

Chapter 8

Harry stumbled out of the Floo to a round of giggles from the girls. Rolling his eyes, he dusted off his clothes. When he looked up, he couldn't help but stare at Penny for a moment. She wore a pair of tight jeans and a red halter top. A flush heated up his cheek as his gaze darted to her face. Smirking, Penny walked forward, kissing his cheek and hugging him tightly.

"Come on, I ordered pizza," she smiled.

Walking over to the small kitchen, Harry raised his eyebrow at the number of drinks and snacks littering the counter, with just enough space cleared for two pizza boxes.

"I didn't know what everyone would like, so I got one sausage and pepperoni and one Margherita," Penny said.

"Margarita?" Daphne asked. "I thought that was a Muggle drink."

"It's pronounced the same but spelled differently," Penny smiled. "But on a pizza, it just means tomato sauce, mozzarella, and basil. I also got a whole bunch of soda, crisps, and candy bars for you to try."

"You really didn't have to do all this," Daphne said, looking overwhelmed by the selection in front of her.

"I know," Penny shrugged with a smile. "I may have gone a bit overboard, but I've never gotten to show a magical the Muggle world before."

"Here, try this," Hermione said, handing Daphne a can of Sprite.

"So, what are we watching?" Harry asked as they all moved into the living room.

"I thought we could watch Apollo thirteen," Penny replied before turning to Daphne. "It's based on a true story about American astronauts. They were going to the moon when their ship was damaged, and they had to come back to Earth."

"It's a really good movie," Hermione added.

"Sure," Daphne shrugged. "Did they make a movie about the people that actually landed on the moon?"

Harry sat down on the loveseat while Daphne and Hermione took the couch.

"I'm not sure," Penny admitted. "But I can show you the real footage they recorded on my laptop later if you want."

"Okay. You know, it honestly amazes me what Muggles can do without magic," Daphne said thoughtfully.

Penny smiled as she walked over and put the movie into the DVD player. Walking back over to the couch, she folded her leg under her bum and leaned against Harry's side. With a smile, he wrapped his arm around her, his arm resting on the bare skin of her upper back. Without a bra, he could feel her soft breasts pressing against his ribs. Harry had to focus his mind on other thoughts to quell his growing excitement.

On the couch across from them, Daphne sat so close to Hermione that their shoulders were touching. Neither of them looked at each other, but he could see both of them shifting occasionally, their hands and thighs briefly brushing against each other. Daphne caught him watching them out of the corner of her eye and glared as if daring him to say something. With a smirk, he turned back to the movie.

As he got caught up in the story, Harry didn't notice that his hand had trailed dangerously low as he trailed his fingers lightly up and down Penny's side. It wasn't until his fingers pressed against

something surprisingly soft compared to her ribs that he realized he was touching the side of her breast. Blushing, he quickly moved his hand up and hoped she hadn't noticed.

Penny started shaking next to him. Glancing at her nervously, he blushed even harder when he realized she was laughing at him silently. Blue eyes sparkling, she leaned over and kissed him on the lips. When she turned back to the telly, she winced suddenly and rubbed her neck. Since the loveseat wasn't facing the telly, they both had to look sideways to see it.

"Can you sit back against the arm of the sofa?" Penny whispered.

Harry looked at her curiously but did as she asked. Grabbing his leg, she pushed it to the back of the loveseat and then settled herself between his legs, her back resting against his chest. Once she was comfortable, she took his hand and pulled his arms around her. Smiling, Harry kissed the top of her head.

He and the girls were so invested in the movie that they all jumped when a silver beaver swam through the wall and stopped right in front of the telly.

"There's been an attempted breakout at the Ministry," came Amelia's voice. "Come as soon as you can."

"Bugger," Harry grunted. "I need to go."

"I'll be right behind you. I need to change my shirt," Penny said.

Without waiting for a reply, she dashed into the bedroom and slammed the door.

"Do you want us to come with you?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I might need your help."

Grabbing an unopened can of Fanta off the coffee table, he tapped it with his wand.

“Portus,” Harry muttered, briefly causing the can to glow blue.

Just as Hermione and Daphne gathered around him, Penny came racing out of the bedroom wearing a loose black T-shirt. Harry held up the can, and the girls all placed a finger on it. With another tap of his wand and a yank behind the navel, they were sucked into a swirl of color and wind. A few seconds later, they landed in Harry’s office at the Ministry.

