

Return to Hogwarts

September 1st had arrived quickly. The summer holidays had flown by. Each day seemed the same as the last. Every morning, Neville would dive into the Daily Prophet to catch up on the latest news shaking the wizarding world since the disappearance of Hogwarts' headmaster.

He had learned with growing anxiety about Rufus Scrimgeour's resignation. Many didn't pay much attention, but Neville knew that the disappearance of the last barrier against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was not a good sign for the year ahead.

Early in the morning, Mrs. Longbottom pulled her grandson out of bed. While he was getting ready, she prepared a bowl of porridge into which he absent-mindedly poked his spoon. Without giving him time to finish his breakfast, she urged him to bring down his suitcase and follow her out of the house.

Neville woke up fully when the autumn wind bit into his exposed face. He cast a worried glance around him. Summer had been in full swing just days ago, but now a chilling cold had settled over the country.

Neville wanted to ask his grandmother about it, but she paid him no attention. Her eyes were raised towards the dark sky, as if searching for some sort of creature.

"Don't dawdle, Neville," she ordered. "It's not safe to linger in the streets these days."

She started walking towards Mary Street, then turned the corner at Meredith Lane to reach a circular square where Neville was used to seeing an old man feeding birds from morning till night.

At this early hour, the square was deserted. The few benches were surrounded by flickering lamp posts.

Mrs. Longbottom quickly scanned the area and pulled a long beechwood wand from her old handbag.



She raised it toward the sky without saying a word. Nothing happened for several long seconds.

Moments later, a loud bang accompanied by a blinding light suddenly erupted at the corner of the street. Two gigantic wheels topped with enormous headlights screeched to a halt right where the old woman stood. She didn't flinch as the lamppost she was under bent out of the way of one of the wheels of the purple double-decker bus that had just stopped in front of her.

The door swung open, and a young woman with long blonde hair tied in a ponytail under a delivery cap appeared on the first step.

"Welcome aboard the Knight Bus, emergency transport for stranded witches and wizards. Just stick out your wand hand, hop on, hop on, and we'll take you anywhere you want. My name's Stacy Rotonde, and I'll be your conductor."

Mrs. Longbottom thanked her with a wave of her hand and quickly climbed the tall steps of the bus. She bought two tickets and settled on the upper deck while Neville struggled to hoist his suitcase aboard.

He passed by Earl, the bus driver, who muttered a gruff "Mornin'" without taking his eyes off the road.

They had barely taken their seats when the bus shot off like a rocket. In an instant, it had landed in Surrey, screeching to a halt in front of a traffic island that flattened itself to avoid being uprooted by the wild vehicle. Two scruffy-looking wizards grabbed their small suitcases and disembarked, trembling, just as the accordion door closed behind them and the wheels screeched against the asphalt.

Two minutes later, the bus had landed on a highway heading north. Neville noticed lights approaching in the distance. It took him a moment to realize they were cars, and Earl had driven the bus onto the wrong side of the highway.

After three more stops, where old witches and wizards got on and off the bus, it made one final leap and landed in a large city where the streets became narrower, forcing Earl to maneuver with the skill of a racecar driver to avoid cars and motorbikes cutting across his path.

"Could crush 'em," he grumbled. "No one'd know."

Neville, who had dragged his suitcase down after recognizing the streets of London, caught that fleeting thought and felt great pity for the drivers crossing paths with the mad driver.



The Knight Bus finally skidded to a stop, nearly causing Neville to fall down the stairs. The accordion door opened, and he stepped onto the pavement of a street he knew well.

A little further ahead, he recognized the grand arches under which the glass roofs of the station stretched. At last, they had reached King's Cross.

Mrs. Longbottom quickened her pace and gestured for her grandson to follow. Neville trailed behind silently as they walked through a still-sleepy London. The sun was timidly peeking between the tall buildings, and few people wandered the streets.

The Longbottoms passed a few bystanders, but none paid attention to the old woman with a stuffed vulture perched on her hat or the teenager trailing a heavy suitcase behind him.

"Hurry up, Neville," she exclaimed. "You mustn't be late for your first day. Especially for your last year."

Neville nodded, out of breath from the weight of his enormous suitcase.

They reached the station and weaved through the passersby until they arrived at Platform 9³⁴.

Mrs. Longbottom glanced around and spotted a security guard, his cap pulled down over his head, looking around with a vicious expression. It seemed as though he was searching for his next victim to punish with his baton.

Quick as a flash, Mrs. Longbottom pulled out her wand and cast a Confundus Charm on the poor fellow, hitting him square in the face.

His eyes glazed over, and he started staring into space as if someone had struck him on the head with a hammer.

