind him. “All you have to do is get past me.”

Harry nodded and moved forward, his sword ready. Mulciber closed the gap and launched a huge overhead cut at him. Harry angled his sword and allowed it to slide down, and used the distraction to kick Mulciber.

Mulciber span from the kick, his sword flying it to a horizontal cut. Harry ducked the six inches needed to allow it to pass over his head. He swung his own sword up, aiming for Mulciber's hips.

Mulciber stepped back and gave him a slightly deranged grin.

Harry shut his helm; Mulciber aped him. They clashed again, Harry deflecting a lunge and using his gauntlet to punch Mulciber.

Mulciber took the punch and launched an armoured knee into Harry's protected stomach, Harry was off balance for a second, which allowed a low powered cut from Mulciber to slash against his armour. As Harry had expected, the cut did nothing.

Mulciber growled and attacked again, this time launching a series of overhand strokes down on him, each one as furious as the last.

Harry deflected each of them, content to let the man tire himself out, as he watched and reacted.

Mulciber overbalanced slightly, and Harry reacted, launching a booted foot into his stomach, and swinging for Mulciber's neck. The man swayed back just enough, and attacked again.

Harry was hard pressed, having to concentrate to avoid being overrun by the sustained attack. But every time his defence failed, his armour took the blow and easily held out.

"Your problem," Harry called, as he stepped back quickly and chucked his sword to Viktor, "is that you brought a sword to a hammer fight." He reached behind him, and activated the runes. His war-hammer appeared, and he pulled it forward, using the reinforced handle to block Mulciber's next stroke.

His hammer was all black, with a heavy nine-pointed head, topped with a vicious iron alloy spike coming out of the top. He'd engraved the Hogwarts crest on each of the four sides of the hammer's head. The handle was four feet long, with evenly separated double-gold rings all the way down, demarking the hand-holds.

"As every properly-trained warrior knows," Harry continued, "swords against armour don't work. Armour is designed specifically to stop slashing cuts."

He backed away carefully, blocking, sidestepping and ducking the now frenzied attack.

As he started to recognise a pattern to Mulciber's attacks, he came up with a plan. Mulciber launched into a side cut, and rather than dodge, Harry turned and caught it directly on his chest plate.

His armour held perfectly, freezing Mulciber for a second from the shock. He stepped back and slapped the head of his hammer against Mulciber's arm. The sword went flying as Mulciber yelled in agony.

Harry darted forward, kicking hard at his enemy's ankle. Mulciber tripped and crashed down, rolling onto his back. Harry didn't hesitate, he raised the hammer high, holding it at the end of the handle, and pulled down, slamming the nine spikes as hard as he could – as hard as he had ever stroked anything – into the centre of Mulciber's breast plate.

Mulciber made a small sharp barking noise as the air was forced out of lungs. All four of his limbs

twitched horrifically for a few seconds, before he went totally limp. A pool of blood oozed out of the shattered and mangled chest piece.

Harry stepped back, more than slightly horrified at the sheer brutality of his last move. “Fuck,” he whispered.

“If anyone ever tells me that knights fighting were romantic, I’ll hit them,” Cedric said. “That was both awesome and terrifying.”

Harry stood and knocked back his helm. He winced as he resealed his hammer and looked at the large dent in Mulciber’s chest.

“Are you okay?” Fleur asked, as she moved over and gave him a quick iron-coated hug.

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have done it. It was a stupid risk to take, and announced that we are here to Voldemort.”

“It was awesome, though,” Fleur said with a small grin. “You were awesome. Did people really use hammers?”

“It was how soldiers on foot would deal with knights,” Harry said as he took a deep breath. “They’d drag them off their horses and either use a sharp point to pierce the armour or a hammer to crush it.”

Fleur winced playfully.

“Right,” Harry said, “through that door is Voldemort. You sure you don’t want to stay here?”

“Hell, no,” Cedric said. His words were echoed in a variety of ways by the other two.

“Okay,” Harry agreed. He took his sword back from Viktor and moved over to the doors. Like he had before, he used his foot as door opener, and stepped through the gap and into another, larger, ballroom.

Voldemort, who looked like an older version of the Tom Riddle from the diary crossed with a snake, was sat on a throne about ten metres away, at the end of the dance floor. They’d entered from the left side. To the left and right of him were five Death Eaters; the rest of the hall was empty.

“You were supposed to be alone, as who else could keep up with you, you’ve won everything else so easily,” Voldemort grumped. “I didn’t expect you to share your armour with your competition. I also hoped that I would have some of your armour as well, but alas, my minions failed.”

“No,” Harry exhaled, his voice dark and scary, “I don’t think you ever did understand how to love other people.”

