

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Knight Protectors of the Realm, Part 1 (part 1)

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Book 1: Knight Protectors of the Realm Chapter 1 – Unexpected Meetings

Friday, June 1, 11:00am, Hogsmeade Station

“Wotcher, Harry. Headmistress McGonagall needs to see you in her office.”

Harry Potter reluctantly opened his eyes. He didn't bother asking how Tonks found him in a *notice-me-not* charmed train compartment. She was an Auror, and used to finding wizards who didn't want to be found.

“Oh, Merlin!” he muttered. “The train will leave before I even make it back to the castle!”

“Imagine so. But I'm sure she'll get you to London somehow.”

The young wizard didn't really want to meet with anyone, but lacked the energy to argue.

The Auror wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulder.

“I'll let your friends know what happened, and see to it that Hedwig and your trunk make it to your Aunt and Uncle's house.”

Harry frowned. “If you can manage the cage, I think Hedwig might rather fly back.” His familiar's bobbing head indicated agreement as she was freed and launched herself out through an opened window.

“Wish I had that kind of freedom right now,” the black-haired wizard muttered, as he stepped back onto the platform and started the long walk back towards the castle.

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Dumbledore's password still worked.

Harry found the Headmistress of Hogwarts sitting behind her large wooden desk, lost in thought and gazing out the window. Without turning towards him, she conjured a comfortable chair and asked, “Tea?”

“Yes, please,” Harry replied. A portrait of the sleeping former headmaster caught his attention.

“He hasn't woken yet,” McGonagall said, noting his gaze. “The other portraits tell me that it might take weeks.”

The young wizard let out a sigh and sat down. There were so many questions to ask...

McGonagall interrupted his thoughts. “That said, he's apparently still found a way to reach out to us.”

She picked up a piece of parchment and passed it across the desk. Harry immediately recognized the handwriting of his former mentor:

Dear Harry,

There is someone you should meet prior to your return to Privet Drive. The sword will come in handy. More to say once I get used to this portraiture.

Regards,

Albus Dumbledore
Former Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

“The note was stuck on the portrait frame when I returned from the memorial service,” the Headmistress stated.

Harry frowned. “Do you think it could be a trap?”

“That was my initial thought,” McGonagall replied, “but even with Dumbledore gone I can not imagine how Voldemort could arrange to have a note written in Albus's hand placed within this office.”

Harry thought about that for a second, then rose from his chair and strode towards the glass-encased sword. “Also seems unlikely that Voldemort would ask me to bring the Sword of Gryffindor to our next get together.”

“Just a moment, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall asked. “While the note doesn't mention it, I suspect that transportation has been pre-arranged.”

Harry's attention shifted from sword to Headmistress, then back again. Finally getting what she was implying, he smiled for the first time that day.

"I imagine that you're right," he replied. "But would you think it safe? I mean, not so much where I'm going, but how... the last thing I need right now is harassment from the Ministry for using an unauthorized portkey."

"Well..." thought McGonagall. "I believe that the crime lies in the unauthorized making, rather than in the using, so..."

"So they'd have to ship the portrait off to Azkaban?"

The Headmistress glanced over at Dumbledore's portrait and opined, "I dare say that the Ministry would find it easier to remove Mrs. Black's portrait from the wall."

She then walked around her desk and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Do you have a few minutes before you go, Mr. Po....Harry?"

The young wizard nodded. The older witch chose to lean against the front of her desk, so that she remained within reach of her student. She then took a few moments to compose her thoughts.

"They say that if you want to truly know a wizard you need to fly a mile on his broomstick," McGonagall began. "While I've always thought myself highly sympathetic to your situation, it is only within the past few days that I have fully appreciated your burden."

"How is that, Ma'am?"

"Well, it's just that.... Dumbledore's dead, Snape's betrayed us, Voldemort's chasing after my students and Hogwarts could well close its doors for the first time in over seven-hundred years," she replied. "And in an emergency meeting earlier today, the Hogwarts Board of Governors removed the 'Interim' portion from my title. Apparently, I am now their own 'Chosen One,' - the person who is supposed to keep the school going in spite of all that."

The Headmistress stared down at the floor. "Frankly, I don't feel prepared to meet their expectations. And yet I don't feel I have any other choice but to try. Does that sound familiar?"

"Yes Ma'am," her student said with a grim smile. "That does sound very familiar."

"Harry," she continued, "over the past six years I doubt that anyone would characterize my interactions with you as maternal."

"Oh don't say that, Ma'am...unless you've bought a new broomstick for every new seeker on your house Quidditch team."

"Yes, well, that was a happier time for all of us, wasn't it? A time when taking the House Cup from Snape's office was more important than..."

"Than taking his head from his shoulders?"

"Quite."

The Headmistress took a sip from her teacup, then continued. "I raise this issue because of something I learned just this morning whilst rummaging through the Headmaster's papers."

"What's that, Ma'am?"

"Well, it's that...erm...Harry, do you know that the Headmaster of Hogwarts is your legal guardian within the wizarding community?"

"I knew that Headmaster Dumbledore was my wizard guardian, but...are you saying that the job is tied to the position?"

Minerva nodded. "Guardianship is automatically granted to the Headmaster or Headmistress of Hogwarts over any orphaned magical child raised in the Muggle world."

"So that means that now you are Headmistress..."

"Yes, Harry," McGonagall replied. "I am your legal guardian in the wizarding world." She paused for a moment. "Which brings us back to my maternal instincts, doesn't it?"

"Don't start, Ma'am," Harry replied. "You've been far more of a mother than Aunt Petunia ever has."

"But not as much as Molly Weasley, I'm certain of that. Or Miss Granger, for that matter."

"Mrs. Weasley, I'll grant," said Harry, with a pause. "But Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry," said McGonagall, "Hermione. Or have I been wrong all these years in assuming that she's done a great deal to keep you on the straight and narrow?"

Harry thought back to all of the times that Hermione had made sure his homework was done, all of the times that she kept him from making rash moves, and all of the time she spent with him during his frequent trips to Madame Pomfrey's infirmary. Even with everything that happened the past year, with their arguments over the Half Blood Prince's potion book, and Malfoy, and Ginny....and Ron...

Well, she's tried to keep me out of trouble, at least," Harry finally said. "Can't say that she's always been successful."

That drew a smile from the Headmistress's face. "No, I couldn't either," she replied. "But I daresay that neither of you would be alive today were it not for the other. And it's been a long time since I've ever seen two people in my House that cared more about each other."

She was about to tell Harry that the last two were his parents, but thought better of it. Which was a good thing, because Harry was wondering why she said what she did. Surely she knew that he had been dating Ginny, and that Ron and Hermione had feelings for each other?

"Ah, but forgive me, I've gotten us off track again," the Headmistress noted. "I just wanted to let you know that the Order is in disarray right now, and that you shouldn't expect its presence at your Aunt and Uncle's."

"Oh, that's all right," Harry replied. "I was never quite certain whether those guards were there to keep Death Eaters out or to keep me in."

"Yes, well...that doesn't mean that someone *won't* be there but... I talked with Miss Granger this morning and she told me that she and Ronald Weasley intend to stay with you at the Dursleys. I hope you let them. You might be underage, but they aren't, and I'd feel more comfortable knowing that they were watching your back even with the blood protections in place."

Harry nodded.

"Oh," she continued, "and don't be surprised if you see a tabby cat perched on their fence now and again. The Board is going to wait until August to decide on whether Hogwarts will open this fall, so I might have some time even with my new responsibilities."

"I'd like that, Ma'am," Harry replied. "Am I'm sure that Crookshanks would enjoy the company."

"Now, Mr. Potter!" she said with a sly grin. "Secondly – based on how Scrimgeour and his flunkies treated me this morning, you should worry about the Ministry."

Harry thought for a moment. "Was there anything in particular that he said?"

"Nothing officially," she said, "but it's clear that they think they can roll over me in ways they never would have dreamed to attempt when Albus was Headmaster. Dolores Umbridge and Percy Weasley acting so smug – they probably now see as much opportunity to grab power as Voldemort does."

Harry nodded. "This morning Scrimgeour asked me again to join forces with the Ministry. He wasn't too happy when I brushed him off by saying that I was still Dumbledore's man."

"Oh, dear," she replied. "While I am proud of you, I'm afraid what that will mean...you see, there are some in the Ministry that believe that you are as much of a threat to the wizarding community as Voldemort."

"I'm not surprised," Harry stated. "But what can they do?"

"They can track your use of the floo network and owl post, and also come down hard on any legal missteps," McGonagall replied. "You haven't forgotten your visit with the Wizengamot, have you? Without Dumbledore's help, they may make another run to break your wand."

"No magic use until I'm seventeen," Harry said. "I'll try."

"Well," said the Headmistress, "I wouldn't go that far. You are not allowed to use your wand to cast spells outside of these grounds until you are seventeen. I emphasize the phrase 'use your wand;' I do not think that those who fashioned the law ever imagined an underage wizard capable of performing wandless magic...Occlumency, for example. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, Headmistress, I understand exactly what you mean."

"Also, do not forget that there are very few restrictions on underage use of magical items."

"Oh," said Harry, "guess I never really thought about that, having being raised by the Dursleys."

Headmistress McGonagall's eyes suddenly lit up with inspiration. With a smile, she pointed her wand across the room and an unmarked door opened. "Harry," said asked, "would you mind helping me clean out the closets of my new office?"

When the young wizard turned towards the opened door he smiled.

"Why yes, I'd be happy to help out, Ma'am."

The Headmistress reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a rucksack. "Well then, you might find this useful."

Harry took the offered rucksack and walked into the closet, which was filled with items that had been confiscated by Filch. Once he realized that the bag had a charmed never-full interior, he stopped trying to sort the items by usefulness, and took the lot. He quickly had a rather nice collection of portable swamps, Weasley whiz-bangs, and even a magical tent.

Swinging his rucksack onto his shoulder, he exited the closet and offered his thanks to the Headmistress.

"Suppose I should start on whatever trip Headmaster Dumbledore had planned for me?" he asked.

"Be careful," the Headmistress admonished, as he drew his wand and headed towards the sword's case.

Harry grinned.

"Aren't I always?"