Being a Sunday, the office was empty of the normal hustle and bustle. Racing across the office, they got in the elevator and made their way down a floor to the DMLE. Where the Minister’s office had been silent and empty, the DMLE was buzzing with activity. Amelia was barking out orders to a group of Aurors when she spotted them. Sending them off, she waved him over.

“What happened?” Harry asked.

“Follow me,” Amelia replied.

Leading him to the back of the office, they walked down a long, plain hall leading to the interview rooms.

“A few minutes ago, we caught two Aurors on guard duty trying to sneak several Death Eaters – including Lucius Malfoy and Thadeus Nott – out of their holding cells,” Amelia said.

“Are they Death Eaters?” Harry asked.

“They don’t have the mark, and they claim they were threatened into it,” Amelied told him. “I’m waiting on a reply from Judge Pennington for permission to administer Veritaserum.”

Stopping at a door, she yanked it open, and Harry followed her inside.

“I told you I don’t know!”

Looking through the wall, charmed with a one-way viewing Charm, he saw an Auror sitting in a hard wooden chair, his hands bound to the heavy, sturdy table in front of him. Scrimgeour stood across from him and slapped his fists onto the table. Behind him, Tonks and Kingsley stood guard silently.

“How am I supposed to believe you when you can’t tell me anything!?” Scrimgeour shouted. “So, someone took your family, you can’t tell me who they are or what they look like – and then, instead of going to one of your superiors, you try to help known Death Eaters escape? This isn’t looking good for you, Jackson.”

“I didn’t have a choice!” Jackson pleaded. “They said they’d kill them!”

“Tell me who, damn it!” Scrimgeour shouted.

“I don’t know!” Jackson screamed back, tears falling from his eyes.

“What the hell is he doing?” Amelia grumbled, touching her wand to the wall. “Rufus!”

Looking up, his lion’s mane-like hair looking wilder than usual, Scrimgeour glared at Jackson before hobbling to the door. Walking into the room Harry and Amelia were in, he closed the door behind him.

“What the hell are you doing!?” Amelia asked. “I told you to find out everything you could, not treat them like criminals!”

“They both have the exact same story,” Scrimgeour said. “It’s too convenient. There’s something they’re not telling us.”

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Tuning out the dressing down Amelia was giving him, he slipped into the interview room and closed the door softly. With a wave of his wand, he released the manacles holding Jackson to the table. Rubbing his wrists, the Auror looked up at Harry and swallowed nervously. As he walked around and took a seat, Harry conjured two glasses of water and pushed one across the table.

“What happened?” he asked.

Jackson’s hand shook as he took a drink of water and let out a heavy breath.

“When I got home from work last night, three masked men were waiting for me. Death Eater masks, you know?” he started nervously. “They disarmed me and tortured me for a bit. Then they told me that they had my family, and if I wanted to see them alive, I needed to break Malfoy, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, and the Carrow twins out of the Ministry. My daughter’s only eight, and the things they threatened to do to her if I didn’t...”

“I understand,” Harry said calmly. “I need to know exactly what they said to you.”

“They told me to break them out of the Ministry and take them to an abandoned mill in Tamworth by seven tonight,” Jackson said.

“Did they tell you about Richards?” Harry asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Jackson said, blinking like he hadn’t considered that before. “Yeah, they did.”

“How would they have known you were on guard duty?” Harry questioned.

"I – I don't know," Jackson stammered, staring down at his glass. "I mean, I might've complained about it after a couple of pints at the pub."

"We all make mistakes," Harry reassured him. "Is there anything else you can tell me? Did you recognize any of their voices, maybe a distinct accent?"

"No," Jackson said, shaking his head.

Sighing, Harry stood, walked around the table, and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'll do everything I can to get your families back," Harry promised.

"Thank you, Minister," Jackson said gratefully, blinking back tears.

Giving his shoulder a squeeze, Harry looked back at Tonks and Kingsley and nodded for them to follow him. Walking back into the observation room, Tonks entered last and closed the door.

"What are our options?" Harry asked.

"Short of giving in to their demands, I can't think of another option," Amelia admitted.

"You can't seriously be considering letting them go," Scrimgeour growled angrily. "The Ministry doesn't give in to terrorists' demands!"

"So, what, you want to just leave them to a fate worse than death?" Harry asked just as angrily.

"All we need to do is send a few Aurors, catch whoever is waiting for the Death Eaters, and interrogate them. We'll have their families back in a few hours," Scrimgeour said.

“And if they get away?” Amelia asked, raising an eyebrow. “I don’t like this any more than you do, but it’s too risky. If we send the prisoners with an escort of Aurors, we can make sure they make the trade.”

