

The Portkey deposited them with all the grace of a sack of potatoes thrown against a wall.

Harry stumbled, catching himself on what he initially thought was ornate architectural detail but turned out to be a plain iron railing. The International Portkey Arrival Chamber of the British Ministry of Magic stretched before them in all its aggressively utilitarian glory, gray stone floors, gray stone walls, and gray stone ceiling, lit by floating orbs that gave off light the approximate warmth of a particularly pessimistic winter morning.

"Well," Ted said, straightening his robes and looking around with the air of someone trying to find something positive to say. "It's... certainly functional."

"It's depressing," Tonks said flatly. Her hair had shifted to a muted gray-brown that nearly matched the walls. "Did someone actually design this, or did they just conjure 'bureaucratic despair' into physical form?"

"Now, now," Andromeda chided, though her own expression suggested she agreed. "It serves its purpose."

"So does a dungeon, but we don't use that as an architectural benchmark."

A wizard in official Ministry robes approached, his face set in an expression that suggested smiling was against regulation. His badge identified him as "Inspector H. Weatherby, International Arrivals."

"Documents," he said without preamble, extending a hand.

"Good morning to you too," Ted said cheerfully, producing their travel papers. "Lovely day, isn't it? We've just returned from France. Wonderful country. Very welcoming."

Inspector Weatherby's expression didn't shift as he examined each document with excruciating thoroughness. "France," he repeated, making it sound vaguely accusatory. "Purpose of visit?"

"Diplomatic representation," Andromeda said crisply. "As noted in our travel authorization, which was approved by three separate departments."

"Hmm." Weatherby scrutinized Harry's papers with particular intensity. "Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived."

"That's what they tell me," Harry said neutrally, already exhausted by the interaction.

"International travel at age twelve. Unusual."

"Thirteen in two days," Harry corrected, then wondered why he was bothering.

"Still unusual." Weatherby made several notations with a quill that scratched across parchment like fingernails on slate. "And you attended diplomatic functions?"

"The Minister of Magic invited us personally," Harry replied, keeping his tone polite. "Minister Delacour was a gracious host."

Something flickered across Weatherby's face—was that jealousy?

"I'm sure he was." Weatherby turned his attention to Newt. "Mr. Scamander. Your case requires inspection."

"Of course," Newt said easily, setting the battered leather case on the inspection table. "Standard magical creature transport. I have all relevant permits."

"We'll determine what's standard." Weatherby produced his wand, muttering detection spells over the case. The charms lit up like a Christmas tree—various colors indicating different classifications of magical creatures.

Weatherby's eyebrows rose. "That's quite the menagerie."

"I'm a magizoologist. It would be rather odd if I didn't transport magical creatures."

"Class XXXX designation detected. That requires additional clearance."

"I have additional clearance." Newt produced another sheaf of documents. "Signed by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Department of International Magical Cooperation. And the Minister's office, for good measure."

Weatherby examined each document as if searching for evidence of forgery. Behind them, a queue was forming—other travelers waiting to clear customs, their expressions ranging from patient to irritated.

"This is taking rather longer than the French customs did," Ted observed. "And they were quite thorough."

"French customs," Weatherby said with audible disdain, "have different standards than British customs. We take security seriously."

"As opposed to the French, who apparently welcome international threats with open arms?" Andromeda's voice could have frozen fire.

Weatherby had the sense to back down slightly. "I'm simply following protocol, Mrs. Tonks."

"Then perhaps follow it with reasonable efficiency. We've been standing here for fifteen minutes while you've examined documents that have already been pre-approved by your own departments."

"Security cannot be rushed—"

"Security can, however, be competent." Andromeda's smile was sharp enough to cut glass. "Are we cleared, Inspector? Or shall I file a formal complaint about unnecessary delays of diplomatic representatives?"

Weatherby's jaw tightened, but he stamped their documents. "Cleared. Welcome back to Britain."

"Charmingly antagonistic," Ted murmured as they collected their belongings. "Very on-brand for us."

"I hate him," Tonks announced once they were out of earshot. "I haven't even become an Auror yet and I already hate Ministry bureaucrats."