Not waiting for a predictable response, the Boy-Who-Lived reached out and grabbed the sword's hilt. He immediately felt the all-too familiar hook in his gut sensation produced by an activated portkey.

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Harry landed on a pine-needle covered ground within a small glade. He immediately crouched into a defensive posture, but saw no threats. Noticing a lorry traveling along a paved road some fifty meters distant, he ditched his robes in the main compartment of his rucksack, and sheathed the blade in an expandable exterior pocket, leaving only the ruby-encrusted hilt exposed for quick retrieval. With wand still in hand, he cautiously walked towards the road.

Looking down the lorry's path, he noticed the pavement disappear around a curve. Back up the road was a wrought-iron gate and guardhouse about 100 meters distant. Two men dressed in dark suits and sunglasses stood on either side of the gate. They appeared far too smartly dressed to be wizards in Muggle clothing, and held radios and clipboards rather than wands.

Taking a leap of faith in Dumbledore's plans, Harry walked out onto the road. The men watched silently as he approached the gate. When he got within a few meters, one of them called out, "You wouldn't happen to be Harry Potter, would you?"

Harry nodded. The man talked into his radio, and the gate slowly opened. Gesturing towards a white Land Rover parked on the inside of the gate, he said, "This way, Sir. They are expecting you up at the castle."

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It was a quiet ten-minute trip to the building that the guard had called "The Castle." Frankly, it didn't look like much of a castle to Harry, at least when compared to Hogwarts. It was big, and built of stone, but only one tower rose from the main building, and its ramparts were only a few stories taller than the building itself.

The Land Rover pulled up to the side of the building, and Harry was shown inside. The entry hall was bright and cheery. Large landscape paintings set in heavy wood frames hung on walls dressed in gold wallpaper and trimmed in white wood. The furniture had overstuffed cushions upholstered in pastel floral prints, and several flower arrangements were set on tables and sideboards. Although he had never been there, Harry imagined that the Hufflepuff common room could look like this, except for the fact that this was obviously a Muggle residence. No creatures were bounding across the oil paintings of wooded landscapes, no fire was lit in the fireplace for floor travel, and the heads mounted on the walls of the staircase landing belonged to antelopes, rather than to retired house elves.

He was led towards the tower he'd seen earlier, and climbed up stairs to a room whose decor looked much more Gryffindorish than Hufflepuffian. Pieces of walnut and leather furniture were grouped in separate sitting areas. A large stone fireplace contained a modest fire that looked more ornamental than functional. The unlit torches mounted within sconces also appeared decorative, given the brass floor lamps that were scattered about, and a large, ornate chandelier that hung overhead.

Long narrow windows set within the opposite wall allowed the sun to cast bright rectangular patches of light onto the ornate Oriental rug that covered the stone floor. A tallish man wearing a brown tweed jacket was looking out one of these windows, with his back turned to Harry. His escort cleared his throat and announced, "Your Highness, Mister Harry Potter."

The man in the tweed jacket turned around, smiled, and strode across the room with his hand outstretched.

"Mister Potter, welcome to Balmoral."

Harry instantly recognized the man's face from a portrait that had hung on the wall of his primary school classroom. From all appearances, he had just been introduced to the Prince of Wales.

The young wizard cautiously held out his right hand and gave the man a handshake that was somewhere between firm and tentative in strength. "It's a pleasure to meet you...your... Your Highness."

The middle-aged man took a step back, as if to allow Harry the chance to take his measure.

"Mister Potter, you likely have a million questions running through your mind right now, am I right?"

Harry, who in fact had only time to process a few hundred questions since his introduction, nodded his head.

"Well, my young man, given what I understand you have recently been through, I'm not surprised...and not in the least offended by your caution. Allow me to suggest that we have a seat by the fire."

Harry was guided towards two high-backed chairs near the fireplace. His escort reappeared with a tray that held a silver pitcher and two glasses of iced pumpkin juice.

"*Pumpkin juice?*"— that silent two-worded question jumped to the front of the line of the questions currently dancing in Harry's head.

"Please Mr. Potter, have something to drink," said his companion. "I can't promise that it replicates exactly what they serve at Hogwarts, but I've

been told that my cook's recipe is fairly close."

Mention of the word "Hogwarts" put Harry immediately back on the defensive...just how would the Prince of Wales know anything about Hogwarts? He cautiously chose a glass, but made no effort to raise it to his lips. The man reached down and picked up the other glass, and took a long drink. "Please, Mr. Potter, I'm not trying to poison you."

Harry nodded slightly as he watched the man take another drink from his glass.

"If I were in your shoes, Mr. Potter, I would be desperately looking for the answers to a few key questions. Namely, 'Am I really the Prince of Wales and if I am how do I know about Hogwarts?' Not to mention the question of why you are here and whether or not you can trust me. How am I doing?"

Harry maintained his gaze. "Dead on the mark, Sir."

"I see." The man finished his drink and set the glass on the tray in front of him. "Mr. Potter, I wish I had more time to gain your confidence, but we have some critical issues to discuss before your departure for London. Allow me, then, to try to allay whatever fears you might have concerning my intentions."

The man opened the left side of his jacket and very slowly reached into an interior pocket, allowing Harry to see the retrieval of a brown leather billfold. He pulled out what appeared to be small, dog-eared photograph. As he passed it across, Harry saw a magical image of the Prince with his arm around the shoulder of a laughing Albus Dumbledore.

"Harry...your Headmaster had been a friend of my family for as long as I can remember, and I was proud to call him a personal friend to the handful of people that I could trust with that secret."

The Prince shifted in his seat as he pulled on the front seams of his trouser legs. He gazed into the fire for a few quiet seconds before reaching over and refilling his glass. He then stood up and looked straight at Harry.

"Mr. Potter, it is a tradition in my family that any glass used to make an important toast never be used again." Harry realized what was being said, rose from his chair, and raised his glass.

"To Albus Dumbledore," said the Prince. "If his presence enriches the next world even half as much as his life enriched our own, then it truly deserves to be called Heaven."

"To Albus Dumbledore," Harry whispered.

The thrown crystal shattered against the back of the hearth, and Harry's eyes began to water.

And the man thought by most royal watchers to have all the warmth and compassion of your average puddle of mud stepped forward, and pulled the teen-aged wizard into a hug.

"I know, Harry" he said softly. "I know."

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After a few minutes, the Prince led Harry back down to the main floor and out into a garden located at the rear of the building. The fresh air and bright sunlight helped the two regain most of their composure. They walked down a limestone-block pathway, each with arms held behind their own backs.

"Harry," the Prince asked, "over the years Albus has told me much about you, and your progress at Hogwarts. Did you know that he considered you to be the son he never had?"

The teen's mind raced as he thought back to that awful night, as he stood immobilized and watched his mentor's body tumble over the Astronomy Tower's restraining wall. He reached into his pocket and tightly grasped the fake locket for which Dumbledore had sacrificed his strength and his life.

"I too am trying to come to grips with Dumbledore's death," the Prince said. "I wish I had been able to attend his funeral, but you can imagine the... the logistics... that would have been involved."

Harry nodded. "How did you know about the funeral...how did you know that Dumbledore had died?"

Without looking, the Prince reached into a coat pocket and pulled out a phoenix feather that he slowly twisted in his fingers. "I've been up from London for the past week doing some fly fishing and planning for Her Majesty's summer residency. Four nights ago I heard the cry of a phoenix, and then Fawkes appeared at my bedroom window. And I knew. As for the funeral, well, Harry...let me just say that many in your world would be shocked at just how much a few of us Muggles know about them."

Harry's eyes went wide as the Prince tossed out the word "Muggle" as if they were conversing at Hogwarts Castle, rather than Balmoral Castle. How much did he really know?

"Muggles, sir?"

The Prince looked at Harry with a crooked smile. "Yes, I know about your world, and I know just what some in your world think of us non-magical folks...."

And what is that, sir?"

The Prince paused for a moment, then asked, "Have you any idea how many titles I currently hold?"

Harry looked up and shook his head.

"Wouldn't imagine you would. Frankly, I have problems remembering all myself... Let's see. I am the Prince of Wales, the Prince and Great Steward of Scotland, the Duke of Cornwall, Duke of Rothesay, Earl of Carrick, Earl of Chester, Lord of Renfrew, and..."

The Prince look down at his fingers and counted as he mouthed through the list again.

"Oh yes, Lord of the Isles...although I sometimes also fancy myself Lord of the Dance, but only when I'm not in public."

Harry laughed out loud as the Prince did a little jig.

"Ah, that's more like it, son," the Prince said. "But, I am also aware of the fact that I am heir to a kingdom with realms both Magical and Muggle. You have to admit, the word "Muggle" does trip off the tongue a whole lot easier than "non-magical" or "non-wizard."

The Prince glanced down at his watch. "Oh, look at the time. Harry, you do need to be in London tonight. Will you let me ramble a bit upon why you are here?"

The young wizard nodded.

"Right. Well, then...I know that you are fighting against a dark wizard. I know that if this dark wizard...Voldemort, correct?...that if this dark wizard and his forces win that the results would be disastrous not only in your world, but in mine. I know that this war has already resulted in the deaths of many Muggles by events that have been misidentified as natural disasters, accidents, or terrorist acts."

"Harry, I'm not sure if you are aware of the fact, but the British Prime Minister has been in consultation with Scrimgeour, your Minister of Magic, concerning this situation. However, from what Dumbledore shared with me, I suspect that your Ministry has severely underrepresented how dire things really are. Frankly, Albus didn't have much faith in your Ministry as a whole, and in this Scrimgeour chap in particular... an attitude that you share...am I right?"

Harry smiled in agreement.

"Well... Albus was convinced that the best hope for both our worlds lay not within the Ministry of Magic, but within your hands, and those of your friends. In fact, he had great confidence in your ability to rise to this challenge."

Harry cringed. He wasn't nearly as confident as the Prince seemed to be.

"You must realize, my dear boy, that Dumbledore shared all this with me for a reason...he was certain that some key part of your success in the battle with Voldemort would come not by what you have learned at Hogwarts, but from what you might learn in the Muggle world."

Harry tried to imagine just what within the Muggle world might possibly help him battle Voldemort.

The Prince broke into those thoughts.