“This is ridiculous!” Scrimgeour yelled. “We can’t just hand them over after all the work it took to catch them. You mark my words; if we let Malfoy go free, we’ll never see him again!”

“Uh, I have an idea,” Tonks said hesitantly.

“Not now!” Scrimgeour barked.

“Oh, shut up,” Harry said.

Scrimgeour’s face turned red as he glared at Harry, but he ignored him and turned to Tonks.

“What is it, Tonks?” he asked.

“Well, we confiscated a whole bunch of Polyjuice potion from a brothel in Knockturn Alley a couple of days ago,” Tonks said. “What if we Polyjuiced a bunch of Aurors to look like the prisoners? The Death Eaters will think they’re getting the trade they want, and once the families are safe, we can arrest them.”

“Tonks, that’s brilliant!” Harry grinned.

“Indeed,” Amelia nodded, checking her watch. “We have just under three hours. We’ll need to check the Polyjuice potion to make sure it works.”

“Alright, we’ve got a plan. Let’s get to work,” Harry said.

"Yes, sir," Amelia smiled.

Harry rolled his eyes as they made their way back to the Auror office. It only took a few minutes to discover that the Polyjuice worked just fine. Quickly, Amelia gathered together a few Aurors and told them who they were going to impersonate. Seeing that Tonks wasn't even in the lineup, he pulled her aside.

"Why didn't you pick Tonks?" Harry asked quietly.

"Tonks is a good Auror, but I wanted our best for this," Amelia replied.

"But this isn't just about looking the part. They need to act the part, too," Harry told her. "Any small mistake could give them away. Tonks has more experience impersonating people than anyone else. Besides, she doesn't need the Polyjuice potion. I don't know if there's a way to check for that--"

"There is," Amelia said thoughtfully. "You're right. Auror Tonks!"

Tonks jumped and looked surprised when she spotted Amelia waving her over. Making her way over, she stopped next to Harry.

"Yes, ma'am?" she asked.

"I was just speaking with the Minister, and he made a very good point," Amelia said. "Can you transform into Lucius Malfoy without the use of Polyjuice?"

Tonks' eyes widened as she looked between Harry and Amelia.

"Uh, I'd need to get a good look at him, but yes, I could," Tonks replied.

“And would you be confident you could act like him?” Amelia asked, pinning the young Auror with a penetrating gaze. “There can be no mistakes with this.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sure,” Tonks said, squaring her shoulders.

“Good, you’ll be taking Dresden’s place,” Amelia told her. “You’ll go in as Malfoy with Kingsley. The plan is we’ll show them Malfoy, then release the rest when they produce Jackson and Richard’s families. Hopefully, as Malfoy, you’ll be able to convince them to do it. If you don’t feel ready for this, tell me now.”

“No, I can do it,” Tonks said confidently.

“Then go see Malfoy and do what you need to do to make this work,” Amelia said. “I’ll tell Matilda you’re coming.”

Turning away, she left to go tell the other Aurors about the change. Suddenly, Tonks spun towards Harry and threw her arms around him.

“Thank you,” she said, bouncing on the balls of her feet excitedly.

“You’re welcome,” Harry smiled.

“I’ve been trying to talk Scrimgeour into letting me do undercover work for months, and he keeps turning me down. Says I’m too clumsy,” Tonks said, rolling her eyes. “Maybe after this, he’ll listen to me.”

“I’ll talk to Amelia about it,” Harry said. “Scrimgeour is really starting to piss me off.”

“You know he’s been talking about running for Minister after you leave?” Tonks asked.

“Oh, Merlin,” Harry groaned. “That’s the last thing we need. I’d much rather have someone like Amelia in office.”

Tonks snorted, “Good luck with that. Anyways, I should get going. Thanks, mate. I won’t let you down.”

Giving Harry another hug, she headed for the holding cells. Before making it to the door, she stubbed her toe on one of the desks and stumbled, though she managed to stay on her feet. Harry smiled and shook his head as she hobbled to the door, cursing under her breath. Walking back over to Amelia, he leaned against the desk next to her.

“Have you heard back from Judge Pennington yet?” Harry asked.

“No. Why?” Amelia asked. “Do you think they’re lying?”

“It would be nice to know for sure,” Harry sighed. “I’ve been thinking about what we can do if something goes wrong. I’d like to have permission to use Veritaserum on them if we have to.”

Amelia checked her watch and pursed her lips.

“We’ve got an hour left. I could send someone to find him,” she offered.

“That would probably be best,” Harry said.

