

**(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)**

**A/N: Poor, poor Penny~**

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Her life is over. And that's not hyperbolic. The pictures and whatever story both the Prophet and the Quibbler want to make up in their heads will likely be out by tomorrow morning... if they don't bother with a Special Edition Release later today.

As such, Penelope Clearwater is in rare form as she stomps into the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic and makes her way towards the elevators. She doesn't make eye contact with anyone. Even if rationally she knows that none of them could possibly have a clue what had happened yet, part of her still feels like they somehow already know.

She should probably wait for Minister Bones to catch up with her, but not only does Penelope not know when Amelia will arrive, she also has no desire to share a small, confined space like an elevator with her superior right now.

After all, it was her fault. Sure, Fleur had been the one to hand over her lacy black thong, but it was Penelope who hadn't tucked them away in her robes immediately. She'd been... so embarrassed to be seen with them by the Minister that she'd frozen up. And then it was much, much too late because the doors were opened and Lavender Brown and Luna Lovegood were already taking pictures.

Stepping into the elevator, Penelope hits the button for Level One, where the Minister and her Support Staff have their offices. She tries her best to compose herself on the ride... but it's pretty much a lost cause. She can't stop fidgeting. After everything, this is how her career ends. Because of one mistake.

The elevator doors open and Penelope makes a beeline for her office... but unfortunately despite the early hour, Level One is not completely empty.

“Penny? Not walking in with the Minister today?”

Turning, Penelope Clearwater is met with big brown eyes set in a pale face and framed by bushy brown hair. The other witch, shorter than her by a few inches, looks legitimately concerned at the break in routine... and Penelope snaps in spite of herself, snarling angrily.

“That is none of your concern, Ms. Granger.”

Hermione Granger, a fellow muggleborn and one of Penelope’s subordinate secretaries within the Minister’s Office, goes wide eyed at this rebuke, hurt flashing across her face for a moment before she pulls back and bows her head.

“... Of course, Ms. Clearwater. Apologies for overstepping.”

Penelope is just about to enter her office and put the encounter behind herself... when she stops instead and turns back, letting out a shaky breath.

“No... Hermione, wait.”

The other muggleborn turns back to her, eyes slightly wide and Penelope closes the distance between them so they’re mere feet apart.

“I’m sorry... that was uncalled for. I’ve just had a very trying morning and... and I took it out on you. Please forgive me.”

A hesitant smile blooms across Hermione’s face and she nods happily.

“Of course, think nothing of it. We all have bad days, right?”

Not as bad as this one. Not so bad that Penelope isn’t sure if she’ll even be working alongside Hermione by the end of today. Of course, she’s not about to tell the younger muggleborn that. Penelope is well aware that Hermione looks up to her. Idolizes her, even. She’s done her best to take the other witch under

her wing and act as a proper mentor to her ever since Hermione joined the Minister's Office, after all.

Before she can muster up a proper response however, the elevator dings again and... Amelia Bones steps off of it. The moment that the Minister's eyes land upon Penelope and Hermione, they flash and her jaw clenches.

"Penelope. My office, now."

Hermione looks between them both, more worried than ever, but Penelope just smiles and gives the younger woman a nod before following Amelia into the Minister's Office. The door is closed shut behind them the moment both are inside, and Amelia runs her hand over the Minister's Desk, activating the wards and magical defenses that will ensure total privacy for the two of them.

Penelope swallows thickly as Amelia takes a seat behind the desk.

"I... it might be best if I were to resign now instead of later. You know, get ahead of things before anything goes to print..."

Amelia looks up sharply from where she'd been studying a part of her desk in quiet contemplation.

"What? No, don't be ridiculous. You're not going anywhere. This morning... that whole mess was my fault."

Blinking incredulously, Penny gawks.

"Y-Your fault?! Minister Bones, how could it possibly be your fault?! I'm the one who was holding my panties in my hand like an idiot when we were ambushed by reporters! You played no part in it!"

But Amelia doesn't agree.