"Save some energy," Andromeda advised. "I suspect there will be more to hate shortly."

She was proven correct the moment they stepped through the archway into the main atrium.

The British Ministry's Atrium was technically impressive—high ceilings, the Fountain of Magical Brethren in the center, polished floors that reflected the enchanted sky above. But compared to the French Ministry's elegant grandeur, it felt oddly cold.

And it was full of people.

"Oh no," Harry said.

"Oh yes," Andromeda replied grimly. "Word travels fast when Harry Potter goes anywhere."

A small crowd had gathered near the arrival area, perhaps thirty people in various official robes and casual dress. Some looked genuinely pleased to see them. A few were whispering behind hands, clearly gossiping about something.

"Harry Potter!" A cheerful-looking wizard in emerald robes approached, hand extended.

"Welcome home! Roderick Plimpton, Department of Magical Games and Sports. Wanted to tell you how much we appreciated your talisman work, it's working for the Quidditch World Cup security team!"

"Oh. Thank you?" Harry shook the offered hand warily.

"Brilliant stuff, truly brilliant. Say, have you considered applications for competitive sports? Protective equipment for players, perhaps some sort of impact-absorption charm for Beaters—"

"Mr. Plimpton," Andromeda interrupted smoothly, "perhaps we could schedule a proper meeting? We've just arrived."

"Of course, of course!" But Plimpton pressed a card into Harry's hand anyway. "Do call on us!"

Before Harry could respond, a witch in Auror robes approached Tonks with a wide grin.

"Nymphadora Tonks! Look at you in those French robes! Very sophisticated!"

"Martinez!" Tonks's face lit up. "How's training?"

"Brutal. Moody made us duel Boggarts in complete darkness yesterday. How was France?"

"Incredible. The food, the magic, the architecture—everything's just better there."

"Even the bureaucracy?" another Auror asked, joining them. "Because our bureaucracy is legendarily terrible."

"Especially the bureaucracy," Tonks confirmed. "Their customs inspection took five minutes. Ours took fifteen and included subtle accusations of international treason."

"Sounds about right."

While Tonks talked with them, Harry found himself approached by a series of Ministry officials, each one offering carefully worded welcomes that felt more like job interviews.

"Harry Potter, such a pleasure!" (Department of International Magical Cooperation)

"Welcome back, my boy!" (Improper Use of Magic Office, oddly enthusiastic)

"I hope France treated you well?" (Someone from Magical Maintenance, for reasons Harry couldn't fathom)

Each conversation followed the same pattern: effusive greeting, subtle probing about his time in France, carefully casual mention of their department's work, and an invitation to "discuss opportunities for collaboration."

Harry kept his responses polite but vague, a skill he'd honed during the French ball. Yes, France was lovely. Yes, Minister Delacour was gracious. No, he hadn't made any exclusive commitments. Yes, he'd consider future discussions.

By the fifth conversation, his face hurt from maintaining a diplomatic smile.

"You're doing well," Newt murmured at his elbow. "Though you might want to breathe occasionally."

"I forgot how exhausting this is," Harry muttered back.

Movement near the entrance caught Harry's attention, a woman in acid-green robes was pushing through the crowd, followed by a man carrying what appeared to be a camera. She had sharp features, elaborately styled blonde hair, and red-painted fingernails that looked capable of drawing blood.

"Lady Andromeda," Harry said quietly, nodding toward the woman.

Andromeda's head snapped around. "Oh, for—" She moved with impressive speed, intercepting the woman before she could reach Harry. "Rita. What a displeasure."

"Andromeda Tonks!" The woman—Rita—smiled with too many teeth. "And young Harry Potter! I was hoping to ask a few questions about the diplomatic visit to France—"

"No."

"Surely a few moments—"

"No."

"The public has a right to know—"

"The public," Andromeda said with dangerous calm, "has no right to ambush a child in the Ministry atrium. How did you even know we'd be arriving now?"

"A journalist never reveals her sources!" Rita's eyes gleamed. "Now, Harry, dear, just a quick question—is it true you danced with Fleur Delacour at the Grand Ball?"