Nodding in agreement, Amelia called over an Auror. She gave her a small stack of parchment and told her to find Judge Pennington as quickly as possible. As she left, Matilda joined them and leaned heavily on the table.

“Amelia, Minister, I’m concerned about sending Kingsley and Hartford with the Polyjuiced Aurors,” she said softly.

“Why?” Amelia asked, her brow furrowed.

“I’ve seen kidnappers react badly when they don’t see who they expect,” Matilda said. “I think it would be better to send Richards and Jackson.”

Amelia pursed her lips unhappily.

“I don’t think they can remain objective,” she said, shaking her head. “They’re too emotionally involved.”

“Of course they are,” Matilda said. “It’s their families on the line. Are you really worried they can’t handle it, or are you mad they didn’t come to you first?”

Amelia narrowed her eyes and glared at Matilda.

“They should’ve come to me instead of breaking the law,” she hissed.

“Oh, come on, Amy. What would you have done if it was Susan’s life at stake?” Matilda asked, which earned her an even worse glare. “You know damn well you would’ve done whatever it took to get her back safe, and to hell with any laws you had to break to do it.”

Amelia continued glaring at her for a long moment before she let out a sigh and removed her monocle.

“Do you really think they can be trusted not to act emotionally if something unexpected happens?” she asked softly.

"I think we're far better off sending in who the kidnappers are expecting than someone they aren't," Matilda said. "Jackson and Richards will do whatever it takes to get their families home safe."

Amelia sighed again and turned to Harry.

"What are your thoughts, Minister?" she asked.

Harry thought for a long moment before he replied.

"Look, I'm not going to pretend I know anything about how to deal with kidnappers or ransom demands, but if I was in their shoes, I'd want to go," Harry said.

Amelia stared down at the table, tapping her finger rhythmically. Harry could see how much the decision weighed on her, and he felt a wave of sympathy for her. A single mistake could leave several innocent people dead.

"If we get approval to use Veritaserum, they pass the questioning, *and* I think they can handle it... I'll send them," Amelia said.

"Fair enough," Matilda nodded.

As if summoned by the conversation, the Auror Amelia had sent to find Judge Pennington returned with a wizard in tow. He was tall, thin, and quite old. The long white hair flowing over his shoulders was only equaled in length by his mustache, braided to hand down on either side of his slightly shorter beard.

"Madam Bones, Minister," he greeted. "Your Auror said you needed a few warrants signed, but I'd like to hear a bit more before I approve them."

Nodding, Amelia gave him a brief overview of the situation.

"I see," Pennington frowned, curling his braided mustache around his finger. "And the one for Mr. Malfoy. I was under the impression Judge Fernsby already signed off on that."

"He did, but I'd like to question him again to see if he knows anything about the kidnapping," Amelia replied. "Obviously, we couldn't have known to ask him about it the last time we questioned him."

"Do you have evidence suggesting he would be aware of any pertinent information?" Pennington asked.

"He was specifically named by the kidnappers, along with a few other suspects. However, given his connections, we believe Malfoy to be the most likely to know anything," Amelia said. "I'd like to question them all, with your permission. I was just concerned we wouldn't be able to reach you in time."

"My apologies, I was bowling with Albus," Pennington said. "I'll allow them to be questioned under Veritaserum, but only the suspects that were directly named and only about this crime. As for the Aurors, do you have reason to believe they were *not* coerced into this?"

"No," Amelia answered.

"Then I'll only agree to allow the use of Veritaserum with their written consent," Pennington replied. "Was there anything else?"

"What about the possibility we may need to question suspects in the field?" Amelia asked.

"You know I can't sign off on that without more information, Amelia," Pennington said with a frown. "However, I understand this is a delicate situation. As a compromise, I'll remain present to sign any further warrants we might require."

“Thank you,” Amelia said gratefully before turning to Matilda. “Matilda, get the consent forms for Jackson and Richards and see if they’ll sign them. I’ll be along after I question Malfoy.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Matilda smiled.

Harry followed Amelia back to the interview room holding Malfoy. When they opened the door, they found Malfoy standing against the wall in nothing but a pair of black silk boxers while Tonks stared at him a few feet away. The blonde glared at them, his cheeks tinged red from anger and embarrassment. His skin was lily white, and his body had virtually no definition to it. He reminded Harry of one of those featureless action figures Dudley used to play with as a child.

“Oh, hey, boss,” Tonks said.

“Auror Tonks, can you come back in a few minutes? We need to question Mr. Malfoy,” Amelia said.

“That’s alright. I think I’m done,” Tonks told her.