"Harry, Dumbledore asked that I help you during your stay on our side of the fence. I am not certain how I can make good on my promise, although I have a few ideas. Ultimately, though, that will be for you to decide. Also, Albus wanted any knowledge of my help be kept closely held. You see, few in our government know about my family's connection to the Wizarding World, and I'm not sure that the Prime Minister knows anything about you. Unless, of course, your Minister of Magic mentioned your heroic efforts during their meetings?"

"Oh, I doubt that very much, Your Highness."

"Right, then. I'll leave it for you to decide whom within the wizarding community you can trust. On my end, I have asked a few close friends to provide their assistance on my behalf. Rest assured they will do whatever they can to provide you with whatever you need. And if they can't help you for some reason, these might come in handy."

The Prince handed Harry a small mobile telephone and a folded piece of parchment. "The note informs the reader that you are on Queen's business, and are to be provided whatever assistance might be available. Comes in handy if you want to skiv out of a traffic infraction, amongst other things. Just keep it safe in your wallet."

"Um...I'm sorry, your Highness, but I don't have a wallet."

"What? Well, then," said the Prince, "take mine."

He handed Harry a brown leather billfold.

"Oh, that's quite alright, Your Highness, I can get one..."

"Really, Harry, just take it. It's not like you have lots of free time to go shopping, and Lord knows I seldom have the chance to use it myself...hard for me to just pop down to the pub to buy a few pints."

Harried thanked the Prince and placed the note inside the wallet.

"You'll notice," said the Prince, "that I only have a few hundred pounds in there...but the charge cards might come in handy. I'll have you authorized before you leave today."

"Thank you, Sir, but money is the one thing I don't really think I need help with."

"Ah, Dumbledore mentioned that. But he also said something about the advantages of not having to run down to your bank whenever you needed a spot of cash. He also feared that there may come the day when you were blocked from gaining access to your wizard money."

Harry thought about the goblins, and whether they would ever be tempted to join Voldemort's side, then nodded.

"The mobile has an untraceable number. Don't worry about going over on minutes, and if you need to contact me directly just hit Speed Dial 1 or text me."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but what is speed dial? And how exactly would I 'text' you?"

The Prince laughed.

"Oh my goodness...a teenager that doesn't know how to text message? Harry Potter, you truly do live in a different world."

Chapter 2 - Planes, Trains and Automobiles

Harry tightly gripped his armrests as the engines of the small jet he was sitting within roared to life. While he did now about airplanes, and saw the fly over the Dursleys's house all the time (as Little Whinging was not far from Heathrow), he (like Arthur Weasley), didn't have the foggiest idea how they did so without using magic. He wondered if his magical powers were strong enough to levitate the entire jet, if need be, and wished that his Firebolt was with him, rather than packed in his trunk aboard the Hogwarts Express.

The Prince had arranged for the London-bound private flight from the airfield closest to Balmoral, and told Harry that the Dursleys would be made aware of Harry's travel plans. Actually, what he said was that he would "take care" of them, and only smiled when Harry asked what that meant. The young wizard was further informed that arrangements had been made for ground transport and dinner once he arrived in London.

The airplane's interior was just as luxurious as some of the rooms in Balmoral. There were a dozen comfortable leather seats, mahogany trimming, and a plush crimson carpet. Although the cockpit door was closed, Harry had been promised a full tour by the flight captain once they were in the air.

The plane's uniformed steward stopped next to the young wizard's seat and showed him how to fasten his seatbelt. "Is this your first flight, then?" he asked.

"No...but it's the first time that I've flown in an airplane."

The steward used a smile to cover his confusion with this response. "Well, then, just sit back and relax, Mister Potter, there's nothing to worry about."

Harry was tempted to ask the steward just how worried he would be if he were about to make his first flight on the back of a hippogriff, or a thestral, but thought better of it.

The plane taxied, then lifted smoothly off the ground and banked into a gentle curve. It felt strange to be flying through the air without the wind in his face and his feet dangling off of a broomstick. After a few minutes, Harry raised enough courage to look out the window and down towards the ground below. The view looked amazingly similar to what he'd seen perched high above Hogwart's quidditch pitch - the green hills and valleys, the lochs and the forests. Harry wondered whether Hogwarts might be nearby.

The Boy-Who-Lived stopped looking for castles and started to look for train tracks. Somewhere down there, Ron and Hermione were aboard the Hogwarts Express. He wondered what they were doing right now, and if they knew that he wasn't on board. Harry hadn't failed to notice Ron's arm around Hermione after the memorial service, and he pondered whether they were using the time to sort out where they stood with each other. His two friends had promised to stay with him at the Dursleys, but he really didn't imagine how his Aunt and Uncle would allow that, and seriously wondered how Ron would survive more than a day or two in a non-magical household.

Wishing to drift away from that topic, he turned away from the window, leaned back into the seat, and drifted off to sleep.

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A few hundred kilometers ahead, the Hogwarts Express snaked through the Yorkshire countryside while Hermione Granger snaked through the aisle of one of its carriages. It was a far different experience than when she conducted patrols at the start of the school year.

That previous autumn, the train was filled with the typical assortment of animated and excited students (except for the first years, who were, of course, terrified). Most of her time had been spent confiscating forbidden items that students were trying to smuggle into Hogwarts (by the end of the trip her bag of goodies would have done a fair job of stocking a branch location of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes).

This trip was, in contrast, quiet. Extremely quiet. The students all seemed to be aware that Hogwarts might not reopen, aware that they might not see their friends and classmates for a very long period of time, and (except for a few Slytherins) aware that Dumbledore's death made their world a far more dangerous place. Once the train pulled out of Hogsmeade Station, it became readily apparent how this awareness was going to manifest itself.

One of the other Muggleborn students had nicely summed it up:

Terror-snogging.

On past trips home Hermione had seen (and been disgusted by) the frantic tonsil-tickling of soon-to-be-separated-for-the-summer couples. But this went well beyond that, both in terms of frequency and intensity. Nearly half of the upper-year students, and far too many of the younger ones seemed to be searching for comfort in the arms of another. Couples who had been together all year, couples she had never seen together before, even couples Hermione would never have paired in a million years. She was glad to have been assigned a car mostly filled with younger students – it would have been dreadful for her to have to get in between, say, Lavender Brown's lips and those of Merlin knows who (or how many).

From an intellectual perspective, it was easy for Hermione to see why this was happening. She had scandalized some of the other prefects when she argued (during a hastily called meeting) that the snogging was actually therapeutic (up to a point). From an emotional perspective, Hermione could see the need as well, and a small part of her longed for a bit of therapy herself.

"But there are limits to enforce," she thought to herself, "and 'snog-free' zones to maintain, and Ron's patrolling a different car, and Harry isn't even on the train...."

Hermione let out a small gasp when that last thought passed her mind. *"Harry? Why did I even think of him? He's my best friend...he's Ginny's boyfriend. Okay, so he did break up with her this morning, but it was Ron who had his arm around me after the service, it was Ron I was so jealous over when he was snogging Lavender Brown, it was Ron, right?"*

It took her more than ten minutes to formulate a rationalization that could stand on its own legs.

Why are the other students snogging? Because they were scared, and they needed to feel safe, and the easiest way to feel safe and secure was in another person's arms. But in her case, it was Harry that always made her feel safe and secure, even without the snogging. Harry – the eleven-year-old boy that saved her life before they were even friends. So, if Harry showed up in the same train of thought as snogging, it really didn't mean that she wanted to snog her best friend.

Terror-snogging is to other students as Harry is to Hermione.

Yes. Of course. That had to be it.

Hermione leaned up against a compartment door. She was scared about what might happen that summer. She was terrified about what needed to happen that summer.

She wanted Harry on that train.

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It was raining in Little Whinging. Hard.

The rain beat down with an intensity that betrayed the new neighbors who had failed to properly clear their gutters. Vernon Dursley noted the ponding along their house's foundation with smug satisfaction, and wondered whether the two men were getting water in their basement.

"Would serve those poofers right," he muttered, to nobody in particular.

And it was that lack of audience, rather than the weather, that was truly souring Vernon's disposition. For once he wanted to bask, to bathe, to *wallow* in the rare differentness of Number Four, Privet Drive. Oh sure, there had been the odd wedding party or two that had hired a fancy car to show off around the neighborhood. But nothing close to the 1937 Rolls Royce Phantom III whose running boards Vernon had one foot set upon, in what he imagined to be a dashing pose.

A white-gloved driver held a large black umbrella over Dursley's head. Given the umbrella's limited size and the awkward pose that Vernon insisted on striking next to the car, one white glove and a bit of sleeve were the only parts of the tuxedoed driver that weren't getting soaked. *"All part of his job,"* Vernon rationalized.

The front door of the house opened tentatively as a second well-dressed man attempted to protect both Petunia Dursley and her son Dudley from the elements. As there wasn't an umbrella in all of England big enough to cover the both of them, the man shuttled Mrs. Dursley to the car first, then returned to keep any rain from striking Dudley, his clip-on tie, and his soon-to-be-autographed boxing gloves.

The invitation to join the current European Heavyweight Boxing Champion for lunch had arrived two weeks ago. Vernon had been forced to call in most of his chits at work to get the day off on such short notice, and Petunia had given up her weekly bridge club meeting, but that was no matter. Their son, the current All-Schools Boxing Champion, was to be personally congratulated and recognized for his success. The car and driver were all part of the package. The only bad part was the fact that they would have to swing by King's Cross station after the event to pick up Vernon's cursed nephew Harry.

The thought of his nephew caused Vernon to scowl. Just a few short weeks and they'd be forever done with the boy, done with his type, and done with all of the freakishness. But not before, of course, he earned his keep. The corpulent Muggle noted with some satisfaction that Harry's list of summer chores was just as long as ever. Even freakish clouds have silver linings.

Vernon looked despondently up at the clouds that were presently shedding rain, then up and down the street, searching for anyone who might be positioned to glimpse his family's due.

An admonishing voice called out from inside the car. "Oh for goodness sake, Vernon, get in or we'll be late!"

Dursley reluctantly ducked into the rear of the Rolls. The two attendants climbed into the front, and the car began its journey towards London.