“And the gas was supposed to knock you out,” Voldemort continued as if Harry had not spoken.

He had a sour look on his face as he glared at them.

Harry heaved his sword forward, impaling the snake next to Voldemort, before he summoned it back. Voldemort blinked and frowned. “Violent, aren’t you?”

The Death Eaters all had their wands drawn. “This is what I am reduced to,” Voldemort lamented. “It took everything I had to set up that portal, and the gas, that was expensive. And yet, still I underestimated you.

“Mulciber guaranteed that he was better than you with a sword.”

“He possibly was,” Harry agreed, “but I was better with a hammer.”

Voldemort paused and stared at him, before the snake-like man shrugged. “But no more, we will fight, for our futures, and for how we want our world to grow.”

“Really?” Harry asked. “I believe it is traditional for me to taunt you a bit now, and I’d hate to be accused of not following tradition.”

“Go ahead,” Voldemort said, a strange expression of almost amusement flickered across his face. “Do feel free to add your philosophy of magic.”

“This plan was half-arsed,” Harry said. He shrugged. “I mean, seriously, there is nothing to stop me popping away to start with.”

“Yes, I know,” Voldemort agreed. “My main idea was that you wouldn’t want to leave, as this was your chance. I had high hopes for the gas.”

“I can breathe underwater...”

“Yes, I know, but I thought that maybe gas would not be stopped by your protections. Again, it was a hope.”

“So why?” Harry asked. “Why even do this?”

“I will not hide,” Voldemort said steadily. “I will not be treated as an irrelevance. My supporters are mostly gone, my places to hide vanishing. Even this, the Nott ancestral home, is being purchased by some stupid consortium. The normal methods of communication have been failing. Even Wormtail has abandoned me, and I did not realise how useful he was until he was gone.

“So, a desperate plan was needed, one to bring you in with the remaining loyal support that I have. I have a lifetime of spell knowledge over you. You have different flavours of magic, and that impressive armour. It will be a fight to remember. But you cheated; you didn’t come alone.

“Even so, we will fight. A fight for the future of the Wizarding world. A fight to see who has the correct philosophy, a fight that will go down in history!”

The Death Eaters were slowly edging away from Voldemort, but stopped as Voldemort turned his head.

Harry got the distinct impression that Voldemort was actually quite sane at the moment, and he could see some of the remnants of the brilliant and charismatic young man he had once been, who had swayed so many to his side.

Harry nodded slowly, and moved his sword into position.

As quick as a flash, the killing curse erupted from Voldemort's wand, and was absorbed by his armour.

"Truly impressive," the man said, as he launched a chain of curses. Harry used his sword to start deflecting them away.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Viktor rush toward the Death Eaters to the left, and, foregoing magic, he punched the first in the face, and kicked the second. With little effort, he then stabbed both. "For my family," he called.

Cedric was heading toward the remaining Death Eaters, absorbing their curses. Fleur was moving out of the way.

Harry span out of the path of one lethal curse, and deflected another. He suddenly realised he had a huge problem, as he didn't have his wand, or any form of ranged attack to fire back. He was good for up close, but the barrage was pushing him back and away from Voldemort.

He started to walk forward, relying more on his armour than he would like. He was shocked with the sheer speed and power that Voldemort possessed, before the spells abruptly stopped. Voldemort's wand and the arm that had held it were now on the floor.

There was a stunned pause. Harry dashed forward, and rammed his sword into the shocked Voldemort's stomach.

He retracted his sword, and with one swish, it was over.

"Armour off," he whispered. He moved over and touched each of the other's armour, repeating the command. He pulled Fleur into a hug. "You did it," he whispered.

"No, no," Fleur cried plaintively against him.

"You cut off his arm," Harry pointed out.

"No, Harry, no," Fleur cried again. She looked at him, "Please, I need you to protect me, now, more than ever."

"What?"

“I am part-Veela. If they hear I helped and injured him, all the Pure-blood sympathisers will be out for me, always. For you, they are scared, but they will try and get me, because I am not human!”

“Please, Harry, I need you to take the credit.”

“She is right, Harry,” Cedric pointed out. “I’m willing to take a vow never to reveal it.”

“Me, too,” Viktor said. “Vik will remember the look on his face until he dies, as Harry cut the head off the хибрид.”

“It was Harry who stuck who sword into his gut, and Harry who removed his head,” Cedric continued. “And that was what killed him.”

“Agreed,” Viktor said.

“Right,” Fleur said. “I distracted him, Harry, but you killed him. You killed his support. You killed his reputation, and in the end, it was your armour that allowed us to kill his last few people, and it was your sword, held by you, that finished him.”

