

## Chapter 40

Albus Dumbledore sat slumped in his chair behind his desk, his face pale and drawn with pain. His right hand – blackened, withered, and clearly cursed – rested limply on the armrest while Severus Snape worked over it with his wand, muttering incantations under his breath.

"You were fortunate I was able to contain it to your hand," Snape said, his voice tight with barely controlled anger. "The curse on that ring was specifically designed to kill, Albus. Quickly and painfully."

"Yes, I rather gathered that," Dumbledore replied with a weak attempt at humor. "How long do I have?"

Snape's jaw clenched. "A year. Perhaps less. The curse is eating away at you from the inside. I've managed to slow it, but I cannot stop it entirely."

"A year." Dumbledore nodded slowly, as if confirming something he'd already suspected. "That should be enough time."

"Enough time for what?" Snape demanded, finally looking up from his work. "To continue playing your games? To manipulate more pieces on your chess board?"

"To ensure Harry is ready," Dumbledore said quietly.

Snape's expression darkened. "Potter. Always Potter." He returned his attention to the cursed hand. "You're placing all your faith in a boy who wants nothing to do with your people anymore."

"Perhaps. But he is still our best hope." Dumbledore's good hand reached for a lemon drop from the bowl on his desk, popping it into his mouth. "With the Horcrux inside him gone and him being the master of the Elder Wand, Harry is truly poised to defeat Tom once all the Horcruxes are destroyed."

"You assume he will cooperate with your plans."

"He will do what must be done when the time comes."

Snape let out a harsh laugh. "You haven't been paying attention, Albus. Potter has changed. He's not the malleable boy you once knew. After what happened with Andromeda Tonks..." He shook his head. "He sees the Order for what it truly is now. A tool for your manipulations."

Dumbledore sighed, his blue eyes dimming behind his half-moon spectacles. "I know Harry does not see the Order favorably anymore. What happened with Andromeda was... unfortunate."

"Unfortunate," Snape repeated flatly.

"Yes." Dumbledore said regretfully. "I made a mistake. I see that now. But there might be differences between us, Severus, yet those differences won't matter when the time comes. Harry will understand that defeating Tom is more important than our personal conflicts."

Suddenly, the fireplace flared green. Both men tensed—Dumbledore straightening in his chair despite the pain, and Snape melting into the shadows as if he'd never been there.

"Albus? Are you there?" a voice called from the flames.

"I am here," Dumbledore replied, quickly drawing his sleeve down to cover his blackened hand. "You may come through, Kingsley."

Kingsley Shacklebolt stumbled through the fireplace, his usually composed demeanor shattered. His eyes were wide, his breathing heavy, and his robes were disheveled as if he'd been running.

"Albus," he gasped. "You need to hear this. I just came from St. Mungo's. There's been an incident—a major one."

Dumbledore leaned forward, his expression grave. "What kind of incident?"

"A group of prisoners just arrived. Two dozen of them, maybe more. All of them were being held in a manor belonging to the Carrow twins. Tortured, experimented on. The Healers are overwhelmed."

"The Carrows." Dumbledore's voice hardened. "How did these prisoners escape? Did the Order—"

"No." Kingsley shook his head vigorously. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. It wasn't us. Someone attacked the manor. Killed every Death Eater inside. All thirty of them, including Alecto and Amycus Carrow themselves."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "Thirty Death Eaters? That would require significant force. Did Voldemort's followers turn on each other?"

"That's what I thought at first." Kingsley ran a hand over his bald head, still looking shaken. "But the survivors, they all told the same story. It was one person. One wizard who stormed the place alone and killed every Death Eater in the building."

"One person," Dumbledore repeated slowly. "Did anyone see who it was?"

Kingsley met his gaze, and Dumbledore saw something like awe mixed with disbelief in the Auror's eyes.

"It was Harry Potter, Albus. Harry did this. Alone."

The office fell into absolute silence.

Dumbledore stared at Kingsley, his expression frozen somewhere between shock and something that might have been fear or perhaps grim satisfaction. His good hand gripped the armrest of his chair tightly.

"Harry," he whispered finally.

"The prisoners were very clear," Kingsley continued. "They said he appeared after all the fighting was done. Calm, composed, like he'd just gone for a walk. He opened their cells, told them they were free, and set up portkeys to St. Mungo's. Some of them saw the carnage in the entrance hall. Bodies everywhere. The place was destroyed."

"Thirty trained Death Eaters," Dumbledore murmured, more to himself than to Kingsley. "The Carrows were formidable duelists. For Harry to have defeated them all..."

