

The salon doors opened, and Harry's attention snapped toward the sound. The man who entered was different from the others. The moment Harry looked at him, he knew he was more powerful than anyone else in this room. Well, maybe Itisa was more powerful than him, but he wasn't about to test that theory.

Nicolas Flamel was shorter than Harry had imagined, barely taller than Nymphadora, with a lined face that seemed to hold every year of his six hundred and sixty-seven years like rings in a tree trunk. His robes were simple—deep burgundy without ostentation—and his silver hair fell to his shoulders in a way that suggested he'd stopped caring about fashion sometime around the fifteenth century.

But his eyes. His eyes were young—bright and curious and *alive* in a way that made the rest of his aged appearance seem like a comfortable disguise rather than decay.

"Victorien, my apologies," Flamel said, his French carrying an accent Harry couldn't quite place—something older than modern dialects. "I became distracted in your library. The new acquisitions from Prague are absolutely fascinating. I lost track of time entirely."

Minister Delacour rose to clasp Flamel's hand. "Nicolas, you are always welcome to lose time in my library. Though I had hoped to introduce you to our guests before they concluded lunch."

"Then I'm not too late?" Flamel's face brightened. "Excellent. I've been looking forward to this."

He moved around the table like a young man, greeting each person. Ted received a warm handshake and a comment about "the excellent work on protective charm legislation—quite progressive for British standards." Andromeda got a slight bow and a question about St. Mungo's trauma recovery protocols that suggested he'd been following her published research. Nymphadora's metamorphmagus abilities earned an intrigued once-over and a muttered comment about "cellular restructuring theory—must discuss later."

Newt practically vibrated when Flamel reached him. "Monsieur Flamel, I've been hoping to speak with you about the preservation properties of phoenix tears in relation to—"

"Later, Newt," Flamel said kindly. "I promise we'll discuss magical creature alchemy at length. But first..."

He turned to Harry, and his gaze dropped immediately—not to Harry's scar, which was where most adults looked first, but to his chest pocket where Harry had tucked one of his Enhanced Talismans for tonight's demonstrations. The old alchemist's eyes lit up with the sort of pure delight Harry usually associated with Hermione discovering a new library.

"Ah," Flamel breathed. "There it is. May I?"

Harry's hand went automatically to his pocket. "Sir?"

"Your talisman. I can feel it from here. Like listening to a symphony composed in metal and magic." Flamel's smile was genuine. "I've been wanting to meet you for quite a while, Harry Potter. The Maker of Talismans."

Not The Boy Who Lived, not The Basilisk Slayer, but something he'd actually earned through his own work. Something that defined him by creation rather than survival.

Harry's answering smile was probably wider than diplomatic protocol allowed, but he couldn't help it. "Monsieur Flamel, the honor is entirely mine. I've read everything I could find about your work—the Philosopher's Stone alone revolutionized alchemical theory, and your papers on transmutative matrices are still the foundation of modern artifact creation."

"Papers I wrote three centuries ago," Flamel said with amusement. "You'd think someone would have improved on them by now."

"They have," Harry replied, his excitement overriding his usual careful diplomacy. "Your basic principles, yes, but the applications—Professor Marcello Torino in Italy built on your resonance theory to develop curse-resistant enchantments that actually adapt to the specific curse being cast. And there's a Russian artificer, Volkov, who used your transmutative framework to create self-repairing wards that—"

He cut himself off, suddenly aware that he was babbling at a living legend about the legend's own work. His ears heated. "Sorry. I get carried away when discussing magical theory."

"Don't apologize." Flamel's expression held something that looked almost like pride. "Most people want to discuss the Stone—immortality, gold, the dramatic implications. You want to discuss the actual *work*. The theory. The innovation." He gestured to the empty chair beside Harry. "May I sit? I'd very much like to examine your talisman, if you're willing. And perhaps discuss how a twelve-year-old managed to achieve integration of basilisk materials that I've seen master artificers struggle with for decades."