“You three are getting credit,” Harry said firmly. “You know, I think he knew all of that, and he’d restored enough of his soul to be sane enough to see how things were going, and wanted to go out on his own terms.”

“Possibly,” Cedric said. “It could also be that he was deluded enough to think that he’d still win, just because he’d never really been beaten in a direct duel before.”

Harry turned and looked at his two male friends. “How are you guys doing?”

“I’m holding it together,” Cedric confessed.

“Do not think of them as human,” Viktor said, his voice cold. “They tried to kill us, we killed them. They no try kill us, they still live. Their mistake. Vik saw them, remembered what they would do to Vik’s girlfriend and little sister, Vik put them down, like animals.”

Harry reached out and put a hand on Viktor’s shoulder. “That’s pretty much what Daphne told me, after the first time I killed them,” he agreed. “They were scum, diseased animals, and we put them out of our misery.”

Viktor nodded fiercely. Harry turned to Cedric, who was looking a bit more relaxed. “Cho, too,” Cedric murmured after a few second. “Being foreign is almost as bad to these racist fucks.” He moved over and kicked Voldemort’s corpse.

Harry laughed. He picked up Voldemort’s head and put it in a sack. “Tell you what, you three can burn him.”

“Burn him?”

“Yeah, Incendio the fucker.”

The other three laughed. With wands in hand, they looked at each other. Harry decided that leaving his wand by his bed that morning had been an incredibly stupid mistake. And that maybe Dobby had a point about the potions.

“On three?” Fleur called.

“Wait, is that three and then cast, or cast on three?”

“Three, then cast.”

Viktor and Cedric nodded.

“One, two, three,” Fleur counted, before they all cast the same spell on Voldemort’s body. It burst into fire, as did his wand, before it turned to ashes.

“Satisfying,” Viktor noted.

“Now, I suspect that some people are going nuts worried about us. Shall we get out of here and see our loved ones?” Harry asked.

The other three nodded. “Ready?” He popped them all back to the entrance to the maze.

Their friends and families were gathered, and the worried looks on their faces faded. Near them, the Armoured Auror squad were pacing, hands on the pommels of their swords, and a concerned looking Amelia Bones to the fore.

Harry raised his right hand, and silence engulfed the stands and the field. He slowly held up the sack. “Tom Marvolo Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort, is dead.”

The cheer that followed was utterly awesome.

“With the help of Viktor Krum, Fleur Delacour and Cedric Diggory, the remaining Death Eaters were taken care of.” Even with the Sonorus charm, Harry had to shout to be heard.

“Which,” Cedric yelled, his own charm activated, “gave Harry the time and space to decapitate Voldemort. He died as he lived, hiding from the world, and trying to run from death.”

The cheer was even louder.

“The Tri-Wizard Tournament ended in a tie, and we couldn’t be happier. The money will be donated to the victims of Tom Riddle’s terrorism.”

The roar that followed was the loudest yet.

“And now that it is over, we are going to spend some time reassuring our families that we are

okay.” Harry dropped the Sonorus charm. “Elves, can we transport everyone, and Professor Dumbledore and Professor Vane to the Greengrass ballroom?”

Harry stayed behind, and approached Amelia. “The Nott Ancestral home,” he told her. “We were kidnapped, they tried to gas us, failed, we killed the ones in the way, beat Voldemort, and headed back here.”

“Is there anything left for us?” Tonks asked eagerly.

Harry shrugged. “No idea at all.” He handed the bag to Amelia, who opened it, and paled slightly as she looked in.

“Thank you, Harry. There will be official recognition for this, and for everything else you’ve done this year.”

Harry shrugged. “Hopefully, I can go back to being a blacksmith. I’ve had enough of fighting.”

“And I will wish you nothing but the best of luck. You will also have to talk to the I.C.W. and me in an official capacity, to get your formal statement.”

Harry nodded and frowned. “Can you arrange to do it together, please? No matter how evil, decapitating someone isn’t something that I want to talk about more than once.”

Amelia nodded her agreement.

“Right, let Dumbledore know.” He didn’t wait for any more questions, he popped away to the Greengrass manor.

“Harry!” Hermione managed to beat Astoria and Romilda by a fraction of a second as they all pounced on him. All around him, the other three champions were getting the same treatment as he was.

Even the Diggorys had abandoned their dignity to check that Cedric was okay.

The girls were moved to a side, to allow Derek, Cressida and Sirius to take their places. Harry hugged them, before he was pounced on by a blonde. She kissed his cheek firmly, hugged him tightly. “You did it,” she whispered, “You protected my love, killed Voldemort, made it so that I can live the life I want. You are the most amazing big brother.”