"There's more." Kingsley's expression grew even more troubled. "One of the survivors, a witch named Martha Pemberton, she tried to leave St. Mungo's before we could properly debrief her. Said she was scared. Death Eaters picked her up within an hour. We don't know what happened to her after that, but..." He trailed off meaningfully.

"Voldemort knows," Dumbledore finished. "He knows it was Harry."

"Almost certainly."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, his mind racing. This changed everything. Harry wasn't just avoiding the Order or refusing to follow his plans – he was actively waging his own war against Voldemort. And from the sound of it, he was winning.

Thirty Death Eaters dead in a single night. The Carrow twins eliminated. An entire base of operations destroyed.

This was the work of someone who had abandoned restraint, who had chosen to fight without mercy or hesitation. This was not the Harry Potter he had known, the boy who valued life and sought peaceful solutions.

This was someone else entirely.

"Albus?" Kingsley's voice broke through his thoughts. "What do you want me to do? Should I try to contact Harry?"

"No." The word came out sharper than Dumbledore intended. He softened his tone. "No, Kingsley. It's clear that Harry is fighting this war in his own way now. We must respect that, even if we don't entirely understand it."

Kingsley frowned. "But Albus, if he's taking this kind of action alone, without coordination or support... he could get himself killed. Or worse, he could escalate this conflict beyond our ability to control it."

"Harry has made his choice," Dumbledore said quietly. "And perhaps... perhaps I drove him to it with my own actions. The best we can do now is continue our own efforts and hope that when the final confrontation comes, we will be fighting on the same side."

Kingsley didn't look satisfied with this answer, but he nodded. "I'll keep you informed of any developments."

"Thank you, Kingsley. You've done well to bring this to me so quickly."

After Kingsley left through the floo, Dumbledore sat in silence for a long moment. Then, without looking toward the shadows, he spoke.

"You can come out now, Severus."

Snape emerged from the darkness, his expression unreadable. He studied Dumbledore carefully before speaking.

"So. Potter has finally embraced the power you always knew he possessed."

"It would appear so." Dumbledore's voice was heavy with something that might have been regret or resignation. "Though I fear he has embraced it in ways I never intended."

"You wanted a weapon against the Dark Lord," Snape said coldly. "You have one. Does it matter if that weapon refuses to be wielded by your hand?"

Dumbledore didn't argue. How could he? Snape was right. Every manipulation, every secret kept, every piece of the grand plan that had required Harry's ignorance — all of it had led to this moment.

He knew this was a possibility, that someday, Harry might have to kill. He didn't think that day would come so soon, or that he would seek to kill instead of being forced to.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, had finally had enough of being controlled. He was his own person, and now he was taking matters into his own hands.

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Fleur woke to sunlight streaming through unfamiliar curtains, and she was momentarily disoriented before her memory caught up with her. She was in Grimmauld Place. Harry's home. She was in Britain now, under the Fidelius Charm's protection.

The bed was comfortable, far more so than she'd expected from such an old house. She stretched lazily, surprised by how well-rested she felt despite the previous day's travel and the emotional whirlwind of meeting Nym, Susan, and Hannah.

Those three young women. Harry's lovers.

The thought sent an unwelcome twinge through her chest again, but she pushed it aside as she rose and went through her morning routine. A quick shower using the en-suite bathroom – surprisingly modern compared to the house's exterior – and she dressed in casual robes suitable for a quiet morning at home.

She made her way downstairs, expecting to find the kitchen bustling with activity. Instead, she found... nothing. The house was eerily quiet and empty.

"ello?" she called out softly. "Is anyone 'ere?"

There was no answer.

Frowning, Fleur turned to head back upstairs, thinking perhaps everyone was still asleep, when a sound caught her attention. It was faint, coming from somewhere below. A rhythmic noise, like... magic being cast?

She followed the sound to a door she hadn't noticed the night before, slightly ajar and leading downward. Curious, and thinking someone must be down there, she pulled the door open and slowly descended the narrow staircase. The sounds grew louder with each step – the distinctive crack of spellfire, the hum of powerful magic being channeled and released.

Fleur's eyes widened when she felt the thick essence of magic envelop her as she descended. The sheer power she could feel was unlike anything she'd felt before. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she paused at the threshold of what appeared to be a training room.

The sight that greeted her made her breath catch in her throat.

Harry Potter stood in the center of the basement, his wand moving in complex patterns as spell after spell erupted from its tip, slamming against the magical barrier erected right in front of the wall. But it wasn't just the magic that made her freeze.

He was shirtless.