Harry stared at her. "Who are you?"

Rita looked momentarily nonplussed. "Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet's premier correspondent—"

"Never heard of you."

"I—what? Everyone knows who I am!"

"Apparently not everyone," Ted said, materializing on Rita's other side with Tonks. "Come along, Harry. Nothing to see here."

"But I haven't even—my photographer hasn't—this is journalistic suppression!"

"This is protecting a minor from harassment," Andromeda corrected. "Good day, Rita."

They swept past her, Rita's indignant sputtering following them across the atrium. Once they'd put some distance between themselves and the reporter, Harry asked quietly, "How did she know we'd be here? Our arrival time wasn't public."

"Rita always knows," Andromeda said grimly. "I have no idea how—she appears at events she shouldn't be able to access, knows things she shouldn't know. It's deeply unsettling."

"Maybe she's got sources throughout the Ministry?" Tonks suggested.

"Maybe. Or maybe she's using illegal methods. Either way, she is like an insect, avoid her whenever possible."

"Noted."

They'd nearly reached the exit when a familiar pompous voice called out: "Ah! Harry Potter! Returning from your French adventure!"

Harry closed his eyes briefly. "Minister Fudge."

"Indeed!" Cornelius Fudge approached in his signature pinstriped robes and lime-green bowler hat, looking pleased with himself. "Welcome home, my boy! Welcome home!"

Behind him, Harry caught Andromeda and Ted exchanging a look that clearly said, *Here we go*.

"Minister Fudge," Harry replied with careful politeness. "Thank you."

"I trust your visit to France was educational? Minister Delacour treated you well, I hope?" Fudge said with the biggest smile on his face.

"France was quite beautiful, Minister," Harry said, deliberately vague. "Their magical architecture is impressive."

"Yes, yes, the French do love their grandeur!" Fudge chuckled, though his eyes remained sharp. "Though I'm sure you must have missed home? Nothing quite like good old British soil, eh?"

"Beauxbatons Academy is certainly well-equipped," Harry continued, ignoring the attempted redirection. "Their approach to magical education is quite different from ours."

Fudge's smile tightened slightly. "Different isn't always better, my boy. Hogwarts has produced the finest witches and wizards in Europe for a thousand years!"

"Of course," Harry agreed neutrally. "Though Minister Delacour was a very gracious host. Very organized. His meetings started precisely on time and never required last-minute rescheduling."

The barb landed. Harry watched Fudge's expression flicker—a brief flash of irritation before the politician's mask slammed back into place.

"Ah, well, the demands on a Minister's time can be... unpredictable," Fudge said, his jovial tone forced now. "I'm sure Delacour has fewer responsibilities than I do. Britain is a much larger magical community, after all."

"Of course, Minister." Harry kept his face carefully blank, though he caught Tonks hiding a grin behind his shoulder.

Fudge seemed to realize he was losing whatever game he thought he was playing. His expression shifted, becoming more businesslike. "Well, regardless! I'm delighted you've returned safely. And I hope you haven't made any... premature commitments to foreign governments? Britain should have first access to our own prodigies' work, after all!"

There it was—the real reason for the friendly welcome.

"I honor my existing contracts, Minister," Harry said carefully. "The Italian agreement was approved by your office months ago."

"Yes, yes, of course! Excellent work with the Italians, truly excellent!" Fudge's hand movements became more animated, his politician's enthusiasm ramping up. "Though perhaps we should discuss expanding your work with our own Auror department? I'm sure we could come to a mutually beneficial arrangement. Better terms than what you're getting internationally, naturally!"

Harry felt Newt shift slightly beside him—a subtle warning. "Perhaps," Harry said noncommittally. "Though I find I prefer arrangements that respect independence rather than demand exclusivity."

Fudge's eye twitched. "Independence! Yes, very admirable, very admirable indeed!" He laughed, but it sounded hollow. "Though do remember, Harry—Britain is your home. We take care of our own here."

He is threatening me. Stay loyal, or else.

"I appreciate your concern, Minister," Harry said politely.

Fudge seemed to realize he wasn't getting anywhere with Harry. His gaze shifted to Andromeda, and the smile grew once again. "Mrs. Tonks, might I have a word? Just a brief chat."