"Almost thirteen," Harry corrected automatically, then felt ridiculous. "And yes, please. I'd be honored. Though I should warn you—the basilisk integration wasn't elegant. It took me fourteen failed attempts and a lot of trial and error."

"The best innovations rarely are elegant the first time," Flamel said, settling into the chair. "Elegance comes from refinement. Discovery comes from being willing to fail repeatedly until something finally works." He held out his hand expectantly. "Now, let me see what you've created."

Harry retrieved the talisman from his pocket, bronze and silver with irregular patches of green basilisk skin that still looked more functional than beautiful, and placed it carefully in Flamel's palm.

The old alchemist's eyes went distant, focusing on something beyond normal sight. His fingers traced the runic inscriptions, and Harry felt magic pulse from him in gentle waves, diagnostic spells so subtle that Harry was sure the others had not noticed.

"Remarkable," Flamel murmured. "You've woven three separate magical matrices together—absorption, redirection, and communication—without any of them interfering with the others. The basilisk skin acts as both amplifier and insulator simultaneously. That shouldn't be possible."

"It wasn't, until I started talking to the basilisk in Parseltongue while inscribing," Harry admitted. "The skin responded better when I addressed it as if it were still part of a living creature rather than just dead material."

Flamel's head snapped up, his ancient eyes suddenly very sharp. "You spoke to the materials? In the language of serpents?"

"It seemed logical at the time," Harry said, wondering if he'd just revealed something he shouldn't have. "The basilisk skin retains some awareness even after separation. Treating it with respect rather than just forcing it to comply—that made the difference."

"Respect," Flamel repeated softly. "Most artificers view materials as tools to be shaped. You view them as partners to be convinced. That's..." He paused, searching for words. "That's the approach of someone who understands that magic is relationship, not domination."

He turned the talisman over in his hands, and Harry saw the old alchemist's expression shift from academic interest to respect.

"Harry Potter," Flamel said, meeting his eyes directly, "I think you and I have a great deal to discuss. About magic, about creation, and about what it means to build something that outlasts your own mortality." His smile turned wry. "Though in your case, I suspect you have considerably more time than I did at your age to figure that last part out."

Flamel returned the talisman to Harry's palm carefully, like he was handing over a very important artifact. "Tell me, Harry—how did you come to create your first talisman? What sparked the idea?"

"It started with Itisa," Harry said, glancing toward Newt's case where his Nundu was currently sulking. "My cat. She's... temperamental. And powerful. I needed something that could help monitor her magic, keep her calm when she got agitated. So I made a simple talisman—basic absorption and release functions, nothing fancy."

"Nothing fancy," Flamel repeated with amusement. "Yet functional. The best innovations often begin with practical necessity rather than grand ambition."

"Exactly." Harry warmed to the topic, the nervousness of speaking with a legend fading into the familiar comfort of discussing his work. "Once I'd made that first one, I started wondering what

else it could do. What if it could warn me of danger? What if it could store energy for later use? The possibilities kept expanding."

He paused, aware that Tonks was listening intently from across the table, her hair shifting to an attentive blue.

"And then Tonks—Nymphadora—told me she wanted to become an Auror after graduating from Hogwarts," Harry continued quietly. "I knew that being an Auror was dangerous, so I started reading more. I wanted to know how dangerous it could be. And I just..." He struggled to articulate the feeling. "I wanted to create something that would keep her safe. Something that would make sure she came home. So I spent the rest of my first year working on it."

Tonks' hair flashed through several colors rapidly—surprise-yellow, touched-pink, embarrassed-orange—before settling on something between all three. "Harry," she said, her voice oddly thick. "I didn't know... You never said you made it for me."

"I didn't make just one," Harry corrected, feeling his own ears heat. "I made the design that could protect anyone. But you were the reason I started. You were what I was thinking about when I figured out the emergency healing function—the part where the talisman sacrifices itself to save a dying wearer. Because the thought of you dying on some Auror mission while I just... sat at school doing nothing... I couldn't accept that."

