

It wasn't long before Charlie returned with Bill, both of them grim-faced. They had left Percy to be fussed over by Fleur, it seemed.

Harry expected Remus to come with him, but the werewolf shook his head. "I'm going to get Amelia back to Longbottom Manor," he explained, carefully lifting the unconscious woman. "I can explain everything to Susan and Augusta, so they know how to look after her." He looked up at Charlie, eyes serious. "Be careful out there. Bring him home as soon as you're done. I'll let Sirius know where you've gone."

Charlie nodded, hand settling on Harry's shoulder. "We'll keep him safe, Moony," he promised.

"I'll keep both of them safe," Bill assured with a small grin. "Come on, then, kids."

Bidding goodbye to Kingsley and Remus, Harry followed Bill and Charlie through the floor. They arrived in a part of Gringotts Harry had never seen before; an office block type room, full of goblins and humans alike. Their entrance drew some raised eyebrows, and one goblin hurried over.

"It's time for the ritual?" he asked in a voice like ground gravel. Bill nodded.

"As soon as possible. I'll get him prepped."

The word sent a shot of alarm through Harry — he was led down a narrow corridor and into a small room, empty but for a single metal wardrobe. Bill reached inside, pulling out a sleeveless grey robe. "Put this on," he urged. "Take everything else off, even your pants, and your glasses. We won't look," he added with a wink, him and Charlie both making a show of covering their eyes and turning around. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Harry snorted. His heart raced a mile a minute as he fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, but soon he was dressed in nothing but the robe, his clothes in a pile on the floor.

Bill nodded in approval, and rummaged through the cupboard a second time, coming out with a small clay pot. "Okay, now stand still. This might burn a bit."

With that ominous warning, Bill began to daub some kind of ointment on Harry's face. It did tingle, a little like the muscle balm he sometimes used after quidditch, but the sensation was bearable. It took a few moments to realise that Bill was drawing runes on him, rather than just swiping the stuff on at random. Harry tried not to even twitch, not wanting anything to smudge. Bill drew the runes all over his face and arms, then nodded again. "Good. Okay, you're ready. But... I'm going to need you to trust Charlie to look after your wand for a bit."

Harry's stomach lurched — surrender his wand? When Death Eaters had just taken the Ministry?

"I'm sorry, but it'll interfere with the ritual," Bill told him, crystal blue eyes sympathetic. "I'll be there the whole time, I won't let anything happen to you. Besides," he added with a smirk, "from what I've heard, you hardly need that wand to do damage."