His torso was bare, his skin glistening with sweat as muscles flexed and moved with each casting. He'd changed a lot since the tournament, she realized as she stared, having filled out, grown taller, and broader in the shoulders. Sweat dripped down his muscular back as he pivoted, launching another spell at one of the targets near the far wall with enough force to make the stone shudder.

For a long moment, Fleur could only stare.

The magic he was wielding was powerful. Raw. Volatile. The kind of magic that most wizards spent decades trying to master, and he was throwing it around like it was nothing. Each spell was precise, controlled despite its power, and the sheer force behind them made the air crackle with energy.

However, there was another reason why she stood frozen her in place, feeling like she was being forced her to stare.

The veela inside her was responding to him in ways she'd never experienced before, and it froze her in place. Her magic was singing, reaching out toward his powerful, volatile energy like a moth to flame. It was intoxicating. Dangerous. Completely unlike anything she'd felt before.

She couldn't move. She knew how mortifying it would be if he noticed her standing here like some star-struck schoolgirl.

But she couldn't move.

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Harry had felt Fleur the moment she'd started down the stairs. Her veela allure was controlled, tightly leashed, but still noticeable enough to make him aware of her presence. He'd continued his training routine without pause, though his awareness of her never wavered.

*Oh, you've got quite the delicious audience now, Maria's voice purred in his mind, dripping with amusement. Little veela can't take her eyes off you. Why don't you put on a proper show for her?*

Harry's lips curved into a small smirk as he shifted his stance. *Why not?*

He launched into a more complex series of spells. Each spell was more powerful than the last, and he could feel Fleur's magic responding to his, could sense the way her carefully controlled allure was beginning to slip just slightly as she watched.

*That's enough of a show, I think, Maria said after another minute, her voice thick with satisfaction. Any more and you'll have her melting into a puddle on the floor.*

*Funny how just a few flashy spells seem to affect her so much.*

*Oh, you silly boy! It's not flashy spellcasting. It's a veela's innate magic interacting with a powerful wizard's own. It would've happened even if you were sleeping like the dolt that you are.*

*Okay. Power it is then. Still pretty vain in my opinion.*

*It's her feelings, dumbass. What do you take a veela for? Slut for any strong wizard? Nothing would happen if the veela doesn't have feelings for her mate. And this one? Oh my, if she was any weaker, she would've thrown herself at you already.*

*You'd have liked that, wouldn't you?* Harry laughed softly and ceased his casting, lowering his wand as he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

Releasing a deep breath, he turned around, putting on his best surprised expression.

"Fleur? I didn't know you were awake."

Fleur jolted as if she'd been struck, her eyes widening as Harry turned to face her fully. She definitely wasn't in control of herself right now, not with her magic still singing in response to his presence.

"I... I 'eard sounds," she managed, her accent even thicker than usual. "I thought someone was down 'ere."

Harry smiled and walked toward her, and Fleur found herself surprised – shocked, really – when she realized she had to look up to meet his eyes. When had he gotten so tall? He'd been shorter than her during the Tournament, but now...

Her eyes widened when his arms came up to embrace her, but he stopped at the last moment, chuckling softly.

"I'm sweaty," he said, his voice warm with amusement. "You probably don't want that on you first thing in the morning."

Fleur's breath hitched as she watched him raise his wand with a casual flick. The sweat vanished from his skin, leaving him clean and smelling faintly of magic and something very masculine that she found oddly enticing. Then his arms came around her, pulling her into a gentle embrace.

She melted into it without thinking, inhaling greedily as his scent filled her senses. Her veela magic flared, singing with approval, and she found herself pressing closer before she could stop herself.

This was bad. This was very bad. She'd never reacted to anyone like this before, never felt her magic respond with such intensity to another person's presence. It wasn't just attraction – though there was plenty of that – it was something deeper, something that spoke to the veela side of her nature that she usually kept so carefully controlled.

Harry's hold tightened for just a moment as her allure flared and washed over him, his body tensing against hers. Then he relaxed and gently pulled away, giving her a brilliant smile that made her heart skip.

"I'm really happy to see you," he said, his voice sincere. "And I appreciate you coming to Britain at such a dark time. Just to support me... it means a lot, Fleur. Really."

The veela in her sang at his appreciation, preening under his words, and Fleur had to fight to maintain control. She took a shaky breath.

"I am just doing what I feel is right," she managed, her voice not quite steady. "You 'elped me in ze past. You 'elped Gabrielle when you didn't need to. I am beyond grateful for zat."

Harry's smile faded slightly, a small frown creasing his brow. "I didn't do it because I wanted something in return, Fleur."