"And you found you liked doing it?" Flamel prompted gently. "Creating these protections?"

"Yes." Harry's voice strengthened. "When the first Auror came back and told me the talisman had saved his life—that he had children who would still have a father because of something I made—that feeling was... I'd never felt anything like that before. Like I'd done something that mattered. Something real."

Flamel's expression had softened into something approaching grandfatherly pride. "You're a boy who can go far, Harry Potter. Not because of talent—though you clearly have that—but because you create from love rather than ambition. That's the difference between artificers who make objects and those who make legacies."

He glanced toward Newt's case with renewed interest. "This cat of yours—Itisa? I'd quite like to meet her. Any creature who inspires such innovation must be remarkable."

Newt cleared his throat diplomatically. "Ah, well, she's currently in my case. Didn't want to risk any... incidents. She can be a bit territorial, and French palaces have so many valuable tapestries."

"Territorial," Flamel repeated with amusement. "A polite way of saying she's dangerous?"

"She has strong opinions," Harry said carefully. "And the magical power to enforce them."

"My favorite kind of familiar," Flamel declared. "Though perhaps we'll save formal introductions for when there are fewer priceless artifacts nearby."

He turned back to Harry, his ancient eyes sharp with curiosity. "Have you given any thought to your third creation? What comes after the Enhanced Talismans?"

Harry hesitated. He had ideas—several of them swirling in his head since Crystal-Harmony's transformation, since watching her struggle with legs that weren't meant to be hers. But those ideas were half-formed, more intuition than design.

"I'm not sure yet," he admitted. "I have a few concepts I'm exploring. Something about transformation magic, maybe. Or adaptive enchantments that respond to the wearer's specific needs rather than following preset parameters. But nothing concrete."

"Good," Flamel said, surprising him. "The space between ideas is where innovation lives. Rush to execution and you'll make something functional but forgettable. Let the concept breathe, evolve, reveal itself—that's when you create something that changes everything."

He leaned back in his chair, and something mischievous entered his expression. For a moment, Harry felt like he was looking at Professor Dumbledore.

"When I was young—very young, perhaps fourteen—I created my first artifact. Would you like to know what it was?"

"The Philosopher's Stone?" Harry guessed.

"No, no. Much earlier. Much less impressive." Flamel's smile widened. "It was a charm to stop snoring."

Harry blinked. "Snoring?"

"My father snored like a hibernating dragon," Flamel explained. "Every night, the entire house shook with it. My mother threatened divorce. The neighbors complained to the local magical authorities. So I, in my infinite teenage wisdom, decided to solve the problem with magic."

"Did it work?" Harry asked.

"Eventually. After seven failed attempts, three small explosions, and one incident where my father briefly spoke backwards for a week." Flamel's expression turned nostalgic. "But yes, it worked. And more importantly, it taught me that all magic—even the simplest household charm—requires understanding the fundamental problem before attempting a solution. My father's snoring wasn't just noise; it was a magical resonance issue with his breathing patterns. Once I understood that..."

"You could design a targeted solution rather than just trying to muffle sound," Harry finished, seeing the lesson clearly.

"Precisely." Flamel nodded with approval. "Though now I'm curious—surely you've read that my greatest achievement is the Philosopher's Stone?"

"Every book says so," Harry confirmed. "Immortality, unlimited gold, the greatest alchemical achievement in history."

"And you believe this?" Flamel asked, something challenging in his tone.

Harry hesitated, thinking about the way Flamel had described his father's snoring charm, the affection in his voice for that simple early work. "I think... the Stone might be your most famous achievement. But I'm not sure if fame and significance are the same thing."

"Clever boy." Flamel's smile turned mysterious. "You're right to be skeptical. The Stone is quite an achievement—I won't pretend false modesty. But my best work?" He paused, and there was a smile of pride on his face. "That's a different matter entirely. Perhaps one day, Harry, you'll understand the difference. When you've created something that changes not just the world, but yourself. That's when you'll know you've made your masterpiece."