Scrunching up her face, she morphed into an exact duplicate of Lucius Malfoy. Tonks winced slightly and tugged at her robes, which were now far too tight. A quick wave of her wand loosened them up considerably.

“What do you think?” she asked, her voice matching Malfoy’s.

“That’s creepy,” Harry muttered while Amelia looked her over critically.

Tonks grinned, which looked disturbing on Lucius’ face.

“Excellent work, Auror Tonks,” Amelia said. “And you won’t have a problem holding this?”

"Nope," Tonks said. "As long as I'm conscious, I can hold it as long as I need to."

"And is everything accurate?" Amelia asked, looking her over closely.

"Everything but the bits," Tonks replied. "I can do them if you want, but I didn't think it was necessary."

"Disgusting," Malfoy sneered, his hands moving to cover himself.

"No, I don't think they'll look that closely," Amelia said, her lips twitching.

"I hope not," Tonks snorted.

Shifting back to her normal look, she picked up Malfoy's clothes off the floor and headed for the door.

"Where are you going with my robes!?" Malfoy shouted.

"Shut up and sit down, Mr. Malfoy. You have much bigger concerns to worry about," Amelia told him firmly.

Harry stayed in the room as she force-fed him Veritaserum and questioned him thoroughly. Unfortunately, he didn't know anything about the kidnapping or who was behind it. They questioned the others as well but got the same result. Not one of the Death Eaters that were supposed to be rescued knew anything useful.

When they were finished with the Death Eaters, Amelia and Harry moved on to questioning Jackson and Richards, who both eagerly agreed to be questioned under Veritaserum. They

didn't give them any new information, but they now knew that neither of the men was working with Voldemort, and their families had genuinely been kidnapped.

"Alright, listen up, both of you," Amelia said, pacing in front of the table Jackson and Richards sat at. "Auror Bennet thinks it would be best to send the two of you to the exchange."

Jackson and Richards sat up eagerly.

"We'll do it," Jackson said quickly.

"However," Amelia continued, with a glare, "I have my concerns. Understandably, both of you are very emotionally involved. *If* I let you go, you need to swear to me right now you'll follow orders."

"We will," Richards, a short, bald man with extremely dark skin, said. "We know we let you down by not coming to you first. It won't happen again."

Jackson nodded quickly in agreement.

"Do not make me regret this," Amelia said, jabbing a finger at them aggressively. "And if something like this ever happens again, you come to me first. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," they replied in unison.

Reaching into her pocket, Amelia took out a pair of wands and silver badges and tossed them onto the table.

The last half an hour seemed to crawl by. Harry paced back and forth across the office while Aurors ran around, doing busy work. As he passed Penny for the dozenth time, she sighed and wrapped her arms around him from behind.

“Relax,” she whispered softly. “You’re making everyone else nervous.”

“Sorry,” Harry muttered.

“Think positive,” Penny said, kissing the side of his neck.

Closing his eyes, Harry relaxed back against her and let out a deep breath.

“Alright, time to go!” Amelia yelled a few minutes later.

Straightening up, he gave Penny’s hand a squeeze before making his way over to Amelia.

“Remember, you’ll be Portkeying in here,” Amelia said, pointing to a dirt roading leading to the abandoned mill on the map. “We have two teams ready to Portkey in if anything goes wrong. Richards, Jackson, you go in, make the exchange, and get out with the hostages. As soon as they’re safe, we make the arrests. Any questions?”

The Aurors remained silent, their faces set with determined looks.

“Alright, take your Polyjuice now,” Amelia said, starting a timer.

The Aurors downed the potion and grimaced as they changed. Tonks morphed into Malfoy, filling out the robes she’d taken from him earlier.

“Go!” Amelia barked.

Grabbing the Portkey, they all disappeared in a swirl of color. The moment they were gone, Matilda pulled down a projector screen attached to the ceiling near the back wall. As it came down, and an image of what one of the Aurors was seeing flickered to life.

"Where is that coming from?" Harry asked.

"A Surveillance Charm on Auror Tonks," Amelia told him.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Harry asked.

"It's undetectable," Matilda assured him. "As is the Communication Charm she's using."

Harry nodded and relaxed as Penny rubbed his back. While Jackson walked Tonks up the road to the mill, Richards stayed behind with the rest of the Polyjuiced Aurors. It took a couple of minutes for them to walk up to the run down mill. It was empty when they got there. A knot grew in his stomach as they waited for something to happen.

Suddenly, a series of *pops* echoed through the countryside. Six cloaked and masked Death Eaters appeared in front of them, wands drawn.