"Didn't I? You wouldn't have been holding anything at all if you hadn't felt obligated to... follow me in taking Lord Hallows up on his offer. We wouldn't

have even been there this morning if not for that. We would have left last night and it would have been the Wizard Lord alone that the reporters ambushed this morning!”

That... that wasn't fair.

“Y-You had to make the call you made, Minister. That man... he's not long for this world. He's too flippant, too irreverent, too arrogant by half. Whatever killed all of the other wizards IS going to get him too... and you saw an opportunity to get something out of the situation before he died. Now, with how the newspapers are likely to speculate, I've maybe ruined it for you. The threat might come for us now if it learns we're pregnant by Lord Hallows.”

Amelia grimaces.

“... Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We don't know that we're pregnant yet.”

And yet... somehow Penelope is almost certain that she is. And she suspects Amelia is certain too. Before she can say anything else about that topic, however, the Minister changes the subject.

“Regardless, I'm not letting them take you from me over one unfortunate photo, Penelope. So sit down and let's make a game plan. There must be some way to turn this back around on the Prophet and the Quibbler, some way to make it clear that they're the bad guys here and you did nothing wrong.”

She... doesn't see one, but Penny sits down across from the Minister all the same and her Amelia start trying to spitball ideas. The next few hours feel like an exercise in futility in that regard, however. Nothing they can think up seems very viable, most are lukewarm responses at best that might split public opinion down the middle.

And that's saying nothing of how the witches in the Wizengamot will use this to eat Amelia alive if they can. Oh sure, none of them actually wants to be Minister... but they WILL try to use this to take more concessions from her, to rip away her power bit by bit and take more of her authority for themselves.

As time drags on, Penelope becomes more and more certain that their only option will be her immediate resignation once the news breaks. Even if Amelia is struggling to accept that fact, she knows she'll gladly sacrifice herself for her Minister. In a heartbeat, even.

A knock comes on Amelia's door close to noon and wouldn't you know it, it's Hermione Granger... holding a copy of the Daily Prophet. The muggleborn witch looks wide eyed and shocked as she hesitantly makes her way deeper into the office.

"Minister Bones, Ms. Clearwater... there's a Special Edition of the Daily Prophet today and it seemed like something you would want to see."

Feeling the walls closing in on her, Penelope watches as Amelia nods and holds out her hand for the newspaper. Hermione hands it over, glancing in Penelope's direction nervously. There's a brief pause before Amelia makes a curious noise in the back of her throat.

"... How bad is it, Minister?"

Blinking, the older witch looks up... and shakes her head.

"It's not, actually. It's fine."

She sets the newspaper down and swings it around so Penny can read it. The first thing she sees though is the magical picture that takes up most of the front page... and it baffles her. There stands Lord Harry Hallows... all by himself, giving the camera a knowing smirk. There's no sign of Amelia or Penny in the picture. Meaning it was probably taken after they departed.

Snatching up the newspaper, Penny reads the front page article... and sees no mention of her or Amelia anywhere in it. It's still Special Edition worthy news to be fair, the first Wizard Lord to willingly enter the British Isles in years would be worthy of his own newspaper release. However... there's no scandal involving her and her... panties. Not even a whiff of it.

“Really? This... this is fine?”

Looking up, Penelope sees Hermione looking uncertain and incredulous as she glances between the two of them.

“He’s the first Magical Lord to show up in the British Magical World since I graduated from Hogwarts and they put his picture all over the front page of the Daily Prophet. Isn’t this... disastrous?”

Well. When Hermione put it like that, Penelope supposed her fellow muggleborn had a point. But as she exchanges a look with Amelia, Penny is forced to acknowledge that it could have been so, so much worse than this. Hermione really has no idea...

Besides, the rest of the magical population was bound to find out about Harry sooner or later. What damage could one news article cause?

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*“Lumos!”*

A dark room is suddenly dimly lit by the Wand-Lighting Charm as a bright white light appears at the tip of a wand. After a moment, the light breaks off from the tip of the wand and floats up into the air in defiance of all known limitations to the charm.