"Non, non!" She was quick to reassure him, reaching out to touch his arm. "I did not mean it like zat. What I mean to say is... you are my friend, 'arry. And I want to be zere for you in your time of need."

The smile returned, softer this time but no less genuine. Before Fleur could prepare herself, Harry pulled her into another embrace. This time, though, she had better control. She hugged him back, her arms wrapping around his waist as she let herself accept that this felt... nice. Safe. Right in every way.

When they finally pulled apart, Harry was grinning.

"Come on," he said, gesturing toward the stairs. "Let me get dressed properly and I'll make us some breakfast."

Harry led the way up from the basement, magic swirling around him briefly as clothes materialized on his frame – a simple and comfortable set of shirt and trousers. Fleur followed, trying not to think too hard about how her body was still humming with delight from their embrace.

The kitchen was bright with morning sunlight streaming through the windows. It was a surprisingly cheerful room despite the house's grim exterior, with warm wooden counters and copper pots hanging from hooks above the stove.

"Where is everyone?" Fleur asked as Harry moved to the stove and began pulling out pans and ingredients.

"They went to Greengrass Manor," Harry replied casually as he started cracking eggs into a bowl. "Had some things to discuss with Daphne, Astoria, Tracey, and Evelyn."

Fleur didn't recognize the names. "Who are ze Greengrasses?"

"Close allies," Harry said, and Fleur didn't miss the subtle shift in his demeanor when he mentioned them. His voice softened, and there was a warmth that made her feel that it was more than a simple alliance. "Daphne and her younger sister Astoria, along with their friend Tracey Davis. Their mother Evelyn is... well, she's something special. They're great. Strong. Loyal."

The way he spoke about them, the tone of his voice, the slight smile that played at his lips – Fleur noticed it all. And it was confirmed by the subtle shift she felt in his magic that the veela inside her recognized. These women were his lovers too, weren't they?

It irked her, that twinge of... what? Jealousy? Possessiveness? It returned. She knew she had no right to either, no claim on Harry Potter beyond friendship. But the feeling persisted nonetheless.

Just how many women was Harry involved with? She wasn't a stranger to the concept of polygamy. After all, in the older days, harems weren't uncommon among powerful magical families. But she hadn't pegged Harry as someone who would want or have one of his own. He'd come across as shy during the Tournament, unsure around girls, with barely any female interaction outside his friend Hermione.

To see this side of him was shocking, to say the least.

She kept her thoughts to herself, though. It wasn't her place to broach the subject, not when she'd only just arrived and didn't have that kind of relationship with him.

*At least not yet*, she couldn't help but think.

Harry moved around the kitchen as he prepared breakfast for them, and Fleur found herself staring at him once more. He'd become graceful in a way he hadn't been during the Tournament, confident in his movements and entirely comfortable in his own skin.

He caught her staring and grinned. "See something you like, Fleur?"

The playful tease in his voice sparked something in her, and the veela side of her nature rose to meet his challenge.

"Per'aps," she purred, leaning against the counter with a small smile. "You 'ave changed since ze Tournament, 'arry. Grown up quite nicely."

"Have I now?" Harry's eyes glinted with amusement as he whisked the eggs. "You're not so different yourself. Still one of the most beautiful witch I've ever seen."

One of... Fleur didn't like it. But she didn't show how it affected her.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Fleur shot back, her smile widening. "Though I suspect you already know zat, non? With so many women around you?"

"Maybe I just appreciate beauty when I see it."

"And 'ow often do you see it, 'arry?"

"Often enough to know when someone's fishing for compliments."

Fleur let out a delighted laugh. "You 'ave become quite ze flirt."

"Well," Harry said with a roguish grin, "when you're surrounded with as many women as I am, flirtation comes naturally."

They stared at each other for a moment, the air between them crackling with a different kind of energy than his magic had produced in the basement. Then they both burst out laughing, the tension dissolving entirely.

"I'm surprised," Fleur admitted once their laughter had faded. "Zis side of you... it is very different from ze boy I knew during ze Tournament."

Harry hummed as he went about preparing their breakfast as a moment of silence set in. Fleur's smile faded, and a small frown grew on her face as she stared at him.

"" Arry?"

"A lot has changed," Harry said, his voice serious. "War does that to people."

"War... Is zat why you were using ze magic I saw you wielding downstairs?" She asked softly, walking closer. "It was... powerful. Volatile. Not ze kind of magic zey teach at Beauxbatons or 'ogwarts."

Harry sighed, his hands pausing in their work for a moment before he resumed cracking eggs.

"No, it's not," he agreed. "A lot has changed in the past year since Voldemort's return. Especially over the past few months."