He tightened his arms and hugged Daphne back. “So we can all live the lives we want.”

Daphne leaned back and smiled at him.

“Okay, Vik is happy and okay,” Viktor called. “Silence.”

Everyone went quiet and looked at him.

“Voldemort tried, Harry’s armour was better. We helped, Harry killed. Is done, we safe, sorry for worry, but time to move on, already.”

“Viktor’s right,” Cedric agreed. “Harry gave us the armour this morning, and when you are inside it, you feel pretty indestructible. We took out the support, while Harry duelled Voldemort, and then Harry cut his arm off, rammed his sword through Voldemort’s stomach, and then cut his head off.”

Harry felt a slight tug, and he moved automatically.

“And then,” Fleur said proudly, “we burned his body, so he cannot be raised again.”

“Excellent,” Professor Dumbledore called. He appeared to be bouncing, he was so happy. “Your four have done something amazing.”

“From what I can tell, these two,” Cedric pointed at Romilda and Astoria, “and this one,” he pointed to Hermione, “kicked it off by getting Harry to live up to himself. The rest just happened.”

Harry hugged Astoria with one arm, and kissed her chastely on the lips. He did the same to Romilda, before he finished with a kiss on Hermione’s cheek.

“I’m pretty sure that I talk for the four of us, when I say that it’s time for all of us to move on. The constant shadow of Voldemort has been blown away, and now we can get on with the rest of our lives. I’ve got loads of ideas for things I want to craft!”

“Like a range of Hedwig dolls?” Apolline suggested.

“Armoured Hedwig dolls as well,” Harry agreed. “Maybe dolls that can put on armour like Hedwig does.”

“Armoured?” Israel called.

Harry laughed. “Hedwig will be here in a second.” There was a bark, and his owl swooped in through a window that Harry was pretty sure hadn’t actually been open before. She landed on a table near him. Her armour was in place, and she had an extremely smug expression on her avian face. “What have you been up to?” he teased.

Hedwig barked a few times. “So that’s what he meant!” Harry laughed. “Look at Hedwigs’ boots.”

“What?” Cedric asked.

“Voldemort was trying to gather support by letter. Hed’s been doing her bit to ensure that those letters did not get through.” Hedwig barked again. “And she has some ideas for more armour.” He chuckled. “I was going to stop making armour, Hed, but I’ll happily make yours.”

Hedwig nodded her approval, before she glided to a mantelpiece, and went to sleep, still in full armour.

“You do know that’s not normal?” Sirius demanded.

“An armour-wearing owl? Yeah, I know. She looks great, though.”

Sirius laughed. “I meant talking to an owl.”

“Hed’s awesome. From what I can tell, other owls aren’t.” Harry looked around at all his friends and family – and Cedric’s parents – and how they were all still just standing around. “Derek, we got any beer left?”

Derek blinked, and then he nodded. “Of course, Harry. Come on you, Bulgarian barbarian, you can help,” the extraordinarily good looking man said to the extraordinarily hirsute man (who had already managed to lose his shirt). The two hurried off.

“Dobby,” Harry paused as the elf appeared. “Can you grab some other Elves and cook some food for this evening? Make sure you make enough so that all the Elves that help can eat with us.”

Dobby nodded eagerly. “Elves will be cooking great feast. And now that nasty man is gone, Elves can talk to Harry about their ideas for making things!”

“Absolutely,” Harry agreed. Dobby popped away just as Derek and Boris returned, floating crates behind them.

It didn’t take long for everyone to have a drink in their hands. “To the future,” Harry toasted.

“The future,” everyone else echoed. And with some alcohol, people started to relax and drifted into smaller groups. There was some movement, and Harry turned to watch, as Cedric talked to some Elves, before his parents were popped away, and his friend immediately looked more relaxed. More Elves appeared, this time with Cho’s parents, both of whom immediately checked that Cedric was okay. Harry popped out and picked up Georgie. Along with Sirius and Dumbledore, it was the same people from the great night they had enjoyed after their game of Podska.

Harry smiled and relaxed. The mood was still a little sombre, but then, this wasn’t a celebration as much as it was a chance for everyone to spend time together to reassure themselves that they had all made it.

“So,” Sirius said, “what the hell do you say when everything is over?”

“Yay?” Astoria suggested.

“Ding dong the witch is dead?” Hermione asked.

“Yippie-ki-yay, Moth...”

“Romilda Vane!” Rosella Vane interrupted. “I have no idea where you learn such language!”

A large part of the group sniggered, and looked at Nadya.

“Grandmother!” Rosella sighed.

