

Chapter 38

The train ride back to Hogwarts felt different from the usual ones. Instead of the excited chatter and laughter that typically filled the Hogwarts Express after the Christmas holidays, a heavy silence hung in the air like a thick fog. Barely any student was seen running outside the compartment door, and a few who did pass spoke in hushed whispers, if they spoke at all.

The news of the Azkaban breakout had dominated the Daily Prophet during the final days of the holiday. Several Death Eaters had escaped, comprising of Voldemort's most dangerous followers. Now every wizarding family in Britain lived with the knowledge that some of the most violent criminals in their world were free once again.

As if adding to the pain and terror, the attack on St. Mungo's had devastated dozens of families who had lost friends or loved ones to the brutal savagery of the Death Eaters. There was still no progress on the mysteries that surrounded that attack, and they were now more than certain that there was a mole in the hospital who had played a role in ensuring the attack went as smoothly as it could.

It had also made them wonder what other organizations or departments within the Ministry had been infiltrated and remained compromised despite the new minister's measures to flush them out.

Harry sat in their usual compartment with Daphne, Gabrielle, Neville, and Tracey, watching the Scottish countryside roll past the windows. The landscape looked as bleak as everyone felt – bare trees stretched skeletal branches toward gray skies, and patches of dirty snow dotted the hills.

"Look at them," Gabrielle said quietly, nodding toward a group of third-years in the corridor who walked past their compartment, huddled together like frightened rabbits. "They're terrified."

"Can you blame them?" Neville asked, his voice hoarse. He'd barely spoken since leaving Grimmauld Place that morning. The attack on St. Mungo's was still fresh in everyone's minds, especially his. "Half their families probably have targets on their backs now."

Daphne leaned forward, her blonde hair falling across her shoulder as she studied Neville with concern. "How are your parents doing? Any improvement since Christmas?"

Harry and Daphne had left Grimmauld Place with Gabrielle after Christmas, spending the rest of the holidays with the Greengrass family at their manor. The Delacours had also arrived, and Harry had spent quality time with his new family, getting to know everyone better than he already did.

"Dad's arm is healing well. Mum..." Neville paused, swallowing hard. "She keeps asking why people were screaming. Madam Pomfrey says the trauma might have set her back months, maybe longer."

Harry felt a familiar surge of anger rise in his chest. The Death Eaters hadn't just attacked St. Mungo's for strategic reasons. They'd done it to spread fear and to hurt the most vulnerable people they could find. They knew how hard-hitting it would be to the morale of the wizarding populace if it happened mere days after the mass breakout from Azkaban, and they had struck gold.

It was cruelty for its own sake, and that made it somehow worse than their other attacks.

Amelia's new government had faced several questions when the Wizengamot convened in the new year. The probes had been logical and deserving. However, even the people in the Wizengamot knew that the government they had right now was the best they could hope for, and discussions had quickly shifted from accusations to constructive suggestions and resolutions.

"We'll make them pay for what they did," Tracey said firmly, her hand finding Neville's and squeezing it. "All of them."

"I know," Neville replied, but his voice lacked conviction. He looked exhausted, like he'd aged years in just a few days. The realization that his parents had almost perished in the attack while they remained helpless had hit him harder than any of them had thought, and they were thankful for Tracey who had been there for him every step of the way, supporting and reassuring him.

The train began to slow as they approached Hogsmeade Station, and Harry could see through the window that their arrival would be unlike any they'd experienced before. Bright magical lights illuminated the platform despite the early evening darkness, and he could make out the distinctive purple robes of at least two dozen Aurors stationed around the area.

"Well, they're taking this seriously, at least," Daphne remarked dryly.

"A welcome change. I just hope they keep this up and are competent," Tracey added.

As the students disembarked, they got a clearer picture of the increased security measures. Aurors stood at regular intervals along the platform, their hands resting casually on their wands but their eyes constantly scanning the crowd. Few students who were advanced enough in the art of magical detection could feel layers upon layers of magical monitoring wards humming in the air. Harry and his group knew perfectly well what those were for – to catch anyone trying to bring dangerous objects or use Polyjuice Potion to infiltrate the school.

"Students, please form orderly lines!" McGonagall's voice rang out over the crowd, magically amplified, and surprised, the students turned to where her voice had come from. She stood near the carriages, her usually stern expression even more severe than usual. "You will be scanned for contraband and unauthorized magical items before boarding!"