"Changed 'ow?"

Harry was quiet for a moment, considering his words. When he spoke, his voice was measured but dark, and Fleur shivered at the look on his face.

"The Ministry is useless," he said bluntly. "Corrupt, incompetent, more interested in maintaining their own power than actually protecting people. The Wizengamot is a joke – a bunch of inbred purebloods playing political games while people die. And Dumbledore..." He laughed bitterly. "Well, let's just say the great manipulator doesn't know I've seen his true face and the reality of his useless organization. Posers, the lot of them. All talk and no bite, not even when one of theirs is suffering."

Fleur's eyes widened. These were radical views, the kind of thing that could get someone labeled a revolutionary or worse. But after what she'd seen and heard of this society so far, after the tension in the Ministry and the fear on people's faces...

She couldn't find fault in his words.

"So you've decided to take matters into your own 'ands," she said softly.

"Someone has to." Harry's jaw tightened. "The Ministry won't act. Dumbledore wants to play his long game of chess where everyone's a piece to be sacrificed for the 'greater good.' And meanwhile, Death Eaters are torturing and killing people every day. So yes, I decided to do something about it."

"Ze magic downstairs..."

"Is what's necessary to fight them." Harry met her eyes, and Fleur saw steel there that hadn't existed in the boy from the Tournament. "They don't play by rules, Fleur. They use the darkest magic imaginable, torture for fun, kill without hesitation. If I'm going to stop them, I need to be stronger. Faster. More powerful than they are."

Fleur took in everything he was saying, thinking about the sheer force she'd witnessed in the basement. "And ze others? Ze women staying 'ere? Ze Greengrasses? Zey know what you're doing?"

"They're all with me," Harry said simply. "They're my true allies, Fleur. They're going to be fighting alongside me, standing with me every step of the way. In this war, and what comes next. We're in this together."

The way he said it, the obvious care in his voice when he spoke of them – it made that twinge in Fleur's chest return. But she pushed it down, focusing instead on the bigger picture.

"It is dangerous," she said. "What you're doing. Going against ze established order, fighting a war on your own terms..."

"I know." Harry's voice was quiet but firm. "But it's necessary. This society, this government – it's broken, Fleur. Has been for a long time. Someone needs to break it down and rebuild it into something better."

"And you think you can do zat?"

"I'm going to do that."

The conviction in his voice, the absolute certainty – it was both frightening and impressive. Fleur found herself believing him, believing that Harry Potter might actually be capable of the impossible task he'd set himself.

Silence settled over them as Harry brought over two plates laden with perfectly cooked eggs, bacon, toast, and what looked like sautéed mushrooms. The smell was heavenly, and Fleur realized she was quite hungry.

"That's enough morose chat for the morning, I think." Harry said as he pulled out her chair for her with a small flourish, making her smile despite herself. "Milady."

"Such a gentleman," she teased as she sat.

"I have my moments." Harry took his seat across from her, pushing one plate toward her.

Fleur took a bite of her eggs, savoring the taste. "Zese are delicious."

"Thanks. Learned to cook young. My aunt and uncle weren't exactly the nurturing type."

There was a story there, Fleur could tell, but she didn't push. Instead, they fell into easy conversation about lighter topics.

It was comfortable, Fleur realized. Easy in a way she hadn't expected. Harry made her laugh with dry observations about Ministry politics, and she found herself

opening up about her own frustrations with the limitations placed on her due to her veela heritage.

"People see the allure first," she said softly. "Zey never look past it to see who I actually am."

"I see you," Harry said simply, and the sincerity in his voice made her breath catch. "Always have, Fleur. You're brilliant, talented, kind, and brave enough to come here when you didn't have to. The veela heritage is just a part of you, not all of you."

That warmth in her chest bloomed again, spreading through her entire body. She smiled at him softly, her eyes shining.

"Thank you, 'arry. Zat means more zan you know."

They finished breakfast in comfortable silence, and as Fleur helped Harry clean up the dishes—he tried to protest but she insisted—her mind was whirling with thoughts.

She'd come to Britain expecting... what? To help fight a war, certainly. To support Harry in whatever way she could. But this—this connection she felt to him, this pull that went beyond simple attraction—she hadn't anticipated that.

Her veela magic was still humming contentedly in his presence, more settled than she'd ever felt it around anyone else. It recognized something in Harry, something powerful and protective and right.

And as she glanced at him from the corner of her eye, watching him dry the dishes with magic while he told her an amusing story about one of his training mishaps, one realization solidified in her mind: Her decision to come here was going to change her life forever.

She just didn't know how much yet.

To be continued...