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Platform 9 ¾ was quiet as the Hogwarts Express pulled into King's Cross Station...for security reasons, parents had been kept on the Muggle side of the brick-walled entrance. Once the all-clear was given, prefects allowed small groups of students to disembark in intervals. Teams of Aurors quickly shepherded each group across the barrier and into the arms of their families. The process was streamlined through Ministry of Magic-arranged "Closed for Repair" signs, floor-to-ceiling tarps and some well-placed Muggle repelling charms.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny were amongst the last leave the train. Siblings were grouped together, and prefects had to ensure that all within their houses were accounted for.

Neither Ginny nor Hermione were all that happy with Ron at that moment. Ginny's ears still stung from his scolding...although Ron hadn't actually caught her snogging, it didn't escape him that she spent most of the trip thigh-against-thigh with Dean Thomas. Worse, she apparently hadn't even looked for Harry, or realized that he had gotten off the train back at Hogsmeade Station.

Hermione was ill at ease for a different reason. Ron had gotten upset when she suggested that the prefects split up one per carriage to facilitate continuous monitoring; he had apparently expected to patrol hand-in-hand. Hermione had thought this to be a tad presumptuous. Sure, he had been there for her during the funeral, and hadn't left her side from there to the Tower and back to the train. There had been, however, no discussion about how things stood between them...whether they were finally looking at themselves as a couple. It was as if Lavender had set the standard for warp speed relationship progression.

"So what are you going to do now that Harry's gone missing?" asked Ron, as another batch of students left the train.

"Besides sending my otter out to chew on his leg until he lets us know that he's safe?" she replied. "I don't know."

"Could always stay with us," Ron said hopefully.

"No," said Hermione, as she sized up his intentions. "I might as well use the time to be with my parents. I'm still underage on the other side, and I'm going to have to coax a permission out of them to stay with Harry."

"Yeah, well...don't think that being of age will make it any easier for me to tell Mum that I'm not staying at the Burrow this summer, much less skiv out on seventh year."

Tonks stepped into the car. "Your turn, guys."

"Heard from Harry?" asked Hermione.

"Nothing yet," the pink-haired Auror replied with a slight smile (for it had been the eighth time that the younger witch had asked). "I'm going to get his trunk to his relatives, then pop back to Hogwarts."

Hermione nodded, as she checked off the last three names on the Gryffindor roster, shooed Crookshanks into his travel box, and began to drag her trunk towards the head of the car.

"What are you doing?" ask Ron. "Forget your age already?" He pointed his wand at his trunk and levitated it towards the car door.

"No worries you haven't," Hermione replied as she dropped her hold on her trunk handle and levitated both her trunk and Ginny's. "You plan on grabbing anything other than your wand this summer?"

"Won't need to with you around, I image," Ron said, wagging his eyebrows.

Ginny's trunk lost altitude and hit Ron behind his knees. He tumbled backward and ended up flat on his back on the trunk's lid.

"But he's so used to grabbing his own wand," Ginny giggled. "Why should he stop now?"

Hermione's smile at Ginny's comment turned into a scowl as she turned towards Ron. She raised her wand towards him, ignoring Ron's look of uncertainty, and cast a shrinking spell on Ginny's trunk. It shrank to the size of a paperback, which caused him to again fall, this time back flat on the floor. Ginny and Tonks laughed as Hermione performed the same spell on her own trunk and placed it in the pocket of her jacket.

"Oy, what about mine?" Ron asked as he rubbed the back of his head.

"Oh," Hermione replied sweetly, "I'll leave that to you. Wouldn't want you to lose your touch."

Ron let out an exasperated groan. He didn't even try to shrink his trunk – he had yet to master that transfiguration charm and didn't dare practice on something that contained most of his worldly possessions. He levitated his trunk again and guided it out onto an empty cart on the platform.

Hermione swore she could hear a loud maternal shriek even before she passed through the wall.

"Ron! Ginny! Come here you two!"

As Hermione walked through the wall she saw Mrs. Weasley smother her two youngest children using arms that looked as if they had been

extended by one of the Twin's products.

"Oh, and Hermione, give me a hug, too," Mrs. Weasley said. "I am so glad that you're all safe and sound."

"Not like you didn't just see us this morning," Ginny muttered.

"Yes, well, I wish you could have floo'd home with us, but what with the security and the lines at Hogsmeade...where's Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked, suddenly realizing his absence.

"Don't really know," replied Ron. "Tonks said he was pulled off the train to meet with the Headmistress just before we left Hogsmeade."

"Headmistress? Well, yes, I suppose so," said Mrs. Weasley. She grabbed Ron and Ginny's chins and asked, "How are you two doing?"

"Fine," Ron and Ginny replied, in a tone of voice that suggested otherwise.

"Nothing some home cooking can't improve upon," said Mrs. Weasley. "Once we get home, that is."

"Mom, don't tease me, you know the train doesn't have a dining car!" Ron whined. He didn't mention the fact that without Harry on board to pay that they'd been forced to let the snack trolley go by.

"We have to stop by St. Mungo's," said Mrs. Weasley. "Your father is trying to sort things out about Bill. Besides, once we use their floo connection we'll be home quicker than if we had taken a car."

"Why is Bill at hospital?" asked Hermione. "We saw him at the funeral...didn't Madame Pomfrey released him from the infirmary?"

"Yes she did," said Mrs. Weasley, with a sharp edge to her voice. "But it seems that some busybodies from the Department of Magical Creatures have suddenly lost faith in her professional judgment. They've insisted he stay at St. Mungo's until the next full moon."

"Oh, no!" said Hermione, "Fleur must be so upset...that's what, ten days away? What about the wedding plans?"

"So did they decide to call it off?" Ginny asked, full of hope.

"Certainly not, Dear," said Molly with an air of certainty. "Nothing is going to stop their happiness...not that vile Greyback, or Scrimgeour, or anyone. Besides," she said trying to lighten her mood, "it's not as if the groom does a lot of the planning, right?"

A call came from across the hall. "Hermione! Over here!"

The bushy-haired witch looked up to see her parents waving at her. "Excuse, me, Mrs. Weasley," she said with a happy but puzzled look on her face.

"Yes, of course," Molly replied. "Don't be a stranger to the Burrow this summer, Dear."

Hermione nodded as she turned to Ron and said, "I'll let you know if I hear anything." She then gave him an awkward hug and ran towards her parents. For some reason, they were wearing ridiculously oversized red-rimmed spectacles and were terribly overdressed; her mother was wearing an evening gown, while her father was dressed in a tuxedo.

"Mum, Dad, it's so good to see you," Hermione said, after a few necessary moments of smothering. "But really, you didn't have to get all dressed up just for me."

"And why not?" her mother asked with spring in her voice. "Like the latest trend in fashion eyewear?"

"Let me guess...they've got Muggle repellents set up and those glasses are what got you by them."

"Right in one, Sweetie," said Mr. Granger. "It really is too bad that they're collecting them at the exit. We've got tickets to see Sir Elton at the Palladium next month, and these are so Yellow Brick Road-ish."

"Oh, Daddy, *really*," said Hermione. "So you've explained the glasses, now what about the formal wear?"

"You'll see," said her father, with a grin plastered across his face.

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Hermione's confusion was compounded once they left the station. Rather than cross the street to the car park, they steered her towards the taxi rank.

"Where's the car, Dad?"

"Oh, it's at home in the garage," her father replied with a mischievous smile. Just then a black Bentley limousine splashed through the puddled remnants of a rain shower and pulled in front of the queue. The car's boot door popped open as the uniformed driver got out and tipped his hat.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," the man said to Hermione. "Do you have any trunks to stow?"

Hermione looked at both of her parents, her mouth opening and closing wordlessly.

"What?" Mr. Granger asked. "Can't we spoil the greatest wit...greatest student of her generation once in a while?"

Mrs. Granger chimed in. "Erm...we should keep Crookshanks with us, Dear... where's your trunk?"

Too surprised to be thinking properly, Hermione reflexively reached into her pocket and pulled out the shrunken trunk. She caught her breath when she realized what she had done, but, on a whim, handed the box to the driver with a smile. "*They want to be cheeky, then so will I,*" she thought to herself.

The unflappable driver didn't miss a beat. "Very good, Miss Granger," he said, as he took the box from Hermione and placed it in the boot. The evil grin she gave her parents produced some chuckles.

"Touché," said her mother, as the driver held open the rear door and the Granger family climbed into the back seat. Crookshanks whined, but Hermione didn't let him out of his box. As the Bentley pulled out into traffic she decided to give up trying to pry any more information from her parents; words would have had a tough time getting past their Cheshire Cat grins.

A small part of Hermione was bothered by how her parents were acting. Although owls had been sent to all Hogwarts parents informing them of Dumbledore's death and memorial service, they hadn't mentioned it at all. But she certainly wasn't going to say anything...it was too easy to give them the benefit of the doubt, and to assume that their antics were due in part to her long absence. Hermione also knew that she wasn't the typical boarding-school student home on hols; it felt more like a respite from a military tour of duty, and they were no doubt ecstatic just to see her alive.

That said, she was happy to be back with her parents - just not goofy-happy. But if they wanted to be goofy-happy, she had no problem compartmentalizing her worries for a while. It was something she had learned to do very well whilst standing by Harry's side.

They tried to find things to talk about, but the conversation soon faltered. On other trips from King's Cross the Granger family sedan was filled with stories about Hogwarts and Hermione's world, but their Muggle driver put a damper on that type of discussion.

Hermione's mother doled out bits and pieces of news about her cousins, the neighbors, and the school-aged children of their surgery staff. It was the same thing every year – cousin Barry just graduated and was going to uni at Nottingham, only one of the Thompson twins passed their driver's examination on first go, her neighbor Lizzie just got her braces removed, and so on.

Her mother always hoped that these updates would strengthen the tenuous string that kept her attached to the Muggle world. Hermione, however, had long realized that the stories produced the opposite effect. Hers was, quite simply, a world turned upside down, and the stories only emphasized that fact. Her "normal" was a world in which ghosts and goblins and Dark Lords ran about; it was the world of computers, and dental floss, and angst-filled pimply-faced teens that was unreal.

"Well," Hermione thought to herself as the car moved through traffic, "*maybe the teenage angst part is the same.*"

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In a different part of London the passengers within another black limousine were anything but goofy-happy.