The process took nearly an hour. Each student had to pass through what looked like a modified version of the security measures used at the Ministry, complete with golden scales that weighed their wands and detected any traces of dark magic. Harry watched as several students had items confiscated – mostly harmless joke products from Zonko's or the twins' owl-order joke shop, but also a few items that made the Aurors exchange glances.

Harry and his group made their way to one of the carriages, only to find it occupied by Ginny and another girl who Daphne recognized.

"Hey Ginny, Luna," she smiled. "Mind if we join you guys?"

Harry's eyes were on the blonde girl whose grey eyes shined as she looked at Daphne before glancing toward Gabrielle and finally, her eyes shifted to him.

"Hello, Harry Potter," she said in perhaps the softest voice Harry had ever heard.

"Er, hello," he greeted.

"Oh, just come on in," Ginny said, making room for them. Neville and Tracey sat beside the two girls while Harry found himself sandwiched between Daphne and Gabrielle across from them. As Neville shut the door, the carriage lurched forward.

"Pretty impressive," Ginny commented, looking out of the glass pane on the carriage door at the aurors who were still checking the students.

"It shouldn't be like this, but there's little choice," Neville said with a frown.

"These are tough times, Nev," Tracey said softly, taking his hand.

Tough times indeed. Even the thestrals pulling their carriage seemed more agitated than usual, their skeletal heads turning frequently to scan their surroundings.

"Even they can feel it," Luna remarked in that serene voice of hers, making everyone turn to regard her. She was watching one of the winged creatures with a peculiar look on her face. "Thestrals are very close to nature. They can feel the tension in the air. Everything must feel wrong to them."

"You know about them?" Daphne asked softly.

"My mother," Luna said simply, and that was enough of an answer. Ginny squeezed her shoulder in silent support, making Luna glance at her before her eyes once again found Harry.

"Is there something you want to say to me, Miss Lovegood?" He asked curiously.

Luna tilted her head slightly, studying Harry with those piercing grey eyes. He oddly felt like she was staring right through him.

"You're different from before," she said softly. "There's something... darker around you now. Not dark magic. But you've seen things. The kind that change a person."

Harry felt both Daphne and Gabrielle shift slightly, their hands finding his. He stared at Luna, knowing exactly what she was talking about. The battle in Azkaban and the deaths of Elphias and Benjy had indeed changed all of them.

"We all have. These aren't normal times."

"No," Luna agreed, her gaze never wavering. "But some people change by growing harder, and others by growing deeper. You've done both, I think."

Gabrielle leaned forward slightly, clearly intrigued by the strange girl. "You speak very strangely, Luna."

"Do I?" Luna asked with genuine curiosity. "I've always thought everyone else spoke strangely. All those words they use to avoid saying what they really mean."

Ginny smiled softly. "Luna can see... things around people. More than anyone notices."

The carriage hit a bump in the road, and through the window, Hogwarts came into view. Even from a distance, Harry could see that the castle looked different. Lights blazed from more windows than usual, and he could make out figures moving along the battlements – guards, he realized. The school had become a fortress.

"Dumbledore added those protective enchantments he was talking about," Harry remarked, squinting at the castle. "I can see them from here."

"Good," Tracey said firmly. "After what happened at St. Mungo's, nowhere is safe unless we make it safe."

Luna's expression grew thoughtful. "My father says that safety is often an illusion we create for ourselves. But sometimes," she looked directly at Harry again, "illusions are necessary to keep functioning."

"Your father sounds wise," Harry said diplomatically.

"He is, in his way," Luna said with a faraway look in her eyes. "He thinks there will be a great convergence soon. When all the hidden things come to light."

"Hidden things?" Neville asked.

"Secrets have a way of surfacing during wars," Luna said simply. "People you trusted, people you didn't, allegiances you never suspected. The Death Eaters

breaking out of Azkaban was just the beginning. Now everyone will have to choose which side they're really on."

The carriage began to slow as they approached the castle gates, which Harry noticed were now flanked by additional iron barriers covered in protective runes. More Aurors stood guard, their presence both reassuring and ominous.

"Luna," Gabrielle said quietly, "Ginny said you can see things around people... what exactly does that mean?"

Luna smiled, and for the first time since they'd met, it seemed entirely normal.

"I pay attention, Gabrielle Delacour. Most people are too busy talking to really listen, too busy looking to really see. But magic leaves traces, emotions leave impressions, and choices... well, choices change the very air around a person."

No one knew how to respond to that.