"Where are the others?" the lead Death Eater growled.

"Where are our families?" Jackson countered.

"You're not in a position to be plain' games," the Death Eater spat.

"My partner is waiting down with the others for my signal. Show me our families are safe, and he'll bring them here," Jackson said, his voice remarkably calm.

The Death Eater stared at him for a long moment before turning and nodding to one of the others. Walking over to the mill, he tapped his wand on the wall in a complex pattern. When he finished, the bricks folded back to reveal a door, much like the entrance to Diagon Alley. Yanking the door open roughly, the Death Eater reached in and started pulling people out. Two older women, their hands bound with rope, came out first, followed by three small children between the ages of four and eight.

“Daniel!” the blonde woman yelled.

“Shut up!” the Death Eater barked, shoving her roughly.

“It’s okay, Mary,” Jackson said, his voice trembling.

“Show me the others, or they die,” the lead Death Eater growled.

Taking a trembling breath, Jackson raised his wand and sent up red sparks. A moment later, Richards came around the corner, leading the other Polyjuiced Aurors at wand point.

“They’re here, not let our families go,” Jackson said.

“After our people are gone,” the Death Eater replied coldly.

“Tonks, you can’t let them take you anywhere. It’s too risky,” Amelia said, her wand pressed to the base of an old microphone.

“Let them go,” Tonks said, matching Malfoy’s drawl perfectly. “These Aurors won’t cause any trouble, will you?”

Harry couldn’t see her face, but he could hear the superior smirk in her voice.

“Sorry, Malfoy, but we have orders,” the Death Eater replied.

The image swung to the side as Tonks looked at him sharply.

“From who?” she asked.

“The Dark Lord,” the Death Eater answered.

“Shit,” Harry cursed.

“Go along with it for now,” Amelia told Tonks. “But do *not* leave with them. Everyone pick a target. Wait for Tonks’ signal and then hit them hard.”

The atmosphere in the Auror office turned tense as they watched the Polyjuiced Aurors gather around the Portkey one of the Death Eaters produced. As Tonks looked around, Harry noticed that Richards had edged closer to the Death Eater holding the hostages at wand point.

Suddenly, Tonks’ wand appeared in her hand, and there was a bright red flash. There was complete chaos as the Death Eaters fired back instinctively. Outnumbered and surprised, they fell quickly. Tonks turned back, and Harry sighed in relief when he noticed the hostages were safe. While the Aurors in the room clapped and celebrated, he noticed movement in the corner of the screen.

One of the Death Eaters was down but not out. Yanking up his sleeve to reveal the writhing black tattoo on his forearm, he pressed the tip of his wand to it. Harry’s veins flooded with adrenaline as he rushed forward and pressed his wand to the microphone.

“One of them summoned Voldemort! Get out of there! Now!” he shouted.

“What!?” Amelia asked, the rest of the room falling deathly silent.

Tonks noticed the moving Death Eater and stunned him quickly.

“We need to go! Move!” she yelled.

The Aurors rushed to Portkey the stunned Death Eaters back to the Ministry while Jackson and Richards checked on their families.

“There’s no time. Get out of there now!” Harry yelled frustratedly.

“Leave the rest. Go!” Tonks yelled.

The Aurors left the two remaining Death Eaters and started getting out their own Portkeys just as more Death Eaters began Apparating in. They began dueling as they walked backward toward Jackson, Rishcards, and their families.

“Grab hold!” Jackson yelled.

Voldemort appeared silently as if he had simply stepped out of the air. His red eyes flashed angrily as he took in the scene.

“Stop them!” he screamed furiously.

Tonks turned to grab the Portkey just as he brandished his wand. At the same moment they were whisked away, she let out a scream that made Harry’s heart stop. The Aurors appeared in the Auror Office an instant later. All Harry could focus on was the river of crimson poured down from a large tear in Tonks’ robes. It seemed to take forever for her to fall to the ground, her skin deathly pale and her eyes staring unfocused into the distance.

For a second, she didn't move, and a single thought ran through his mind.

She's dead.

Then, she took a weak, rasping breath. Harry felt like his feet were stuck to the floor, unable to command his body to move as Matilda raced to her side.

"She's hurt bad. We need to get her to St. Mungos quickly," she said, waving her wand frantically as she tried to stem the loss of blood.

Amelia made a Portkey and handed it to her. Harry blinked, and they were gone. The room was painfully silent except for the soft sniffing of the small children clinging to their fathers. Slowly, everyone started moving again while Harry remained in place, his eyes stinging as he stared at the pool of red gradually soaking into the carpet.