The Dursleys had spent two hours waiting for Dudley's hero. At first they were elated – they'd been taken to a ballroom at the Savoy, and it had all seemed so *posh*, so *West End* – Petunia had already exposed two rolls of film for bragging material with the neighbors. The elation had turned to frustration as time dragged on, however. They hadn't even been fed. And then came word that the meeting place had been changed, and that they needed to be driven to a different location. Vernon's face had turned crimson, and his neck bulged out against his shirt collar.

Only Dudley's pleas to do whatever was needed for him to collect his autograph kept his father's temper in check, at least until Vernon realized that the car they were now riding in was driving around in circles.

"Alright," he bellowed, with face turned puce, "I've had enough of this. Take us back home."

"But father," Dudley lamented.

"But father nothing," Vernon replied. "It's clear to me that someone has played a nasty joke on us...Oy! Did you hear me up there, bring us back home!"

The man in the car's passenger seat turned around to face Vernon. "I'm afraid that's not possible, sir. Just sit back, and you'll be at your meeting in a few minutes."

"Meeting with whom?" Vernon shouted. "I said, take us home...or are you holding us against our will?"

"Sorry, sir," the man replied, "it will all be made clear at your meeting."

"Meeting with whom, I ask you again!" Vernon cried out. He stopped for a moment to wrap himself around a thought that turned his red face a bit paler.

"You...you aren't *those* kind of people are you?"

The man looked at him questioningly. "What kind of *those* people are you talking about?"

"You know," Vernon replied, "one of those... *Freaks* ...like Dumbledore.... you know... *wizards*?"

"Wizards?" the man said incredulously. "You're asking me if I'm a wizard?"

"Yeah, that's right."

The man broke out into a laugh and turned towards the driver. "Hey Gerry, did you here that? This bloke thinks we're bleeding wizards!"

He turned back to face Vernon with a sneer. "That's right, sir, you found us out, ...caught us with our wizard's robes down, you did. My name is Merlin and my friend over there is Tinkerbell."

"Clap if you believe in fairies," the driver said with a laugh.

Vernon turned red again. "I demand you return us to our home!"

"Alright, tubby, I've had enough of you," the man said. "Sit back, and shut yer mush." He reached into his coat and withdrew a handgun. "Or I might have to use my wand."

Vernon quickly sat back in his seat.

"That's better," the man said as he holstered his firearm. Nodding towards a suddenly nauseous Dudley, he added, "Oy, Tubby...don't go making a mess, we just got the upholstery redone."

Dudley whimpered, but managed to keep his stomach down.

The Dursleys didn't say a word for the rest of their trip. They were too scared to see much either, else they might have noticed the black Beefeater hats worn by red-uniformed guards, as the car pulled off the road and through the gates of a military barracks.

Chapter 3 – Knight Protectors of the Realm

Hermione didn't fail to recognize her location as saluting members of the Queen's Guard allowed their limousine access through the main gates of Buckingham Palace. From that point on she was in fairytale land. Doormen rushed to open the door of their car and Beefeaters sprung to attention as they walked up the Palace steps. Someone introduced herself as Crookshank's hostess for the evening, and carried him off for some feline pampering. A separate escort led them through the obscenely ornate main entrance and up a red-carpeted staircase. Hermione found opulence wherever she looked.

"This is unreal," she told her parents.

"Well," said her father, "for a girl that has flown on a hippo-giraffe that is saying something, isn't it?"

Hermione giggled. "They're called hippogriffs, Daddy."

But even her parents took a moment to take in their surroundings. The room they'd been shown into had gold-trimmed walls and was furnished with eighteenth-century antique chaises and ottomans trimmed in gold. Two chandeliers, each at least ten feet in diameter, hung from a gold-trimmed ceiling. The floors were carpeted in an antique Oriental rug large enough to cover the King's Cross meeting hall. And the artwork was stunning even if it was static; life-sized portraits of kings and queens throughout the ages, along with what Hermione recognized as works by Rembrandt, VerMeer, and Reubens.

Their escort left them with word that someone else would be with them shortly. Hermione walked into the room, expecting at any moment to have museum guards materialize and scold her for touching the furniture. There was a fire within a marble-tiled fireplace set against the far wall. Sitting next to that fire was a person whom at first glance didn't appear out of place, given his formal attire.

It was the unruly mop of black hair that shook Hermione out of her "every-girl-wants-to-be-a-princess" mindset.

The teen-aged witch tore across the room with a shout and tackled her best friend as he stood to greet her. The force of this hug knocked him back down onto the chair.

Harry smiled; he'd been in worst places recently than lost in Hermione Granger's mass of hair.

"Oh, Harry," she cried into his shoulder, "Where have you been? I was so worried about you when Tonks told us you weren't on the train!"

The black-haired wizard tilted his head sideways to get a partial view of Hermione's parents. With his arms wrapped around her, he had to blow a sizeable chunk of her hair away from his face in order to clear his throat. "It's very nice to meet you again, Mr. and Mrs. Granger," he said with a smile.

Hermione jerked her head off of Harry's shoulder and looked at him crossly.

"Oh...nice to see you too, Hermione," he said. The mock sincerity earned him a punch in the arm.

"Now Hermionikins," her father laughed, as he walked towards the pair. "How am I going to be able to shake his hand if you break the arm that's attached?"

"Shake it nice and hard, please," she replied. "And maybe squeeze some sense into him before he tries to take off again without his friends."

"Hermionikins?" asked a grinning wizard.

Never you mind, Mr. Potter,” Hermione replied, as she pulled her friend to his feet.

“How did you get here, Harry?” Mr. Granger asked as he shook the young wizard’s hand. “Hermione told us you weren’t on the train.”

“I flew.”

“Flew?” Hermione asked incredulously. “In broad daylight?”

“Yeah, it was brilliant.”

“On a broom?”

“No, on a Gulfstream, silly.”

Hermione frowned. “A jet? How did you arrange that?”

“It was the...well, a friend of Dumbledore’s,” her best friend replied. “All in all much more comfortable than the Firebolt...pleasant meal, comfy nap, and I didn’t have to land every time I needed to use the loo. They even let me fly it for a bit.”

“They did?” asked Mrs. Granger.

“Yeah, well, once we were in the air and cruising. Funny, the pilot told me that I was a natural at flying.”

“Imagine that,” said Mr. Granger with a laugh.

Harry laughed as well. “I wasn’t too sure at first. Couldn’t even think about magic, or else I’d have probably fried all of the avionics. But they let me dive, and move the rudders, and they explained all of the instruments for me...Mr. Weasley would have thought he had died and gone to Muggle Heaven.”

“Harry,” said Hermione, “this is just too weird. Mom and Dad all dressed up with a car that takes us to Buckingham Palace, only to find you here in black tie after using an airplane to get home from Hogwarts? Will somebody please tell me what’s going on?”

“You’ll see,” said Harry with a grin.

“Now that’s just what we keep telling her, but will she listen?” asked Mr. Granger dryly.

The French doors opened at the end of the room and a well-dressed man approached them.

“Oh, Brian,” said Harry. “I’d like you to meet my friend Hermione Granger and her parents.”

He turned and grinned at Hermione. “Yes ,” he teased wordlessly, *“I’m on a first name basis with the Palace staff as well .”*

“Thank you, Harry,” Hermione’s mother said, “but we’ve already met Mr. Willox.”

It was her parent’s turn to fall under Hermione’s evil eye.

“Good evening, Miss Granger, and welcome.” the man said to Hermione. “Your mother thought that after your travel you might want to freshen up a bit, and perhaps - well, she gave us a few things this morning in case you might like to change?”

Hermione tried to articulate something but couldn’t manage anything more than an open-mouthed “Huh?”

“It’s okay, Hermione,” said Harry. “Just go with the flow...they did the same for me.”

Hermione’s mother grabbed her hand and led her out of the room. “Listen to your friend, dear, and flow with Brian and me towards the Palace powder room.”

Once they alone, Harry and Mr. Granger spent a moment walking around the room examining the artwork. Harry felt more than a little awkward.

It was Mr. Granger that broke the ice.

“So how long have you known?”

“Erm, I don’t really know what I know, Sir,” Harry replied. “For all of the teasing I was giving your daughter, I don’t really have an idea what’s going to happen much past dinner. How long have you known?”

“We got the invitation about two weeks ago, and Brian visited this morning with some more details.”

“Two weeks?”

“Yes, does that mean anything to you?”

Harry paused for a moment. “Only that this visit was likely arranged by Dumbledore before he...”

“Oh, Harry,” Mr. Granger said, “I’m so sorry for your loss. Hermione’s told us how close you were to your Headmaster.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Harry...there’s so much I’d like to ask you, but now is certainly not...”

“No, that’s alright, Sir. As much as Hermione’s done for me, as much as she’s risked...you’ve risked.... it’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Mr. Granger replied. “I hope you don’t think I’m trying to go behind Hermione’s back, but she’s told us that owl mail can’t be trusted anymore, and she’s no doubt afraid we’d refuse to let her return to Hogwarts if she tells us too much.”

“I understand, Sir. She’s very lucky to have two parents that care so much for her.”

Mr. Granger nodded, then thought for a moment. “We were told that Dumbledore died during an attack on the castle by the Death Eaters...is it true that he was murdered by one of your instructors?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “our former potions professor, Snape. Dumbledore trusted him, even though he used to be a Death Eater. He’d been acting as a double agent– spying for us as he was pretending to spy for Voldemort....only he wasn’t pretending.”

“Was Hermione involved...in the fighting....was he there?”

“Not really,” Harry said. “She was guarding a part of the castle away from the fight...stunned by Snape before she knew that he’d turned...and as far as we know, Voldemort wasn’t directly involved.”

“No, I’m sorry, I meant the one that tried to...well, the one that attacked Hermione.”

Harry winced as he realized that Mr. Granger was asking about the previous years’ attack at the Department of Mysteries – the night Sirius died and Hermione was almost killed by one of Voldemort’s Death Eaters.

“Dolohov wasn’t there,” he replied softly.

“Harry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean too...well I guess I should have expected that, and you should be proud tonight rather than despondent.”