“Oh, grow up, dear,” Nadya replied. She chuckled. “Actually, I think she meant, don’t lose your head.”

Harry laughed. “Good advice.” He took a long pull on the bottle, and felt more of himself relax. “It’s still hard to believe it is over. How did you feel, Professor, after you defeated Grindewald?”

Albus stroked his beard. “Honestly? I got blind drunk and slept for two days. But then, at one time, we were friends, before our philosophies went very different directions. But, before I bring everyone down, that was a hell of a long time ago, and I do not live in the past. I can’t tell you how proud I am, Harry, of you, and your friends.

“The Tri-Wizard Tournament was meant to bring schools together, and it might not have done that as much as I might have wanted. It has certainly brought the champions together. And you four will go down in history, not just as Champions, but as the people who finally ended Voldemort’s dreams of conquest.”

“I think we should all call him That Wizard,” Astoria said. “Take away his name, make it a figure of fun. If you don’t eat your vegetables, That Wizard will come.”

“I like it,” Harry said. “Hey,” he looked at Romilda, “even though he’s dead, can I still give him a cursing?”

Romilda bounced. “We could try,” she said eagerly. “You want to destroy his memory?”

“Yep. Tori’s right. We’ve taken away his reputation, his life, and his supporters, we need to take away his legacy as well, so that what he stood for dies.”

“Hmm,” Rosella hummed. “You know, that might be possible. We’ll have to do a clan project on it. It’s a wonderful idea for revenge.”

“Agreed,” Israel said. He smiled. “New curses are always a fun thing to research.”

“Ouch,” Hermione said, as she snapped a rubber band she kept around her wrist. She blushed as everyone looked at her. “I’m still trying to keep focused. Tori and I have spent far longer than expected exploring the big jerk’s Magic is Magic idea, but we think we’re about finished. And in itself, I suspect I will spend the next few years researching it – and because of that, I can’t be distracted with shiny things.” She pouted.

Harry pulled her into a hug with his spare arm. “So I shouldn’t tell you about my new idea?”

Hermione punched him in the stomach, not hard. “No,” she said primly.

“Good, because I’ve not got one.”

The punch was harder the second time.

“Actually,” Harry said, “you know what, I’m gonna have a break.”

“A break?”

“I’ve been getting by on a couple of hours sleep for the past several months, because I was worried about the last task. Sirius, how is the house coming along?”

“It will be finished on time.”

“Cool. Derek, you mind putting up a couple of refugees for a few weeks?”

“Of course, Harry.”

“Professor Dumbledore, I’m done for the year.”

The Headmaster looked at him for a long moment, before he smiled. “Yes, that’s probably not a bad idea, Harry. You have worked exceptionally hard this year. I’ve had quite a few parents ask if we are going to offer more vocational classes in the next few years. It’s something I am seriously considering, when I see how well you have responded to it.” He paused. “Actually, I’ve changed my mind slightly. You can have the time off, but I want you to start thinking about the Lily Potter Wing for the library.”

“Deal,” Harry said with a grin.

“I shall ensure we have a few extra things in the gym,” Derek said, “because I suspect that with your cooking and the energy you won’t be burning down at the smithy, you’ll need an outlet.”

“And Sirius will need to avoid the old middle-aged-spread.”

“Hey,” Sirius protested.

“And,” Harry said enthusiastically, “we can start to plan the end-of-term party.”

Daphne bounced over from Fleur’s group. “Did I hear that right?” she asked with a pout. “You won’t be around at school?”

“Nah, I’ll still be there in the evenings,” Harry said, “I just won’t be working at the forge during the day.”

Daphne’s pout faded. “That’s okay then,” she cheered. She bounced, and looked at her parents. “Oh, did I tell you, Fleur and I are dating!”

“We know,” Cressida said dryly, “your sister did warn us. And the kiss earlier was a bit of a give-away.”

“Thanks, Tori,” Daphne said brightly.

“Derek had guessed, though,” Harry pointed out.

“Yeah, I almost got a crease on my forehead.”

“Ye gods, no,” Sirius declaimed, grabbing his heart.

“Ham,” Harry accused.

“I am,” Sirius agreed proudly. He grinned, and Harry grinned back at him. The more time he spent with his Godfather, the more comfortable he felt.

“If she gets heavy, you can put her down,” Israel told him. Harry tilted his head, and then looked down slightly, and tried to work out when he had picked Isabella up. She gave him a gap-toothed and contented smile, and put her head back down on his shoulder. “She’s fine.

“Now, my bottle is empty, and I’m starting to get hungry, so let’s move this into the dining room.”

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Harry sat on the roof of the Greengrass mansion, and stared at the sky. “Wish I could see you again, Mum.”