"Harry?" Penny asked softly, her hand sliding across his shoulders.

"It's my fault," Harry whispered.

"What?" Penny asked.

"It's my fault," he said louder. "It was my idea for her to go. If I hadn't—"

"Then someone else would've gotten hurt," Penny interrupted. "Or maybe they wouldn't have made it out at all. This isn't your fault, Harry. Tonks is an Auror. She knew what she was getting into. You can't blame yourself for things outside of your control."

Harry knew she was right, but it did nothing to ease the guilt he felt.

"I'm going to go to the hospital to check on her," he said after a moment.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Penny asked softly.

Harry hesitated for a moment before nodding. Pulling his gaze away from the pool of blood, he took Penny's hand in his and walked over to Amelia.

"Amelia, I'm going over to St. Mungos to check on Tonks," he said.

She looked at him, her hardened gaze softening, and nodded.

"Alright, I'll send you a Patronus if anything comes up," Amelia said. "Let me know when you find out how she is."

Harry nodded stiffly and turned, only to find Hermione and Daphne waiting for him.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, lunging forward to hug him tightly. "It's not your fault."

Swallowing thickly, he patted her back.

"I know," he said, even though he didn't believe the words as they left his mouth.

"Do you want us to come with you?" Hermione asked, pulling back and wiping tears from her eyes.

Harry thought for a moment before shaking his head.

"No, stay here and help Amelia," he said.

Biting her lip, Hermione nodded. As he moved to leave, Daphne reached out and placed her hand on his arm.

“You did the best you could, Potter,” she told him. “This is You-Know-Who’s fault, not yours. Put the blame where it belongs. Whether you like it or not, people are going to get hurt, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

“Daphne,” Hermione hissed.

“It’s alright,” Harry said, feeling oddly lighter at her words. “Thanks, Daphne.”

Nodding, she stared at him with her bright blue eyes and let go of his arm. Hand in hand, Harry and Penny took the elevator up to his office and Flooed to St. Mungos.

~

For two hours, Harry sat in the waiting room as half a dozen healers came and went from Tonks’ room, tending to her wounds. He managed to ask a couple of them how she was doing, but all they would tell him was they were doing their best. The whole time they waited, Penny talked about anything she could think of, the steady stream of words calming his nerves and giving him a distraction from watching the clock.

It was another half an hour before they were approached by a nurse.

“Minister, you can see her now,” the young brunette witch told him.

“How is she?” Harry asked, jumping to his feet.

“She’s stable, but I was just given the case, so I don’t know any more than that,” the nurse told him. “I can ask one of the healers to talk to you if you’d like.”

“Please,” he nodded.

Smiling prettily, she led them to Tonks’ room and pushed open the door. For a moment, he thought she might have shown him to the wrong room when he saw the head of mousy brown hair. As he got closer to the bed, he got a good look at her face. Tonks was resting on her stomach without a shirt. Thick white bandages were wrapped around her torso, covering her modesty. Despite how fresh the bandages looked, streaks of red had already soaked through. While she wasn’t as pale as before, she still lacked her normal color.

Sitting in the chair next to the bed, he spent a minute watching her slow, steady, even breaths. The sound soothed him as Penny took his hand and leaned against his side. Occasionally, Tonks’ brow would scrunch, and her nose would twitch. It was so quintessentially Tonks that it nearly brought a smile to his face.

They’d been sitting in silence for a few minutes when they heard the sound of heels clicking rapidly on the floor. There was a sound of a brief, murmured conversation before a tall woman with long, curly brown hair appeared in the doorway. Gasping, she covered her mouth as she looked at Tonks. Behind her, a man with the same mousy brown hair as Tonks, though much thinner on the top, peeked around her shoulder.

Realizing they must be Tonks’ parents, Harry stood and wiped his sweaty palm on his jeans.

“Er, hi,” he said, wincing internally at how lame he sounded. “I’m Harry.”

“What happened?” the woman asked, taking Tonks hand and sitting in the chair on the other side of the bed.

Swallowing thickly, Harry told her everything. The woman – Tonks' mother, Andromeda, as he came to learn – kept her eyes on her daughter's face throughout his explanation. When he'd finished, they sat in silence before it became too much for Harry.

"I'm sorry," he blurted. "It's my fault she got hurt. I'm the one that thought she should go."

Andromeda looked at him sharply, her brown eyes boring into him.

"Why?" she asked. "Why did you send her?"

"I thought she was the best person for the job," Harry said, looking down at his feet. "Tonks is a great Auror, and being a Metamorphmagus made her perfect for something like this. But if I'd known she was going to get hurt like this...."