"Hurry, Neville," his grandmother urged, slipping through the magical barrier.

The teenager looked around to make sure no one was watching and stepped through the barrier after her.

He emerged onto a crowded platform where the scarlet locomotive stood, the one he had taken for the past six years to travel to Hogwarts. He crossed paths with many students he had seen over the previous years. He passed by families accompanying children who were going to Hogwarts for the first time in their lives.

He spared a thought for those students who wouldn't have the chance to meet the most illustrious headmaster the school had ever known.



Neville made his way along the platform and spotted Hannah Abbott, the pretty Hufflepuff student with long blonde hair, who flashed him a radiant smile as she saw him. He returned the smile and also waved at Susan Bones, who greeted him with a friendly wave. A little further on, a group of fourth-year Ravenclaws were discussing Quidditch and the World Cup that would take place the following year.

"Do you think England still has a chance to reach the finals?" asked one of them hopefully.

His two friends looked doubtful.

"I doubt it," one of the others admitted. "Judging by their results, I don't think they'll score very well in their next match."

The third seemed uncertain.

"Who do they have to play in their final qualifying match?"

The first pulled out a notebook covered in stickers from his pocket and flipped through the pages until he found the right one.

"Bulgaria..." he announced sheepishly.

The other two boys sighed. They knew that with the team led by the famous Seeker Viktor Krum, England stood little chance of holding their own against them.

Neville smiled as he walked past them and finally spotted his friend Ginny Weasley in the middle of a group of sixth-year friends. She wore a smile that seemed rather hollow to him. He looked around, searching for his friends Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but saw no sign of them.

He thought about approaching Ginny, but the large number of friends surrounding her dissuaded him. After all, they'd have plenty of time to talk once they arrived at school.

He said goodbye to his grandmother and heaved his suitcase onto the train before climbing aboard himself. The compartments seemed much smaller than the previous year. Neville had grown another good twenty centimeters and had to stoop as he made his way through the corridor to avoid bumping into the lamps hanging along it.

He moved from one car to the next and eventually reached the one closest to the locomotive. He glanced into the compartment and saw a blond boy with a sorrowful look in his eyes.



He recognized his friend Seamus Finnigan, who was staring out the window with a melancholy expression. Neville thought about turning back to avoid disturbing him, but Seamus spotted him. He hurried to the door and called out to Neville, inviting him to join him.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Neville asked politely.

Seamus gave him a sad smile and gestured for him to come in.

Neville settled in by the window, facing his friend, who had once again returned to gazing into the distance.

"Did you have a good summer?" he asked.

Seamus shrugged.

"It was alright," he replied. "My mom took us to visit her family in Ireland. I got to play Quidditch with my cousin Fergus. I practiced as a Chaser and managed to pull off a few decent moves."

Neville listened absently, his attention drawn to the arrival of two people he liked the least at school.

Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, Draco Malfoy's insufferable cronies, were casually strolling along the platform. They were accompanied by two men built like retired rugby players, who were glaring at the families on the platform.

"Who are they?" he muttered quietly.

Seamus stopped talking to follow Neville's gaze and spotted the two hulking men with Crabbe and Goyle.

"They must be their parents," Seamus guessed. "I've always wondered who was responsible for producing such calamities."

Neville shared a smile with Seamus.

"Have you seen Malfoy?" he asked.

Neville squinted, searching for the boy, but couldn't spot him anywhere on the platform.

"After what happened the night Dumbledore was killed, I don't think we'll be seeing him anytime soon."

"I haven't seen Harry either," Seamus mentioned.

"Nor Ron, nor Hermione," Neville added. "From what I've heard, Dumbledore gave Harry a mission, and I think they went with him to help."



Seamus frowned.

"The dorm's going to feel really empty this year."

Neville looked at him curiously.

"Speaking of which... where's Dean?"

In response, Seamus handed him a letter. Neville unfolded it and recognized the handwriting of his friend, Dean Thomas, Seamus's best friend.

Dear Seamus,

I'm writing this letter to let you know that I won't be coming back to Hogwarts this year.

Since the end of last term, Professor McGonagall warned me that I'd be in serious danger if I returned to school this year. According to her, Snape is taking over as Headmaster and has banned all Muggle-borns like me from enrolling at the school.

So, I had to run away from home without telling my family. I can't say where I am, but I'll do my best to keep in touch as often as I can.

Take care of yourself and try not to get into too much trouble.

See you soon,

Dean

Neville looked up from the letter and saw his friend staring out the window, his eyes filled with tears.

"It's over, Neville," Seamus said quietly. "We've lost. You-Know-Who has won."

He paused before continuing.