The carriage came to a complete stop, and through the windows they could see other students climbing out of their carriages, all of them looking around nervously at the increased security.

"Well," Ginny said as Neville opened the door, "whatever's coming, at least we'll face it together."

"Together," Tracey nodded as they climbed out of the carriage, walking over in front to see the castle properly. They could see the protective wards and enchantments glowing visibly high above near the spires of the towers, and Harry realized that must be what Dumbledore had meant when he'd told them the students would see something to be reassured of their safety at Hogwarts.

He just hoped the measures were worth it.

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The Great Hall felt different too. Even with the floating candles and the star-filled night sky on the enchanted ceiling up above, there was just... something in the air that didn't feel like the usual warmth and comfort that the place always had. Students were quieter than usual as they took their seats, and Harry noticed that several families had clearly decided not to send their children back. There were noticeably empty spaces at all four house tables.

Professor Dumbledore called for attention before the meal could begin, his voice carrying easily through the suddenly silent hall.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts," he said in his typical grandfatherly voice. "As you have no doubt noticed, we have implemented additional security measures following recent events. These measures are for your protection and the protection of the school.

You will find Aurors stationed throughout the castle and grounds. They are here as our guests and allies, and you will treat them with appropriate respect."

He paused, his eyes roaming over the student body.

"Additionally, several new rules are now in effect. No student may leave the castle grounds without express permission from a Head of House. The Forbidden Forest is strictly off-limits to all students, regardless of year or circumstances. Finally, any student found with unauthorized magical items or engaging in behavior that could compromise the school's security will face immediate consequences."

A murmur ran through the hall at that. Hogwarts had always been relatively lenient about minor rule-breaking, especially when it came to magical experimentation. This new zero-tolerance approach was clearly going to take some time to get used to.

"On a more positive note," Dumbledore continued, "we welcome a new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor. Professor Marcus Proudfoot comes to us from the Auror Corps, where he has distinguished himself in the fight against dark wizards. Professor Proudfoot?"

Harry turned toward the staff table along with everyone else, watching as a man who looked to be in his early forties stood up. Professor Proudfoot was average height but powerfully built, with close-cropped brown hair and sharp, watchful eyes. One look at him and it was apparent that he was an experienced fighter. His robes were well-tailored but practical, and one could see the outline of a wand holster beneath his left sleeve.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Proudfoot said, his voice carrying clearly through the hall. "I look forward to working with all of you. Defense Against the Dark Arts has never been more important than it is right now, and I intend to ensure that every student in this school graduates with the skills they need to protect themselves and others."

He sat back down, but not before his eyes swept the entirety of the hall. He was clearly doing what must be second nature to him, being an auror – assessing for any possible threats. This was clearly not going to be another incompetent DADA teacher.

As dinner progressed, Harry paid more attention to the reactions of his fellow students than to the food on his plate. The Slytherins seemed particularly subdued, and he noticed several of them shooting nervous glances toward the staff table where Snape sat. The Potions Master looked even more sour than usual, and as Harry glanced over, he found the man's black eyes were fixed on him with the usual sour expression.

Harry stared back stoically. He knew Snape hated him even more now after the whole Malfoy business, but he could not bring himself to even relate to the man, let

alone feel bad. He could keep his loathing for him, allow himself to drown in it for all he cared, but only as long as he did not work against their interests.

"He looks like he wants to hex you into next week," Daphne said quietly, following Harry's gaze toward the staff table.

"Let him try," Harry replied, his voice harder than he'd intended.

Gabrielle, who had been picking at her food with little appetite, suddenly tutted beside him. Harry followed her gaze and saw what had caught her attention. A group of seventh-year Ravenclaws were staring at her with expressions that ranged from curiosity to outright fear.

"We expected this," she muttered in exasperation. "But this is still weird."

Harry looked around the hall more carefully and realized that Gabrielle was drawing attention from multiple tables. Some of it was the usual mixture of desire and dismissal that her Veela heritage typically provoked, but there was something new there now. Students whispered behind their hands when they thought she wasn't looking, and more than a few seemed actively afraid of her.

The story of what had happened to Dolores Umbridge had made its way through the rumor mill, as such stories always did at Hogwarts. The official version was that she'd suffered a severe magical accident, but the students had filled in the gaps with their own theories. Most of them were wildly inaccurate, but they all painted Gabrielle as someone dangerous—someone who had done something terrible to the woman, however vile she might be, and gotten away with it.

"I don't care what they think," Gabrielle said.