Andromeda's expression could have frozen the Fountain of Magical Brethren solid. "Regarding?"

"A private matter. Family business, you might say." Fudge gestured toward a relatively quiet corner of the atrium, near one of the ornate pillars. "Just between us?"

"Anything you need to say to my wife can be said in front of all of us," Ted said firmly.

"I'm afraid this is rather delicate." Fudge's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Wizengamot business. I'm sure you understand, Mr. Tonks—pure-blood family matters can be quite complex."

Tonks's face went red, and her hair went bright red like blood; she seemed ready to hex the Minister for talking like that to her father.

"Five minutes," Andromeda said coldly before anyone could do anything. "And only because I'd rather hear whatever scheme you're proposing in private than have you announce it to the entire atrium."

"Excellent, excellent!"

Harry watched them walk away, unease settling in his stomach. Whatever Fudge wanted to discuss, it clearly wasn't about Harry's talisman work.

"This won't be good," Tonks muttered beside him, her hair flickering through anxious colors.

"What do you think he wants?" Harry asked quietly.

"Nothing good." Ted's usual cheerfulness had evaporated. "When Fudge wants a 'private word,' it's always political maneuvering dressed up as friendly advice."

From their position, Harry couldn't hear the actual conversation, but he could see it unfold like a silent play. Fudge spoke first, his gestures expansive, clearly making some kind of argument. Andromeda's posture remained rigid, her arms crossed defensively.

Then Fudge said something that made Andromeda's entire body go tense. Her head snapped up, and even from a distance, Harry could see the shock and fury warring on her face.

"Oh no," Ted breathed. "He didn't."

"Didn't what?" Harry demanded.

"I don't know, but Andy only looks like that when—"

Andromeda's voice suddenly carried across the atrium, sharp and clear: "How dare you—"

Several nearby conversations stopped. People turned to look.

Fudge raised his hands in a placating gesture, speaking urgently. From the movement of his lips, Harry caught fragments: "...just asking..." "...reasonable discussion..." "...benefit everyone involved..."

Andromeda took a step back, and when she spoke again, her voice was lower but no less furious. Harry couldn't make out the words, but he could not remember the last time she seemed so angry, and Harry had to admit, he had never seen something as scary as Andromeda when she was scary.

Fudge continued talking, leaning in slightly. His expression had shifted from placating to mildly exasperated, as if Andromeda was being unreasonable about something perfectly sensible.

Then Harry caught a name on Fudge's lips: "Narcissa."

Andromeda didn't shout, but her entire bearing radiated such cold fury that Fudge actually took a step backward.

"What about that whore Narcissa?" Tonks asked urgently, her voice tight with worry, earning a look from her father, who reminded her that, despite Narcissa not being a friend of theirs, she was still her aunt.

"I don't know," Harry said, straining to catch more of the conversation. "But your mum's not happy about it."

That was an understatement. Andromeda was speaking rapidly now, her hands moving in sharp, angry gestures. Fudge tried to interrupt several times, but she talked over him, her words clearly cutting despite Harry's inability to hear them properly.

Finally, her voice rose enough to carry: "...wants to talk with me? Wants to make a Bond?"

Fudge nodded, saying something that included the words "...become sisters again..."

Andromeda's laugh was bitter and loud enough that half the atrium could hear it. "Sisters? SISTERS?" She stepped forward, and despite being considerably shorter than Fudge, she somehow made him look small. "You have no idea what you're talking about. None."

"Mrs. Tonks, please be reasonable—"

"I am being reasonable!" Andromeda's voice had gone dangerously quiet now. "What's unreasonable is you asking me to have anything to do with House Black after everything—" She cut herself off, visibly struggling for control.

Fudge seized the pause. "It's not about the past, Mrs. Tonks. It's about the future. The Wizengamot—"

"The Wizengamot," Andromeda interrupted icily, "can rot in hell for all I care. And you can tell Cassiopeia Greengrass that if she thinks—"

Harry's head snapped around. *Cassiopeia*? What did Daphne's mother have to do with this?