Nothing happened, and he hadn’t expected it to. It was about three in the morning, and everything was silent and still. He couldn’t sleep, whether because of the alcohol, the relief of stress, the memory of Mulciber’s death, or the potions he still had in his system. The suddenness of the ending had caught him by surprise. Part of him wished he could talk to Tom Riddle, ask him so many questions. All he had was theories, such as maybe he had ignored Fleur because she wasn’t human.

It all just seemed so stupid. But maybe that was what you got when you split your soul and only rejoined bits of it.

He sighed and leaned back, so he didn’t have to hold his head up as he stared. He absently waved his wand that Dobby had fetched for him, and a shimmer appeared before him, focusing the light from the Hercules constellation. At one stage, it was called the Stag. Next to it, he pulled up another, this one focused between Aries and Perseus, for a constellation that was once briefly called the Lily.

“I did it,” he said to the two images. “Voldemort is dead, I have some incredible friends, I’ve got a new sport, and I’m only fourteen. I don’t know if I’ll ever have a year like this again, and really, I guess I hope I don’t.

“But killing Voldemort was so easy, so anti-climactic. We just walked in there, blasted through his traps, and killed him. So, I gotta ask, why did it take me, and three friends to kill him? Why

didn't anyone else do this? I mean, I heard that Professor Dumbledore has been shielding from the Killing Curse with raised walls for years, and as a shield works, why didn't anyone just get a piece of metal and use it like the olden days?

“Why did I have to clear up the mess?”

“And if I think about it, I realise that the problem wasn't so much actions as inactions, as people not wanting to deal with it, like the Ministry and the Auror force.

“I know, I know, the I.C.W. made a huge difference this year, but if an international community can do a good job, it just says how bad a job our own leaders must have been doing. I vaguely remember some quote, about people getting the leadership they deserved.

“And if that's true, and honestly, it looks like it, we really suck.

“And I don't want to fix it. But what else can I do?” He gave out a deep sigh, and stared at the stars in front of him, trying to work out what he wanted. “I don't want to even try and fix it, I don't want to do politics,” he said quietly. “I'd prefer hitting people with swords, but I know that's bad as well. I just want to be me, I've done my bit.

“Maybe, I guess, maybe, things are different this time, and that a lot of the problems that weren't dealt with last time have been dealt with this time, and that things are going to change. I'll just have to hope, you know?”

He sighed. “I do feel better getting that off of my chest, Mum, Dad.

“I'm getting happier with Sirius. It was good today; I didn't feel weird with him. I think that Derek might have had a word.

“Dad, I hope you don't mind, but Derek is probably always going to be the guy I turn to with dad-type problems. Sirius is more like my crazy uncle. I love him, but, you know, not the same?”

“I hope it doesn't disappoint you, I know you were great friends and everything.” He took a deep breath.

“Mum.” He took another deep breath. “Mum. I miss you. I'd love to talk to you about Romilda and Astoria, they are both amazing girls, both different but very similar. I'd love your advice about where I stand. I'm so confused about the whole thing.

“It doesn't seem right to just make a decision and cut one out, but I can't string both along.” He sighed. “Tori is cute and smart, she's calm and expressive. Romilda is pretty and adventurous, and you know, has great boobs. I'm kinda attracted to both of them, physically and mentally, especially as they have both always been after Harry, not that weird Harry Potter guy that I've always disliked.

“So yeah, some advice would be great right now.”

Nothing happened, as he knew it wouldn't. The stars continued to shine light that had been generated billions of years ago.

He chuckled wryly.

“On the other hand, there are three billion other females out there, so who knows what the future holds? You, maybe, but me, I'm just a teenager who fell in love with pounding hot metal. A teenager who managed to make the two best-looking girls he'd found into his sisters, which, my hormones have informed me repeatedly, was fucking stupid.”

He paused, “Sorry for the language,” he added quickly. “Blacksmithing is easy, growing up is hard.

“I guess I feel a little melancholy right now. Or drunk. Like, everything is about to change again, all the pressure to be Harry Potter is gone, and it's just me now, someone who is as confused as everyone else my age.

“I want to create stuff, I want to play with Elf magic, and I want a girlfriend. And that's it. Sure, one day I want kids, and all that stuff, but for now?” He paused. “I guess you know I lied to Hermione earlier?

“Yeah, I do have another idea, or maybe it's just an expansion of my original idea. The way Elves talk to magic is actually more simplistic than humans. We use this weird Greek and Latin derivative along with formulaic wand movements. They kinda use the equivalent of childish English. Yeah, it doesn't really translate, but popping is more, ‘Go here now,’ whereas Apparation is us saying, “Dear Magic, I would like to be squeezed here, please.”