"You shouldn't," Daphne agreed firmly. "Umbridge got what she deserved, and if some of them can't see that, it's their problem."

After dinner, Harry and his girlfriends parted ways, exchanging loving kisses that seemed to draw a lot of stares. It was to be expected. After all, both his betrothals were public knowledge now.

As they left, Harry nodded at his friends and together, they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Sucks that things are like this," Angelina muttered under her breath.

Harry nodded, taking note of the additional security measures throughout the castle. Aurors stood at key intersections, and he could feel the hum of monitoring charms in the air. It was truly unfortunate that they had to endure this level of scrutiny in a place that was supposed to be fun.

The common room was also quieter than usual, with small groups of students clustered around tables discussing the new security measures in hushed tones. Harry

noticed that several of the older students kept glancing toward him and his friends, as if expecting them to have inside information about what was really happening.

The twins and the chasers took their leave, leaving him with Neville. Harry spotted Ron walking toward the stairs that led to the dormitories, and the redhead gave him an uncertain nod when their eyes met. Harry nodded, his lips pursed, but his eyes hardened when he spotted Hermione looking at him.

The brunette looked like she wanted to say something, but she seemed to think better of it as she turned around and walked away toward the girls' dormitories.

"I need some air already," Harry said with a sigh.

"I feel you," Neville agreed. "But where can we go that isn't crawling with Aurors?"

"Well, there's the Room of Requirement," Harry suggested. "Let's call the girls over. We should be able to use it without interference."

The girls met them by the staircase, and together, they made their way through the castle corridors, nodding politely to the Aurors they passed.

Once they reached the seventh-floor corridor, Harry paced in front of the room, asking for a comfortable space for them to relax without worrying about unwanted eyes and possible interruptions.

The room that emerged behind the large double doors was a cross between a living room and a library. Soft chairs were arranged around a fireplace, with tall windows showing a view of the star-filled sky outside. Large bookshelves lined the opposite wall, filled with copies of books from the library.

Harry lowered himself into one of the couches, feeling some of the tension leave his shoulders for the first time since they'd arrived at the station. Daphne took her place to his right, leaning against him while Gabrielle curled up against his left. Neville and Tracey took the loveseat opposite them, and for a few minutes, they all just sat in comfortable silence.

"This feels almost normal," Tracey said eventually.

"Normal," Neville repeated with a bitter laugh. "I'm starting to forget what that word means."

Harry studied his friend's face, noting the dark circles under his eyes and the way his hands kept clenching and unclenching. Neville had been through hell over the holidays, and Harry knew that the attack on his parents had hit him harder than he was letting on.

But there was something else bothering Harry, something that had been weighing on him since Christmas Day. A conversation he'd been putting off for too long.

"Nev," Harry said carefully, "there's something I need to tell you. Something you deserve to know."

Neville looked up, and he must've noticed his tone as his expression suddenly became alert. "What is it?"

Harry glanced at Daphne and Gabrielle, both of whom gave him encouraging nods. They'd discussed this while they were in Greengrass manor and agreed that Neville had a right to know the truth.

"It's about why Voldemort targeted my parents," Harry began. "And why he might have targeted yours instead."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees. Neville sat up straighter in his chair, his eyes fixed on Harry's face.

"What do you mean?" Neville asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Harry took a deep breath, trying to figure out how to explain something that he didn't fully understand himself. "There was a prophecy. Made before either of us was born."

"A prophecy," Neville repeated slowly. "Like the ones in the Department of Mysteries?"

"Exactly like those. I got to know about it last year, after what happened at the end of the third task. It said that a boy born at the end of July would have the power to defeat Voldemort. The thing is, Neville... the prophecy could have been about either of us."

Neville stared at Harry as if he'd spoken in a foreign language, while Tracey shakily reached over to take her boyfriend's hand.

Calmly, Harry recited what he knew of the prophecy.

"Both of you were born at the end of July," Daphne said gently once he finished. "Both to parents who had defied Voldemort three times. The prophecy didn't specify which child it meant."

"So why..." Neville's voice cracked, and he had to clear his throat before continuing. "Why didn't he come for my family?"

"He did," Harry said quietly. "That's why your parents were tortured, Neville. Voldemort came after me because I'm a half-blood, just like him. He chose me as the child of the prophecy, believing that a half-blood made more sense than a pureblood child. But in his final days, he had mentioned both our families to his followers."

Neville was listening intently, his wide eyes fixated on Harry as Tracey rubbed his back in support.