"—that I will help her steal what's left of that cursed family, she's more delusional than I thought!" Andromeda finished.

Fudge's expression hardened. "Mrs. Tonks, I must insist—"

"Insist all you want, Minister. I'm done with this conversation." Andromeda's voice carried the finality of a door slamming shut. "Mind your own business, Cornelius. Harry's guardianship is not up for negotiation, discussion, or political maneuvering. And neither is my family history. Are we clear?"

Several people had stopped even pretending not to stare.

Fudge's face had gone red. "I was merely suggesting—"

"I know exactly what you were suggesting." Andromeda took another step closer, and Fudge actually flinched. "The answer is no. It was no ten years ago when they sent lawyers about 'family obligations.' It's no now, and it will still be no if you ask again tomorrow."

"But surely Lady Narcissa—"

"My sister," Andromeda spat out the word like it was poison, "will get no help from me. Not now. Not ever. Do you understand? I don't care what she wants. I don't care what the Wizengamot voted on. I don't care what Cassiopeia bloody Greengrass is scheming. I am done with House Black."

She turned on her heel and strode back toward Harry and the others, her face flushed with rage and something that looked dangerously close to tears.

Fudge called after her: "Mrs. Tonks, please reconsider—"

"Go to hell, Minister!" Andromeda shot back without turning around.

The atrium had gone silent. Everyone was staring now, Ministry workers, visitors, even the security guards looked shocked. Ministers of Magic did not get told to go to hell in public. Not by respectable witches like Andromeda Tonks.

She reached their group and grabbed Harry's arm with shaking fingers. "We're leaving. Now."

"Andy, what—" Ted started.

"Home," Andromeda said, her voice cracking slightly. "We're going home. Now."

"But what did Fudge—"

"Not Here!" It took everything for her not to shout. Andromeda closed her eyes, visibly struggling for control. When she opened them again, her voice was quieter. "Please, Edward. I need to leave. Right now."

Ted's expression softened immediately. "Of course, love. Of course." He put his arm around her shoulders. "Harry, Tonks, Newt—let's go. Quickly now."

They moved toward the Floo Network entrance, Andromeda's breath coming in sharp, controlled gasps as if she was fighting against breaking down entirely. Behind them, Harry could hear the immediate explosion of whispered conversation—gossip spreading like wildfire through the Ministry.

As they passed through the atrium, Harry caught sight of Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill working frantically, her photographer's camera flashing. Tomorrow's Daily Prophet would have a field day with this.

But that wasn't what worried Harry most.

What worried him was the single sentence Andromeda muttered under her breath as they reached the Floo fireplaces, her voice furious like never before:

"I will kill that devil of a woman."

Harry didn't need to ask which woman she meant.

Whatever had just happened, whatever Fudge had asked and whatever Cassiopeia had done, it had something to do with House Black. And from the look on Andromeda's face it was something terrible.

Tonks squeezed Harry's hand as they waited for their turn at the Floo.

"What just happened?" Harry whispered.

"I don't know," Tonks whispered back. "But I've never seen Mum like this. Not even when—" She cut herself off, shaking her head.

Ted went first through the Floo, then guided Andromeda through with gentle hands. Newt followed, carrying his case and looking troubled.

Tonks went next, leaving Harry alone for a moment in the Ministry atrium.

He turned back, looking across the sea of staring faces, the whispers, and judgment. Fudge stood near the fountain, looking irritated and embarrassed. Rita Skeeter was already interviewing someone—probably trying to piece together what she'd missed.

Harry stepped into the Floo, calling out "Tonks Residence!" as the green flames consumed him.

But as he spun through the network, one thought kept circling through his mind:

What exactly had happened at that Wizengamot meeting? And what did it have to do with him?

Because despite Andromeda's insistence that it wasn't about Harry, he had a sinking feeling that everything—Cassiopeia's interest in him, Fudge's questions, even Narcissa Malfoy wanting to "become sisters again"—was connected somehow.

And he wasn't going to like the answer when he finally figured it out.

Note: After this Chapter, the chapters will get longer, and I will make sure the pacing of this story gets a little faster.