“Wards are the equivalent of ‘Don't let others go here, please.’”

“Power translates to how much you want it. If someone wants the opposite, the person who asks the strongest tends to win.”

Harry chuckled. “I sincerely hope that magic doesn't have a personification, because can you imagine how annoyed she would be with the ‘Please kill that person on touch,’ spell.

“I think that's why it's so magically unblockable, because everyone was focusing on stopping the spell, and not doing the correct counter, which would be simply, ‘Please don't kill me.’

“Scarily, you could cut down the Avada Kedavra spell and make it far worse, but I think I'll keep that nugget to myself.

“Heh, Hermione would be telling me I'm rambling again. Sometimes it's fun to ramble, and if you can't ramble at the stars that represent your parents, who can you ramble at?

“Anyway, my idea was that you could build up a set of new magical building blocks, designed to ask magic to perform the tasks you want in a simple manner, and in doing so, you'd need to use less magic.

“A raw magical language, I guess. Whether it be something simple, like stringing together an adjective and a subject, or a full-on language I don’t know, but can you imagine the things we can create without foolish wand-waving or silly incantations?”

“I know it will probably take me a lifetime to work out, but that’s the other thing I want to do with my life, make a contribution, you know?”

“I want to know that when I eventually die and meet up with you again, that you’ll be proud of me, not just because I can do something physical, but because I did something mental as well.”

He went quiet and sighed, the magnification spell wavered and died, and he was again looking at the sky as a whole.

“I’ll talk to you later,” he promised, as he popped back to his room, and got ready for bed.

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Hermione sat next to the open window. She was in a long flowing night gown, and she was cuddling her knees as she looked out.

She was struggling with extreme guilt. She’d heard a noise, and cast a spell to allow her to hear better, and had listened in to Harry talking to his parents.

Part of her had fallen for his Harry Potter act this year, and she’d somewhat forgotten, despite everything, that he was still a teenager deep inside.

A teenager who desperately missed his parents.

She wasn’t close to hers, but she still had them. And if the worst happened, she could rely on them for support.

She rested her chin on her knees and stared out the window. Family, it was weird. Harry was her family, first and foremost, but then, she had other good friends, Daphne, Astoria, Romilda, and now Fleur, and Viktor and Esmeralda and Cedric and Cho.

And she could go on, with other people she now knew well. She lived in another world from her blood family her new friends meant more to her than her actual parents did.

And she didn’t feel any loss for that.

Like Harry, she was quite ready for some romance, but she had a similar issue to Harry. She was his best friend, and she would have to be extremely careful that whoever she dated didn’t just want to get close to him.

It was a small price to pay, and maybe it meant that she would have to look outside of Hogwarts. And honestly, Israel Vane was a very attractive man, which gave her all sorts of pleasant thoughts for whom she might meet this summer.

Once more, she was feeling a little... she paused, she didn't know what she felt, she just knew that her best friend was planning something so utterly revolutionary that he would go down in history for another reason, and she had been so busy thinking about his previous idea.

She sighed. Jealous, she supposed, was the word for what she was feeling. She smiled, but then, she was there, with him, and she'd be involved. It would be a research project like nothing else.

Harry was still the same, still that little boy who had jumped on the back of a troll to save her, and no matter what, he always would be.

Sure, he missed his parents and he had no clue what to do about his love life, or lack of love life, and he could make magic with fire and iron, and he could come up with brilliant ideas to change the world.

Harry was her best friend in the world, and always would be, and that fact made everything that had happened in her life appear trivial.

And she loved that feeling.

She made a mental note to give him a huge hug in the morning, and tell him that she loved him like a little brother.

She hopped to bed, and dreamt about a language where they could do anything their imagination could come up with.

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“Crazy old uncle?” Sirius asked the ceiling. He grinned. That sounded fun. James's mum had always told him that you never heard anything good when you eavesdropped on someone.

So yeah, he would never be a replacement for James, but that actually made things easier. He could concentrate on the important things in life. Such as making sure Harry got laid over the summer, and did not tie himself down so early in life.

Even James, who had loved Lily for years, had played the field before getting with her, and fourteen was far too early to be planning a permanent relationship, no matter how pretty Astoria and Romilda were, although he agreed with Harry, Romilda did have a remarkable rack for a little girl.

He liked Derek, the man clearly loved Harry as the son he didn't have, and if he was going to be responsible, it allowed Sirius to do all the fun things. He paused. It also allowed him to be himself. The years in Azkaban were dead years, so he was somewhere in his thirties, with the mind of twenty-year-old, and honestly, he didn't have the maturity to be the stern one yet.