“I don’t feel very proud right now, Sir.”

“Well you should, you know,” Mr. Granger replied. “Hermione’s proud of you, and we’re proud of the way that you’ve shouldered what life’s thrown at the both of you.”

“But it’s not fair that she has that burden,” Harry replied. “I was marked for this mission as a baby...it’s a destiny I can’t shake. But she doesn’t have to...”

“Oh yes she does,” Mr. Granger countered. “Hermione has made that quite clear to her mother and myself. Frankly, from all that I’ve learned about your world she’s always going to be safer by your side... if you hadn’t rescued her she’d have been a troll’s Halloween snack, right?”

“Yes, but it was Ron who clubbed the troll on the head...”

“Only after a very brave eleven year-old boy jumped on his back and stuffed his wand up the troll’s nose, right?”

“Yes, but...”

“Enough with the ‘yes-buts,’ Harry,” Mr. Granger replied. “Hermione’s told us Voldemort would kill all of the Muggleborn witches and wizards if he could...was she right?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then Hermione would be at risk even if she did nothing.”

Harry thought about what Mr. Granger said.

“The girls will be back soon...let me just say that I hope that we get to see a lot of you this summer. And I hope that if there’s any way that Emily and I can help that you’ll let us. Fair enough?”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you again, sir.”

They returned to their artwork inspections as Harry thought about what Hermione’s father had said. It wasn’t as if Hermione hadn’t told him that she was proud of him before, but what did it mean for her to tell that to her parents?

Harry’s jaw dropped when Hermione returned to the room with her mother.

Mr. Granger whistled softly. “Emily, where did my little girl go, and who is this Velo on your arm?”

“They’re called Veelas, daddy,” Hermione, said as she walked up and kissed him on the cheek. “But thank you, anyway.”

It was déjà vu all over again for Harry...Hermione was wearing the same dress robes that she had worn at the Yule Ball. Except they couldn’t be the same...*that was two years ago*, Harry thought, *and she’s grown taller since then, and...and filled out in ways school robes don’t show..*

Hermione bore in on Harry's reaction.

"So you remember?"

"How could I ever forget," Harry replied. All of the discomfort built up during his talk with her father melted away at his feet, and was replaced by a rather warm feeling.

"Erm...Mr. and Mrs. Granger, may I steal your daughter away for a minute?" Harry asked.

"You've had her for the past nine months and still need more time?" Mr. Granger asked with a smile. "Okay, you got a minute...just know that I'll be looking at the most beautiful witch of her generation the whole time."

"You and me both, Sir."

"Oh, stop, you two!" Hermione said, as Harry led her to a different part of the room and whispered.

"How did your mother, I mean, they shouldn't have fit you, I mean...not that you're bigger now...well you are...but in a nice way, but..."

Hermione put one hand on her hip, raised an eyebrow at Harry and smiled as he desperately tried to talk himself out of his mess. She finally came to his rescue.

"They're the same robes, Harry...Mum sent them to Madam Malkin's last week hoping to find the same style in a different size, but they only needed a resizing spell."

"Of, course," Harry said. "I'm sorry, Hermione – I guess it's hard...hard to talk when your breath's been... erm, speaking as a friend...of course... did I ever tell you that night that you looked beautiful?"

"You didn't have to," Hermione said sweetly. "Your eyes said it for you, just as they are now...as a friend of course. And thanks, Harry."

"I'm just worried that Krum's going to pop out of the fireplace and spirit you away..."

"Or that Ginny would show up?" Hermione asked.

Harry frowned, and Hermione kicked herself. She had only been trying to play along, and let Harry know that he looked handsome in his evening wear as well, but *Merlin!* How stupid and insensitive could she be?

"Or Ron?" Harry asked. "Maybe he should be here meeting your parents instead of me?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry, I was stupid to say that."

"No, you weren't, especially now that you and Ron..."

"You and Ron what, Harry?"

"Well, just that..."

Hermione grabbed both of her friend's hands.

"Harry, you and I need to sit down and have a long chat about things. But not now...Mum and Dad are looking at us, and there's some flow we have to go with, right?"

"Yeah, guess you're right."

Hermione then surprised Harry by kissing him on his cheek. "If whoever set this up had wanted Ron here tonight he'd have been here. But he's not, and that's fine, because there's no boy I'd rather my parents get to know more than you."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Now let's head back over there and let Daddy dote on me some more."

Hermione grabbed Harry's hand as they walked back to her parents, who were trying (but failing) to act as if they wouldn't have paid anything for a pair of extendable ears.

When dinner was announced they were led into a small but lavishly appointed dining room with a table set for four. Atop the table were the finest crystal, china and silverware that any of them had ever seen. The meal served on this dinnerware was equal in its sumptuousness, with main courses of roast pheasant, braised lamb chops and poached salmon.

Harry told them about his day in between the fork selection lessons that Hermione discretely provided. Not really knowing how much Hermione had told her parents about Hogwarts and Voldemort, he spoke in general terms. Harry did say that had arrived at the Palace about an hour before they had met. Hermione in turn talked about the train trip, and Bill's confinement to St. Mungo's.

Once they had finished eating, Household staff silently poured tea.

"I have to admit," Harry said with a chuckle, "that this was a far better meal with a far better company than what I had a right to expect for tonight."

"No, Harry," Hermione replied. "You had every right to expect more than the horrible treatment you've been given all of these years."

"Speaking of horrible," Roger Granger said, "we didn't see the Dursleys at the platform this evening."

"Our hosts took care of them," replied Harry. "You'll see them in a bit, I imagine."

"They're here?" asked Hermione.

"Um, somewhere near here, I think...Brian asked me if I wanted them to join us for dinner, but I suggested that my Aunt and Uncle might prefer their own company."

"That's too bad," said Mrs. Granger. "Hermione's spoke of them...I would have liked to have seen if they really did sport cloven hooves and horns."

"Don't give your daughter any ideas," Harry replied with a laugh.

"Now, son," said Mr. Granger, "...erm, you don't mind if I call you that, do you?"

Hermione looked at her dad with saucer eyes. "Dad!"

"No, Mr. Granger, I don't." replied Harry, smiling at Hermione's embarrassment in an attempt to cover his own. "Although, it's a bit of a surprise given how little you know me."

"How little we know you?" asked Mrs. Granger. She chuckled. "Harry, some day you'll have to read the owl posts Hermione sent us during her first few years at Hogwarts. I've got them stored back home."

"Mum!" said Hermione, turning a shade of red that Harry thought complemented her periwinkle robes quite nicely. "You didn't! You can't!"

"Emily's right, young man" Hermione's father chimed in. "Took me three months into the first term before I realized that there were students at her school that weren't named Harry Potter."

"Arrrrgh..." Hermione exclaimed with exasperation. "What's next...the photo albums?"

"Oh, no" Mr. Granger replied. "We've got those saved for when Harry comes to visit us."

Hermione scowled.

Mr. Granger continued with gleam in his eyes. "As I said before, Harry, I hope we have the opportunity to get to know you better this summer. Hermione has never had any Hogwarts friends visit her at home, and I'd love to get the *real* story about what she's been up to the past six years."

"Dad!"

Brian entered the room before Hermione could be embarrassed any further and announced that it was time for the evening's entertainment.

As they left the table, Harry stepped back so as to give Hermione the chance to walk next to her parents. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, however, had different ideas, and shooed him towards their daughter and let the two of them take the lead. Hermione leaned back and raised her eyebrows, giving her parents the universal teenager sign for "*Mom, Dad, stop embarrassing me!*" That didn't prevent her, though, from turning towards Harry and grabbing his arm with a sly smile.

"Harry Potter," she said, "if you aren't going to tell me where we're going or what's happening next, then I'm going to insist that you lend me an arm for comfort."

The black-haired wizard laughed, and replied, "Hermione...you know you never need a reason to ask for my arm."

The teen-aged witch looked into Harry's eyes as if to divine some meaning. This kept her from seeing the smiles and knowing looks on the faces of each of her parents as they followed behind.

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Harry and the three Grangers were ushered into a lavishly intimate drawing room where a dozen chairs trimmed in gold satin had been placed in two rows. Brian directed Hermione's parents towards the first row of chairs, and then led Hermione and Harry to spots facing the far wall a few feet in front of the Grangers. He smiled, wished them luck, and took a seat behind Hermione's parents.

A hidden door opened in the wall in front of the two teenagers, and several men dressed in ornate crimson and gold suits entered. Behind them strode a matronly woman who stepped in front of Harry and Hermione and smiled.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, allow me to welcome you and your guests to Buckingham Palace. We should be ready to start in a moment."

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but start what?" asked Hermione.

"Why, the ceremony, of course," replied the woman. "Ah...but you still don't know, do you?"

"We're afraid not."

"Well, then, apologies are in order. The Prince thought it might be a rather nice surprise for you. I'm sure Her Majesty would have talked about it at dinner had it been possible. You see, there was a state dinner with the King of Norway that had been planned for months, but the Prince thought it best if we proceeded directly upon your return to London."

Another member of the palace staff strode through the doorway and whispered into the woman's ear.

"Right, then, here we go," she told Hermione and Harry.

"But what are we supposed to do?" asked Harry.

"Don't worry, Mr. Potter," the woman replied. "Just follow Her Majesty's lead. She's done these things hundreds of times, you know."

The Queen strode into the room, followed by a large retinue of staff. She wore a long navy blue evening gown and white long-sleeved gloves. Hermione looked like she was about to faint. Harry, having already met the Queen's son that morning, found it a bit easier to go with what was now a very royal flow.

The monarch stepped towards Harry and Hermione and offered them a welcome, and a personal apology for having missed the opportunity to dine with them. She then took a few steps back onto a small platform that four members of the Palace staff had placed down on the floor.

"Well," she announced, "shall we begin?"

The Queen looked at Harry. "Mr. Potter, tradition holds that a knight candidate may choose the sword by which his or her title is conferred."

The two teen-agers looked at each other with shock, having finally realized what was about to happen. Hermione turned to her parents, only to find them beaming smiles back at her.

An attendant approached the Queen's side, holding a sheathed sword. "We use my father's sword quite often," she continued, one hand gesturing to her side, "it's a very nice sword...perfectly adequate...but, perhaps, Mr. Potter, you might prefer a different instrument?"