Floating over a table, the ball of light illuminates a newspaper that’s smacked down onto the wood, though it does not illuminate the owner of the wand in any way. Still hidden in the shadows, the wand’s owner reaches out, running fingers over the newspaper... over the smirking face of the wizard that dominates its front page.

The wand jabs at the picture all of the sudden, and the owner begins to mutter under their breath. This time, the incantation is a whole lot longer than a single

word. Multiple sentences over the course of several minutes. A ritual casting, almost certainly.

Eventually, the magical picture shimmers green and the figure pulls their wand back... only to draw something else out from within their robes. It's a blade, but not just any blade... no, it's an athame, a ritual dagger, and the wand goes to it next as the figure begins to chant several more sentences, casting the other half of the ritual on the dagger.

When it glows red, only then does the figure pull back their wand and tuck it away once more. Then, with both hands on the black handle of the ritual dagger, they raise it over their head, concealing it in the shadow at the edge of the Lumos Spell... and bring it down right in the center of Harry Hallows' picture, right in the center of his chest.

The dagger digs deep, punching straight through the newspaper, magical image and all, and even going through the table underneath. There is a pause as the athame remains buried in the effigy of the Wizard Lord for a few moments longer... before being pulled back and tucked away, same as the figure's wand.

*"Nox."*

The figure doesn't need their wand to cast the countercharm. And a moment later, the room is bathed in pitch black darkness once more.

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Harry opens his eyes and stares at the unfamiliar ceiling for a moment in consternation. Then, he slowly sits up and looks around himself, trying to figure out where he is. It comes back to him quickly enough though. This was once Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour.

However, like pretty much every other wizard in Great Britain, Florean had died. To be fair, the man tended to die in most timelines unless Harry specifically went out of his way to save him. But this time around it was all part of the mass deaths of magical males from what he'd been told.

Yes, told. Because Harry had come to Diagon Alley a few hours ago to figure out where he wanted to set up his office... and ultimately, he'd chosen this location because of its premium real estate. He'd finished making the deal, paid off the witch who owned the property, and gained the deed, at which point he'd been left alone in his new building.

And then... darkness.

Frowning, Harry looks down at himself... only to raise an eyebrow at the sheer amount of blood staining the front of his robes.

"... Huh. Someone just murdered me, didn't they?"

Giggling, Death finally makes herself known, stepping in from just out of his field of view and shrugging her shoulders in a way that makes her ample bosom bounce as she struts over to a nearby dusty table and hops up onto it.

"Well, fifteen minutes ago, but yes. Yes they did, Master."

Rising to his feet, Harry does some stretches, twisting this way and that to get the slight post rigor mortis stiffening out of the way. Then, he grunts.

"Ballsy of them, I will admit. But how did they do it? I didn't even see it coming."

"I could just tell you, Master. But where would the fun in that be? Besides, I'm confident you can figure it out yourself."

Harry narrows his eyes... and then looks to the table Death is sitting on and where her hand is stroking. Walking over, he stares down at the Special Edition Copy of the Daily Prophet that Death has brought with her. His smirking face looks back at him, his green eyes glimmering with untold secrets.

"... They used my moving image to create a sympathetic magical connection and then struck at me from afar. Like a fucking voodoo doll. That... is some impressively Dark Magic."

“Always so very clever, Master~”

Harry huffs and just shakes his head. Could he have defended against this form of attack? Yes, almost certainly. Much like the wards on his current abode, however, Harry simply hadn't had the time to do so just yet. It had only been three days, after all!

Still, this was very interesting... and very telling. This wasn't a 'what'. It wasn't a 'curse'. Or at least not an overarching curse. No, this was a person... someone with powerful magic had tried to kill him and Harry suspected quite strongly that they were probably behind all of the other deaths as well.

After all, the only people he'd pissed off since arriving in this world were the goblins, and he knew for a fact they couldn't pull something like this off.

Huffing, he shakes his head... and grins.

“Now this? This is interesting.”

Death just giggles some more, eyes dancing with amusement at his excitement.

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**A/N: Remember to go back and VOTE!**