"The Lestranges and Barty Crouch Jr. thought your parents might know something about what happened to Voldemort on that Halloween night because he had mentioned your family in his final days. They thought your parents might have information about why their master fell."

"They tortured my parents because they thought..."

He couldn't finish the sentence. Harry watched as his friend's face went through a series of emotions – shock, grief, anger, and finally a kind of terrible understanding.

"Voldemort heard part of the prophecy from a spy," Harry continued. "Someone who was eavesdropping when it was made. But they only heard the first part, the part that I just told you. That's about as much as I know about the prophecy."

"So it could have gone the other way," Tracey said, her voice filled with horror. "If he'd chosen differently..."

"Neville's parents would be dead, and mine might be the ones in St. Mungo's," Harry finished. "Yes."

Neville sat in stunned silence for several long minutes, his unseeing eyes fixed on the fire. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse with emotion.

"All this time, I thought I was weak. Thought I wasn't good enough, brave enough, strong enough. But I could have been the one carrying this burden instead of you."

"You wouldn't have been weak then either," Harry said firmly. "Neville, you're one of the bravest people I know. Look at everything you've done – standing up to us in first year when you thought we were breaking rules, staying with your parents even when it's painful, standing alongside us at every step of the way. You think any of that makes you weak?"

"But the prophecy –"

"The prophecy doesn't determine who you are," Daphne interrupted. "It doesn't make Harry special, and it wouldn't have made you special either. You both became who you are through your choices, not because of some prediction made before you were born."

Neville looked up at her, then at each of them in turn. "My parents," he said slowly. "They suffered because of this prophecy. Because Voldemort couldn't be sure which family to target first."

"Yes," Harry said simply. "There was no point in trying to soften that truth."

"And now he's back, and he's still not sure the prophecy is fulfilled."

"He doesn't care about you," Gabrielle said bluntly. "He chose Harry, and that decided it for him. It's Harry on top of his hit list. You... don't exist for him."

Neville was quiet for another long moment, his mind clearly working through everything they'd told him.

"Thank you," he said simply. "For telling me. I know it couldn't have been easy."

"You deserved to know," Harry replied.

A few minutes later, Neville asked to leave with Tracey, stating that he wanted some private time with her. It was understandable too. This kind of revelation was life-changing, and Neville would need time to process it fully with the person closest to him.

Harry easily asked the room to morph, creating two separate rooms ensuring adequate privacy. They watched the couple walk through the door, shutting it behind them.

"That went better than I expected," Daphne said quietly as she got up from the couch, walking over to the bed. She lowered herself on it, patting the spot next to her. Harry smiled and walked over with Gabrielle, and the threesome assumed the natural position easily, with him in the middle and them cuddled up on either side of him.

"He took it well," Gabrielle agreed. "Better than I would have, probably."

"He's stronger than he gives himself credit for," Harry replied. "He always has been. I think this might actually be good for him in the long run."

"He also had a right to know," Daphne added. "Also, keeping secrets people deserve to know has never helped anyone."

Harry sighed as he pulled them close, closing his eyes as they threw their hands and legs over his body, using him like a body pillow. He felt both their lips on either side of his neck and let out a soft groan, his hands caressing their backs.

"This feeling is really something else," Gabrielle said huskily, nibbling on his earlobe before rolling it about with her tongue. Harry's hand descended, and the veela moaned in approval when he grabbed her rear, giving it a firm squeeze.

Their little intimate moment was interrupted by a sudden flash of brilliant flame above their heads. All three of them jerked in place, looking up sharply, and they saw the familiar form of Fawkes materializing in the air above them.

The phoenix circled once, his golden feathers gleaming, before releasing something from his talons. A piece of parchment fluttered down toward them like a falling leaf.

Daphne was the quickest to react, reaching up to catch the parchment. She unfolded it carefully, her eyes scanning the contents quickly.

"What does it say?" Harry asked, though he could guess. Dumbledore had a fondness for dramatic message delivery.

"Dumbledore wants to see us in his office. Now, apparently."

They exchanged glances with each other. It was late for a meeting, and they'd only just returned to school. This had to be about something urgent.

"All three of us?" Gabrielle asked.

Daphne nodded.

"I guess that's it for a quiet, relaxing time with each other," Gabrielle said with a sigh. "Just when things were getting good."

"When is it ever quiet for long?" Daphne remarked, making Harry chuckle. She was not wrong, after all.

To be continued...