Looking up, he held Andromeda's gaze for a long moment before she turned to Tonks and ran a hand softly through her hair.

"I wanted Nymphadora to become an Auror," she said softly. "I've dreaded getting an owl telling me she'd been hurt like I did today. But... not once, ever, have I questioned her ability. I know my daughter, Minister, and she wouldn't blame you for what happened. And neither do I."

Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Thanks," he said softly. "And you can just call me Harry."

Andromeda looked up and gave him a small smile a moment before someone knocked on the door.

"Hello," said a tall, thin Indian wizard with a bald head and a large, bushy mustache. "I'm healer Banerjee."

“How bad is it?” Andromeda asked, squaring her shoulders.

“Your daughter was hurt quite badly,” the healer said, looking down at his clipboard. “The spell cut deep enough to nick one of her vertebrae but, fortunately, didn’t do any permanent damage. It was quite a dark curse. She’ll be sore for quite a while, but I expect her to make a full recovery.”

Everyone in the room sighed in relief.

“We have two possible treatment options for her,” he continued. “This first is a regimen of potions and creams she’ll need to use for a month. The other includes two extra potions and will help her heal in half the time. However, I’m afraid they’re both quite expensive. Approximately a hundred Galleons each.”

Andromeda and Ted shared a startled look.

“The Ministry will cover the cost,” Harry said firmly. “I want her given the best treatment possible.”

Healer Banerjee raised an eyebrow in surprise before making a note on his clipboard.

“Very well,” he said. “Auror Tonks will have to stay here for a couple of days to make sure the wound closes properly, but she should be able to go home after that. After a couple of weeks, she should be good enough to go back to work.”

“Thank you, Healer,” Andromeda said.

“You’re quite welcome,” Banerjee smiled. “If you need anything, just call for the nurse.”

“So, this is what it’s like Having a good Minister for once,” Ted smiled. “I quite like it. I don’t suppose I could talk you into staying on for a full term, could I?”

Harry snorted, “After the number of people I’ve hacked off, I’d never get elected.”

“Urgh.”

Everyone turned to look at the bed as Tonks stirred.

“Don’t move, Nymphadora,” Andromeda said softly.

“Anyone get the name of that Hippogryff?” Tonks asked, squinting as she opened her eyes.

“Do you remember what happened?” Andromeda asked.

Tonks went silent for a moment, her brow furrowed until they suddenly widened.

“Shit,” she cursed.

“Language,” Andromeda scolded. “And stop trying to move. You’re hurt.”

“What happened after I got hit?” Tonks asked worriedly before settling back on the bed.

“Everyone else made it out fine,” Harry assured her.

“Harry?” Tonks asked, turning her head to look at him. “No one else was hurt?”

"No," he told her.

Tonks sighed, "Thank Merlin."

"How are you feeling?" Harry asked.

"Like I got run over by the Knight Bus," she said, wincing as she moved her shoulders. "What did I get hit with?"

"Voldemort hit you with some kind of dark Cutting Curse," Harry said. "The Healer said you should be fine in a couple of weeks."

"Harry thinks it's his fault you got hurt," Penny said.

Harry sighed as Tonks glared at him.

"Penny would smack him upside the head for me. It hurts too much to move right now," she said.

Smiling, his girlfriend cuffed him across the back of the head lightly.

"Don't be stupid," Tonks said. "Of course, it's not your fault. If anything, it's my fault for not being clear enough. I should've told them to leave the Death Eaters and get out. Madam Bones isn't pissed at me, is she?"

"Nymphadora, must you swear?" Andromeda asked.

Tonks rolled her eyes.

"I don't think so," Harry said. "We were all just worried about you. You were bleeding a lot when you Portkeyed in."

Tonks sighed, "I really hope I didn't screw up my first big mission."

"You did beautifully," Harry said, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

"Thanks," Tonks smiled. "Do you know what went wrong?"

"One of the Death Eaters wasn't stunned," Harry said. "He was able to call Voldemort through his Dark Mark."

"I didn't even know they could do that," Tonks said, scrunching her brow.

"Harry, it might help you make a list of everything you know about You-Know-Who and give it to the Aurors," Penny said. "You know more about him than anyone except Dumbledore."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. Sitting back in his chair, he stayed and talked with Tonks and her parents for another hour until the nurse came in and gave Tonks a bunch of potions. Within a couple of minutes, she had dozed off to sleep.

Flooding back to the Ministry, they walked back to the Auror Office, preparing for a long night at work.