Harry's head snapped up slightly; the Queen was looking at him with the kind of sparkle in her eyes that he often saw in Dumbledore's. He stole a peek at Hermione; there was nothing stolen about the wide-eyed stare that bounced back. She looked like she was going to kill him, just as soon as the Queen was out of blood splatter range.

Harry looked back at the Queen and smiled. "Thank you, Your Majesty. With no disrespect meant towards your father or his sword, I believe I do."

The black-haired wizard swung his rucksack in front of him and loosened the straps. He flipped the cover back to reveal the jewel-encrusted hilt of a silver bladed sword.

Harry looked at Hermione with another smile; she was silently mouthing the words "*You don't – You aren't! – You can't!*" in rapid-fire repetition. His smile widened as he unsheathed the Sword of Gryffindor and offered it to the Queen.

The monarch grabbed hold of the sword's hilt and gracefully swung the blade to one side in small waist-level arcs.

"Ah," she softly cooed. "It is magnificent. We have heard legends about this sword," she said. She looked down at Harry. "Perhaps there will come time when a restored Lord Gryffindor will wield it?"

Harry looked at the Queen, gobsmacked by her statement.

"We believe," she stated, "that it is time for the other witnesses to be brought forth."

Harry and Hermione heard doors opening behind them and turned as the Dursleys were escorted into the room. They didn't look very happy. Two large men prodded them towards the second row of chairs; one had what appeared to be a chopstick in his hand, and was waving it around with a manic grin. Vernon eyes narrowed into tiny slits and his teeth clenched when he saw Harry standing with the Queen. The condition of Petunia's teeth was indeterminable, as they were presently covered by lips fixed in an oval-shaped open-mouthed silent scream.

The Queen smiled and announced, "We welcome all of you Buckingham Palace, and to this ceremony. We are most pleased that while this is an event is necessarily a non-public occasion that these two young people are still able to celebrate with those closest to them."

Hermione gave Harry a disapproving glance as he looked back at his Aunt and Uncle and stifled a snort.

Still smiling, the Queen continued. "Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, please kneel."

Hermione and Harry followed the command as a herald unrolled a lambskin parchment and read out:

"Oye, Oye, Oye. Be it made known amongst those present, and throughout the land at such time deemed prudent, that Harry James Potter, son of James and Lily Potter, and Hermione Jane Granger, daughter of Roger and Emily Granger, have performed heroic acts in the defense of the Realm, and demonstrated loyalty, bravery and strength of spirit worthy of emulation for all across our lands. To honor these actions and their strength of character, Her Royal Majesty, the Queen, hereby invites them to join the Most Royal Order of Arthur as Knight Protectors of the Realm."

The herald rolled up the parchment as two members of the palace staff lifted red silk hoods over Hermione's and Harry's heads. Sewn on the outside of each elongate hood was a gold lion reared on hind legs.

As the hoods were being placed around their necks they heard a not so quiet “No!” shouted behind them. They turned to see Harry’s Aunt and Uncle’s beet-red faces trembling with anger and confusion. The two men that had escorted them into the room clamped down upon Vernon and Petunia’s shoulders with ham-fists. In addition, the man behind Vernon placed one end of his chopstick into the entrance of Vernon’s left ear. It was the last they heard from the Harry’s Aunt and Uncle during the ceremony.

Dudley was, frankly, too ill educated and oblivious to realize what was happening. His little brain was wondering when the Queen was going to introduce him to his boxing hero.

“Today you are invited to join the Most Royal Order of Arthur,” said the Queen, in a clear voice that filled the room. “This is the oldest Royal Order within our Empire...and also the least well known. The Order was established in the earliest days of the Realm by those pledged to battle Evil as members of King Arthur’s Round Table. Over the centuries, members of the Order of Arthur have fought in the greatest battles never described by any historian.”

“At least,” the Queen said as she looked down at Harry and Hermione with a smile, “by those who wrote the Muggle history books.”

The staff members who had given Hermione and Harry their hoods returned to the Queen’s side with two boxes. Within each were identical jewel-encrusted medallions fashioned in gold and platinum. The starburst-shaped badges bore crossed swords and wands within their centres.

“Of the many that sat with Arthur at his Round Table, twelve were both warrior and wizard. It is said that King Arthur created the Order as a tribute to these twelve and their loyal service, and that Merlin himself created its emblems. Unlike the badges of most other Orders, these emblems are returned once a Knight Protector passes on, so that they can in turn be passed along to a worthy successor.”

“Begging your pardon, Your Royal Majesty,” said Hermione, “but does that mean that these are two of the original twelve?”

“Yes, Miss Granger,” said the Queen, “these badges are more than 1,200 years old.”

Hermione looked at the relics with awe.

The Queen continued. “All who are here today should understand that given the nature of the service performed by those within the Order of Merlin it is necessarily a secret society. We note with sadness that with Sir Albus’s passing, there is only one other living member. Were he in better health, Sir Evan would have been here today to celebrate with you and your families. We hope that you will have opportunity to meet with him soon.”

Hermione and Harry looked at each other with astonishment, each wondering who this Sir Evan could be and what he had done to join an Order that included Albus Dumbledore.

The Queen raised Godric’s sword into the air. “Now for the fun part,” she stated.

Tapping the flat edge of the sword on Harry’s shoulders, the Queen said, “Harry James Potter, I dub thee Sir Harry, Knight Protector, Order of Arthur.”

The Queen then moved to face Hermione and placed three similar taps on her shoulders. “Hermione Jane Granger, I dub thee Dame Hermione, Knight Protector, Order of Arthur.”

The monarch then took a step back, and said, “Arise, Sir Harry and Dame Hermione, and go forth into the Realm with certain knowledge of Our support.”

The Queen stepped towards Harry and returned the sword. She then shook their hands and said, “We understand that you have had a long day, and we shan’t keep you any longer. Know that you will always find welcome in our presence wherever that might be.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” said Harry.

One of the Queen’s assistants gave her a third box, which she passed to Hermione. “We are also aware that there is a third who deserves Royal recognition, and who will no doubt be at your sides as you face the challenges that lie before you. Were he here today, we would be bestowing upon him similar honors. We hope that Mr. Ronald Weasley and those others who are...shall we say...fully vested in the wizarding world...might some day be publicly recognized by us without fear of repercussions. In the interim, should you think it safe, we ask that you convey to Mr. Weasley our thanks, and on behalf of the Crown and our Government provide him with this token of gratitude.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Hermione said. “We will.”

Mr. and Mrs. Granger were directed by the Palace staff towards the Queen. She shook their hand and congratulated them on their daughter’s accomplishments. A photographer stepped up to take a few pictures of the Queen, Harry and the Grangers.

Petunia Dursley, totally forgetting that it was because of Harry that she was even in the same room as the Queen, rushed towards the monarch for picture proof. The Queen glanced up at Petunia’s direction, but seemed to stare right through her as she turned and left the room. Petunia’s view was blocked by several members of the Household staff before her camera’s flash was fully charged.

Noticing that Petunia’s efforts had failed, Hermione broke away from her parents and walked straight up to Harry’s aunt. “I’m sorry, but were you hoping to bring home a souvenir?” she asked cloyingly. “Here, let me help you.”

Hermione reached into her dress robes, discretely pulled out her wand, and flicked it towards Petunia. Harry look over to see what trouble she might be getting into and broke out into a laugh. His aunt was throwing the quietest fit he’d ever seen from her, apparently thanks to a *Silencio* spell. Hermione had also managed to transfigure his aunt’s dress into a long white shift with flashing red letters on the front that read:

“My nephew was knighted by the Queen and all I got was this lousy t-shirt.”

Harry walked over to Hermione and gave her a hug. Turning towards his Aunt, he took great pride in introducing her to the brightest witch of his generation.

Chapter 4 – Karma’s Little Helpers

The Palace had made arrangements for Hermione’s parents to spend the night in town at the Savoy. Mr. and Mrs. Granger had amazed their daughter with their willingness to let her spend the night at the Dursleys. It had, in fact, been harder to convince Harry, as he had argued quite strongly that she should be with her family. He only relented after Hermione promised that she would spend the following day with her parents.

The Dursleys were not at all happy at the prospect of Hermione’s stay, but the Crown impressed upon them the fact that they really had no say in the matter. Vernon nearly popped the collar button of his dress shirt when he learned that Brian Willox, the Palace staff member that had coordinated the knighting ceremony, would also be staying with them. Brian had noted that the Queen wished to ensure that Sir Harry’s stay wasn’t an “inconvenience.”

When Vernon made it clear that the Queen’s wishes alone weren’t going to hold sway, Brian quietly slipped the man a piece of paper. Upon this paper was a list...a list of twenty people who all had connections to the House of Windsor. Four had been knighted, twelve had dined with the Royal Family, eighteen belonged to the same club as a Royal, three had children with royal godparents; one of them was even two-hundred thirty-seventh on the succession list. These people all had one more thing in common, however.

Each and every one of them had the power to ruin Vernon’s career at Grunnings.

His supervising director, three members of the Grunnings corporate board, a half dozen board members from Grunnings’s corporate parent, and key decision makers from their eight largest accounts. And any of them could put Harry’s Uncle on the curb.

Vernon Dursley was too stupid to be afraid of magical threats, but he was plenty smart enough to recognize why the list had been provided for his review. It was blackmail; pure, simple and effective. Familiar as well; Vernon had been no stranger to similar tactics as he had climbed up the Grunnings corporate ladder.

He returned the sheet of paper to Brian very quietly.

With an eye towards getting the blood protections back in place as soon as possible, Aunt Petunia was asked to join Harry, Hermione and Brian for the trip to Little Whinging. Vernon and Dudley rode home in the back of a trailing van.