He could party with Harry, but discipline him? Probably not.

Being the crazy uncle would allow him to grow up along with Harry, while giving the boy the

benefit of the experience he did have.

He would have to get his motorcycle back, and get Harry one for his birthday.

Sirius had spent too much time in Azkaban, Harry had spent too much time with the Dursleys, both occupied by soul sucking creatures, and then Harry had gone ahead and killed Voldemort as well.

And if that didn't mean he deserved to have some fun, he didn't know what did.

So, maybe he could forget to get the builders to complete on time, and the first week of the holidays they could go and waste some of the Black fortune in Vegas. He'd heard it was brilliant, and the very fact that he would be wasting Black family gold at a Muggle place would have his ancestors rolling in their graves.

Sure, he'd be scolded when he got back, but in the meantime, he'd have had a week of fun and will have made Harry relax.

And then, when he got back, he could start the most important thing he could dream of. Using the resources that Derek was helping provide, along with the Zhangs, the Delacours, the Krums and the Draganovas to ensure that Harry could live his life the way he wanted to.

And he would work with them to finish dismantling the Pure-bloods' status symbols, and then they could look at how the remaining ones made their money, and wipe them out as well. It was time for a change. The previous ways had failed.

Sirius was struck with his own genius. Cressida would make a great Minister for Magic. And with the sort of money they would be throwing around, getting her elected would be easy. And with her in charge, she would definitely work for fair and equitable laws, so that all the kids could live good and productive lives.

Sirius chuckled as he remembered why Derek was actually working for a change – it was for exactly the same reason. Well, that clearly meant that Derek was going to have to accept that he had a new loyal friend, and one who was pretty damn good looking himself.

And with that all in progress, he could start the second most import thing: meeting Apolline's friends!

The future was so bright it was unbelievable.

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Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore sat in the traditional chair of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and, with the ease of long practice, ignored the fact that he would really like to replace it with something far less ostentatious and a little more comfortable; maybe even recline.

The I.C.W. had given him their draft report on the running of Hogwarts, and he'd already decided

it would be followed completely. A lot of it was common sense, and that had been lacking recently.

There were going to be huge changes to Hogwarts, and he couldn't see anything negative about it at all.

Not only were they using the ideas that Harry and his friends had donated money to, but they were going to use some of Hogwarts' surplus to hire more staff and provide more opportunities for the students.

It would take a while, but he felt he was up for the challenge of making Hogwarts the premium school in the world.

And while he felt a little guilty about it, they were going to have a lot of transfers in the next year. People knew that Harry Potter was incredible, and that he had been schooled here, so wanted their children to get that sort of experience.

Sure, they might be a bit disappointed to find that Harry was different, and not really a regular student, but all the other plans he had would ensure that he would be able to ensure that they received the education they, and every other student deserved.

With a suddenness that would have been disconcerting if he weren't used to it, Harry and his friends appeared for dinner.

He hadn't seen Harry since the night before, and was pleased he was looking awake and happy. He still remembered his hangover after the fight with Grindewald, and he wouldn't wish that on anyone.

"I wonder if I can persuade him to give some lessons on smithing," he mused out loud.

Minerva chuckled. "Probably a bad idea."

"Oh?"

"Everyone would sign up, and he'd hate that."

"True," Albus said with a sigh. He moved that idea into the figurative dustbin. He met Harry's eyes, and raised his glass. Harry saluted back, a playful glint in his eye.

"The lad'll be fine," Alastor grunted. "He's got an interview to give tomorrow with Amelia and the I.C.W. After that, he can concentrate on being a teenager." The old Auror chuckled, "And then he can have the fun of turning down people who want his armour, and the commissions for everything else he can come up with."

"Indeed," Albus said, "And as long as he is still nominally in school, I can help protect him." He paused. "With his consent, of course." He chuckled softly.

“Albus?” Minerva asked.

“I do wonder how their group dynamic will change next year.”

“Why?” Minerva prodded.

“Viktor and Fleur will both be leaving school, and I happened to overhear Sophia, Viktor’s sister, and Viktor himself persuade their parents to allow Sophia to attend Hogwarts next year.”

“I’m sure she’ll fit in nicely,” Minerva said.

Albus chuckled and didn’t mention the young girl’s crush on Harry, or the way Viktor appeared to be aware and supportive of it.

The teachers went silent, all of them watching the far-right corner of the room, where the ex-Gryffindors and ex-Slytherins laughed and talked with the students from other schools, the Hufflepuff and the Ravenclaw.

It was a vision of the future that was utterly appealing. And one he fully hoped to see come into existence.