"Without Professor Dumbledore's help, we don't stand a chance against the Death Eaters."

Neville couldn't believe it. All his friends had left. The ranks of Dumbledore's Army had thinned if not crumbled. The older students had finished their studies, and others had left the school to avoid risking their lives.



Only they remained. They would be the last line of defense against the threat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. They would have to face the dangers that Hogwarts was bound to encounter this year.

It was time to turn his attention to the book he had inherited. The book that Professor Dumbledore had bequeathed to him.

During his visit to Diagon Alley, he had gone to the Weasley twins' shop to purchase some prank items for which they had become famous.

While browsing the shelves, George Weasley approached him and invited him to check out other items that might interest him.

He led him to the back of the shop, where two familiar figures were waiting. He recognized Professor Lupin and a young woman with purple hair, whom he had met on the night of Dumbledore's murder, named Tonks.

"Professor?" Neville asked in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Lupin looked even more rugged than Neville remembered, but he still gave him a warm smile and invited him to join them.

"Hello, Neville," he greeted. "I have something to give you."

He handed Neville a canvas bag, inside of which was a book that appeared to be several decades old. Neville read the cover and discovered it was an old copy of *Hogwarts: A History*.

"Dumbledore left this to me?" he asked, astonished.

Lupin nodded.

"According to what he told me, he believed it would be very useful to you this year. He said he had uncovered many of the school's secrets thanks to it."

Neville had forgotten about the book. He had packed it in his suitcase, thinking he would have plenty of time to discover what it contained once he arrived at Hogwarts.

He made a move to get up and retrieve it but then stopped himself. There was no rush; he would have the whole year to explore Hogwarts' secrets.

By reflex, he slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a gold coin. Seamus recognized the Fake Galleon that Hermione had created two years earlier for each member of Dumbledore's Army.

"You've kept it all this time?" Seamus asked in surprise.



Neville looked at the contours of the coin as he rolled it between his thumb and index finger.

"I've always had it on me," he said. "It's the best thing I've ever done in my life."

Seamus looked at the back of the coin. A smile formed on his lips.

"It's thanks to Harry that we're here today," he confirmed.

"He taught me so much," Neville added. "I can't give up without a fight."

With a flick of his thumb, he spun the coin in the air and caught it in the palm of his hand.

"We're going to reform Dumbledore's Army," he announced.

"No one will want to follow us," Seamus replied. "We don't know as much as Harry."

Neville locked eyes with his friend.

"Then we'll learn it."

Whistles blew, and the train started moving. In a few minutes, the platform disappeared, replaced by endless fields. The two boys made use of the time afforded by the journey to discuss the establishment of a new DA.

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the snack trolley pushed by the old witch, who offered all kinds of sweets. The two friends bought some Chocolate Frogs and Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, which they shared while laughing.

They were joined in their compartment by Ginny and Luna, who was wearing a necklace made of Butterbeer corks. They shared the news with them and invited them to join in the continuation of their Defense Against the Dark Arts classes.

Ginny made a face.

"This might be difficult for me," she said. "I've been offered the position of Gryffindor Quidditch team captain."

She showed them the badge with the letter "C" for captain.

Neville and Seamus congratulated her, while Luna gave her a smile.

"I might not have much time to join you for the classes," Ginny continued.

"That's okay," Neville reassured her. "We'll make sure to find times that work for all of us."



As they were talking, Seamus spotted the outline of the small village they knew well: Hogsmeade.

They put on their wizarding robes and left the compartment to join the other students on the platform.

Crabbe and Goyle were shoving the first-years who were trying to figure out where to go. The four friends saw the massive figure of Hagrid, the Keeper of Keys and Grounds. He was encouraging the students to gather closer so he could lead them, while the older students headed towards the carriages pulled by Thestrals, which everyone could now see. They climbed aboard, and Luna was the last to board, gently stroking the creature's neck as it shivered.

Upon their arrival at the castle, they were greeted by Professor McGonagall, who had a serious expression behind her square glasses. She welcomed all the students and invited them to the Great Hall, where the rest of the faculty awaited them.

They joined their table and noticed empty seats at each house table except for Slytherin's.

Neville, Seamus, and Ginny sat together and waited for the new students to arrive.

They looked towards the staff table and almost fell off their benches when they saw who was seated in the director's place.

"This is impossible," Seamus stammered. "How can he be in Dumbledore's place?"

"I can't believe it," Ginny added, her hand covering her mouth.

Neville felt as though his insides were melting at the sight of the person he hated most in the school.

Whispers spread across every table as they saw Professor Snape sitting in the place of the man he had killed two months earlier.

"This is a nightmare," Neville said.