The words settled into Harry's chest like a promise or a prophecy. He wanted to ask what Flamel meant, what his true best achievement was, but something in the old alchemist's expression suggested the answer wouldn't come through asking—only through living long enough to understand it himself.

"In the meantime," Flamel continued, his tone lightening, "I suggest you keep doing exactly what you're doing. Create from necessity and love. Let ambition follow rather than lead. And never, ever apologize for making a simple household charm when your heart tells you it matters. Some of the most important magic in the world looks mundane from the outside."

He rose from his chair. "Now, I believe I should let you prepare for this evening's festivities. But Harry—I'd like to speak with you again before you return to England. About your work, about possibilities, about paths forward that don't require surrendering your independence to established foundations. Would that interest you?"

"Very much, sir," Harry said, standing as well. "I'd be honored."

"Excellent." Flamel clasped Harry's shoulder. "Until tonight, then. Try not to overthink your entrance. The great and powerful are just people who've learned to hide their insecurities behind expensive robes. You've already impressed the ones who matter by simply being yourself."

As Flamel departed with Minister Delacour to discuss whatever legendary alchemists and Ministers discussed when preparing for international gatherings, Harry sank back into his chair with the feeling of having just survived something significant.

"That was Nicolas Flamel," Tonks said quietly, her voice still carrying that odd thickness from his earlier revelation. "You just had a casual conversation about magical theory with the most legendary artificer alive, and you made it look easy."

"It didn't feel easy," Harry admitted. "It felt like talking to someone who actually understood. Who saw past the fame and contracts to the actual work."

"He's not the only one," Tonks said, and when Harry met her eyes, he saw something vulnerable there. "Harry, I didn't know you made the first talisman because of me. Because you wanted to keep me safe."

"Of course I did," Harry replied, confused by her surprise. "You're family. You're important. The thought of you dying because I could have helped but didn't—I couldn't live with that."

Tonks' hair cycled through several colors before settling on a soft pink that Harry had learned meant genuine emotion rather than just embarrassment. "You're going to make me cry at a diplomatic lunch, you absolute prat."

"Language," Andromeda said automatically, but her own eyes looked suspiciously bright.

Ted cleared his throat roughly. "Right then. I think that's quite enough emotional revelation for one afternoon. Shall we perhaps discuss something less likely to result in collective sobbing? Like the weather? Or French wine regions? Or literally anything else?"

Harry looked at Tonks, and the way she was looking at him made his heart beat faster, and her eyes, since when were her eyes so bright, it felt like looking at the sun, but a sun that did not hurt his eyes, a sun that allowed him to look and enjoy its beauty. A Sun that Harry wanted to keep looking at.

Crystal Harmony

Crystal-Harmony had survived the transformation from tail to legs, endured the violence of sunrise, and navigated a market full of aggressive smells and sounds. Surely she could manage something as simple as choosing clothing.

Then she stepped into the dressing room and realized she'd been catastrophically optimistic.

The space assaulted her senses immediately--too many mirrors reflecting light at wrong angles, wardrobes that reorganized themselves with jarring clicks and rustles, and magical lighting that shifted from warm to cool without warning. In Abyssantica, light filtered down through four miles of water in consistent, predictable patterns. Here, everything flickered and changed like the room couldn't decide what it wanted to be.

"Ah, Fleur!" A woman with silver-streaked hair materialized from somewhere, embracing Fleur and Crystal, and was really starting to question why everyone in France seemed so eager to

show this kind of affection; were they going to kiss, too? "And this must be the Princess from beneath the waves. Your Highness, what an honor! My name is Lysette."

Crystal-Harmony wobbled through what she hoped was an acceptable curtsy, her legs protesting the movement with sharp reminders that they were still learning their purpose. "Please, just Crystal-Harmony. I'm afraid I'm not very good at surface formality yet."

The woman--Madame Lysette smiled with genuine warmth. "Nonsense, you're doing wonderfully. Now, let's see what we're working with. Fleur mentioned you need something that honors both your heritage and the occasion?"

"If that's possible," Crystal-Harmony said, eyeing the nearest wardrobe with suspicion as it suddenly sprouted three new drawers from nowhere. "I don't want to look ridiculous."

Why did surface dwellers need so many drawers? In Abyssantica, clothing consisted of ceremonial sea-silk wraps for formal occasions and nothing at all for everything else. Simple. Sensible. Not prone to spontaneous reorganization.

"You could never," Fleur said firmly, settling into one of the plush chairs with that impossible grace she seemed to carry everywhere. "Madame Lysette is a genius. She once made a dress for an old Russian woman."

"That was a challenging commission," Madame Lysette agreed. "But I do love a creative problem. Now, Your Highness, tell me--what colors speak to you? What makes you feel most yourself?"

Something Harry will like, she wanted to say, but she did not.

Crystal-Harmony thought for a moment, creating a small ice crystal in her palm without conscious thought--a habit from home, where ice magic was her only comfort in a kingdom that valued water manipulation above all else. "Blues and silvers, like the deep water where light filters down. And sometimes green, like the bioluminescent kelp forests near my home."

The kelp forests where she'd spent countless hours practicing ice sculptures while other young RSH perfected their pressure control and current manipulation.

"Beautiful," Madame Lysette murmured, and suddenly fabric was flying through the air--bolts of silk and satin and materials Crystal-Harmony had no names for, all summoned with casual flicks of the dressmaker's wand.

Crystal-Harmony flinched. In Abyssantica, magic moved like water--flowing, gradual, visible in its progression. Surface magic was violent and immediate, making things appear from nothing, changing reality with sharp decisive movements that felt fundamentally wrong to her ocean-trained senses.

"And these legs--how stable are they?" Madame Lysette was asking. "Will you be standing for long periods?"

"Probably not," Crystal-Harmony admitted, trying not to stare at a particularly aggressive mirror that seemed determined to show her reflection from seven different angles simultaneously. "I'll likely sit most of the evening. The transformation is still very new."

And agonizing, she didn't add. And temporary. And something that would become impossible if she attempted it too many times. But those weren't the kind of details you shared with strangers, no matter how kind they seemed.

"Then we design for sitting," Madame Lysette decided with a friendly smile. "A dress that looks spectacular from a chair, with fabric that drapes beautifully when stationary."

She began draping material over Crystal-Harmony's shoulders, and the princess tried very hard not to recoil from the sensation. The fabric was so light, so insubstantial--nothing like the weight of water that had surrounded her entire life. It felt like wearing air, like being exposed in a way that had nothing to do with modesty and everything to do with missing the constant pressure of the deep.

"The silver silk," Fleur suggested from her chair, watching with focused attention. "With the blue undertones. It catches light like water."

"Exactly what I was thinking," Madame Lysette agreed.

Of course, they were thinking the same thing. They probably did this often--Fleur and her dressmaker, choosing perfect fabrics for perfect occasions, moving through the surface world with easy confidence while Crystal-Harmony struggled to understand why anyone needed this many clothing options.

In Abyssantica, you were born with your scales. They grew with you, shifted colors with your emotions, protected you from the cold and pressure of the deep. Simple. Efficient. No need for drawers that multiplied when you weren't looking.

"It's so soft," Crystal-Harmony said, touching the fabric tentatively. "In the water, we don't really wear things--our scales serve as clothing. This feels strange but nice."

"Strange but nice is a good starting point," Madame Lysette said warmly. "Now, let's try some actual gowns. I have several that might work as bases."

Even more clothes?! Crystal Harmony wasn't sure if she was ready for this, but she was the Princess of Abyssantica.

My father, my people are counting on me to represent them well, and I will not disappoint them, not them, not Harry.

I am creature of ocean depths. Water crushes stone. Water is my blood, my bones, my breath, and here I stand still, Crystal Harmony reminded herself, and her blood filled with confidence.