As they were driven towards Surrey, Brian Willox answered their questions in a straightforward, but slightly reticent manner, acting as if the details of his life should be unimportant to those he’d been assigned to serve. At the age of 38, he had just recently been awarded his twenty-year’s service pin as a member of the royal staff. He was the latest in a long line of Willoxes to work at the Palace; his great-great grandfather Edwin had been a groomsman in the early years of Victoria’s reign. Brian had started as a cook’s assistant in the kitchens, and after ten years had worked his way up to the position of associate chef. In what he considered a beneficent stroke of luck, one of the Queen’s grandchildren had made it a habit to sneak into the kitchens, and over time had taken a liking to Brian. That relationship led to a position on the personal staff of the Prince’s family, where he had worked ever since. While Brian had no immediate family, he did know someone whose occupation no doubt had something to do with his new assignment...his younger sister, Christina, was a Muggleborn witch that ran a Wizard’s Bed and Breakfast in Coventry.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Knight Protectors of the Realm, Part 1 (part 2)

"Oh my," Hermione exclaimed, when she learned this news, "so that means you're a card-carrying Muggle?"

"Yes indeed, Dame Hermione," Brian said, as he fished a small card from his billfold and handed it to her.

Harry leaned over to get a glimpse. At first glance it appeared to be a "Loyal Customer" discount card for a chain of Muggle home electronic stores. With a tap of Hermione's wand, however, the card morphed into a parchment containing magical images of Brian and his sister, their names and addresses, and the following text:

The Muggle bearer of this parchment is an immediate family member of a witch or wizard citizen of the United Kingdom of Magical Great Britain. As such, they may lawfully retain knowledge of the wizarding world and possess magical items in quantities up to those limits established by Exemption 13.B subpart (f) of Protection of Muggles Act and the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy.

Amelia Bones, Head
Department of Magical Law Enforcement
The United Kingdom of Magical Great Britain

"Wow," said Harry, "I've never seen one of these before."

"Really?" asked Hermione. "That's a bit odd. My parents got their cards the day after I accepted my invitation to attend Hogwarts."

They looked up at Petunia, who was trying desperately to feign ignorance of their conversation and its content. "Yes, we received those cards as well," she finally replied. "About as easy to ignore as those blasted invitations."

Harry wanted to ask Brian more about what he knew, and who else at the Palace was in the know, but hesitated with Petunia sitting across from him. Hermione urged Harry to close his eyes for a few minutes' rest. Without asking, Brian took Crookshanks out of his travel box, placed the box on the floor and lifted Crookshanks onto his lap. This freed up the bench space between Harry and Hermione, so that when Harry did close his eyes, and his head dropped to the side, it landed on her shoulder. Hermione looked at Brian and quietly offered him her thanks. He smiled and nodded his head slightly. Crookshanks, who was getting the spot under his left ear scratched, looked up at Brian and purred his thanks as well.

It only took Petunia a few seconds to destroy the "one big happy back seat" vibe. Demonstrating that she lacked any of Brian's reserve, she hissed out at Hermione.

"Are you Harry's girlfriend? Because if you are, or if you think that even with the Queen's favor I will allow you two to sleep together under my roof, then you are sorely mistaken."

Hermione sat quietly for a few seconds, until she was reasonably certain that she could put Harry's aunt in her place without waking him. When she turned towards Petunia, Harry's head swung off her shoulder and into her lap. Without thinking, she removed his eyeglasses and cradled his head with her left hand as she launched into a response.

"Petunia, if I share a bed with Harry tonight it will be because somebody needs to be within arm's reach to get him through the nightmares and night terrors that he has suffered all of these years. Merlin knows he can't count on you to do that."

Petunia's indignant reply of "Well I've never..." was immediately cut off by, "And that's half the problem!"

"If I sleep next to Harry tonight it will be because somebody needs to watch his back," Hermione continued. "Somebody he can trust to be there. To be there if or when the evil that killed your sister, and his father... and the evil that killed Albus Dumbledore last week...decides to come knocking on your door."

Petunia gasped at the news of Dumbledore's death. Brian felt the air temperature drop precipitously and asked the driver to turn off the air conditioning.

"No, Petunia," Hermione continued, "I am not Harry's girlfriend. But I am everything else. I am Harry's Guardian Angel, I am his comrade in arms and I am his devoted friend."

Brian felt air moving against his face and was alarmed to see that Hermione's hair begin to sway out as a breeze began to circulate around the cabin in a clockwise direction. Something was definitely wrong with the car's ventilation system.

"I am his rock just as he is my shield. Get between us and you will get squished."

Brain noticed that Hermione's eyes were on fire and there was a silvery glow building behind her wind-swept hair.

"I am the mother bear protective of her cub. Try to separate me from him and you will get mauled."

Brian began to compare his present experience against select scenes from various horror movies.

"From everything Harry has told me, you and your family have made Harry's life a living hell for the past sixteen years. Well, not this summer, Petunia...not this summer! Because I am Lily Evans Potter, back from the dead, and your day of reckoning has arrived!"

Unsure if that kind of channeling was actually possible in the wizarding world, Petunia slid as far away from the young witch as she could.

Hermione took a deep breath and paused. The storm that had literally been brewing in the back seat passed, and Brian noticed that the electric tension in the air had somehow been drained. Deciding to punctuate her remarks, Hermione pulled out her wand and casually rested it on Harry's side. Adopting a sweet, conversational voice that seemed all the more sinister when juxtaposed against previous comments, she added, "Oh, and Petunia, dear...in case you didn't clue into the fact that we weren't pestered by Ministry owls when I transfigured your dress, I am seventeen and an adult in Harry's world. I am sure you realize what that means."

Petunia's eyes went wide and she tried to swallow the sanctimonious retort that she had been mentally rehearsing during Hermione's scolding. Crookshanks relaxed and pushed his ear against Brian's hand. He got his wish, as Brian silently tried to gauge whether the witch who was sitting across from him was going to make his job easier or harder.

Hermione's eyes moved towards the side window and out into the night, as she tried to figure out where the uncharacteristic passion and fury had come from, and where it went during Petunia's dressing down.

Harry's eyes stayed firmly shut. He had heard it all, but understood far less.

He had felt the magic straining to burst out from Hermione, and had feared what might happen if it went unchecked. With all of the concentration he could muster, Harry had tried to absorb that magic like a lightening rod. He had no idea how he had done it, but he was certain that he had succeeded.

How else could he explain the elation that was burning within him? It was as if he had swallowed a river of Fawkes's tears...his mind was racing, there was energy surging from the top of his scalp down to the tips of his toes. There was warmth within him that was as extreme in its extent as the grief that had gripped him at the beginning of the day.

It was Hermione's magic that made him feel that way – that, or her fingers presently running through his hair. Harry felt guilty about maintaining the ruse, but was in too good of a mood to test an alternative hypothesis.

He kept his eyes shut.

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It was half eleven by the time they pulled up to Number Four. Harry reluctantly sat up and looked out at the house. He fully expected that the structural evidence of his childhood abuse would still be visible; as a precaution, he made Hermione promise to wait until morning before hexing his relatives into the next century.

Once Vernon opened the front door they almost tripped over Harry's trunk, which had been placed in the front entrance. The young wizard pocketed a small piece of parchment attached to the lid, then gave Brian and Hermione a quick tour of the house whilst the Dursleys searched the kitchen for some normalcy and a bite to eat.

Harry had expected Hermione to rage at the sight of the cupboard and his bedroom door, so her reaction took him by surprise. She sobbed quietly as she poked her head under the stairs and tried to imagine spending a childhood there. Tears filled her eyes as she opened and closed each of the four separate locks that could keep someone inside Harry's bedroom but not keep anyone out. The tears trailed down her cheeks when she pushed the cat flap in and out and tried to imagine how anyone could be cruel enough to use it to feed their sister's son.

It was Brian that provided the outrage. Terms like child abuse and criminal negligence were quietly hurled about amongst a heaping handful of invective. That people could treat any child that poorly was criminal; that they did it to someone in the Queen's favor was worse. He was halfway to ringing the police before Harry took him aside and explained a few things.

Brian didn't understand why Harry needed to stay with people who had treated him so badly; they could have been back to the Palace for a good night's rest within the hour. But he accepted Harry's decision without question. They were staying, most likely for two weeks, and he would simply make sure that over that fortnight Harry would be treated far better than what he'd ever experienced previously under his Aunt and Uncle's care. And if that meant that over that same period of time the Dursleys had it worse than ever before – well, he had no problem being karma's little helper.

He was given the opportunity to quickly discuss his plan with Hermione when Harry opened his bedroom window to let in a slightly flustered Hedwig. It didn't take Hermione any time at all to warm up to both Brian and his ideas.

When Harry returned they walked back down to the kitchen and announced a house meeting. Vernon and Petunia sat silently at the kitchen table while Dudley whined about his desire to eat and go to bed. Hermione changed his demeanor and complexion to match that of his ashen-faced parents with the simple phrase "oink-oink."

With the defenses of each of the Dursleys suitably softened, Harry witnessed Hermione and Brian deliver a withering shock and awe attack.

There were no survivors.

When the meeting ended, Brian positioned himself at the base of the stairs and adjusted his watch to timer mode. On his mark, Dudley dragged Harry's trunk into his own room and then scavenged from his closet some clothes and as many potentially incriminating objects he could find. Petunia jumped up the stairs and rushed to the master bedroom to empty (as best she could) their closet's contents into two trunks. Vernon ran out to the car to get Brian's trunk, which he then dragged up into Harry's old bedroom. Hermione and Harry watched the flurry of events from the living room sofa with bemused expressions.

Brian's signal after three minutes time brought everyone together again. On a request from Petunia, an extra fifteen seconds time was allowed to retrieve some bedclothes and blankets from the upstairs linen closet, which she used to make up the living room couch. There had been some thought to storing the Dursley's trunks under the stairs before it was made clear that they might make the rotund boy's bedtime fit even tighter.

Brian, Hermione and Harry left the Dursleys to fend for themselves and retreated upstairs.

The Queen's man took the guest bedroom for the night; neither Harry nor Hermione wanted him to sleep in Harry's old bedroom room until Vernon had replaced the door. Dudley had left his bedroom a shambles, but Harry wasn't going to be sleeping anyway; he was still too jazzed from the day's events and the ride home from the Palace. Hermione and Brian protested against Harry's plans to stand watch for the night, but he said it was the least that he could do after what they had just done for him. He expressed amazement that the Dursleys had surrendered so quickly and completely, and feared that there might be a reprisal. Brian told Harry that he thought that possibility was remote; the Dursleys were bullies, and bullies became cowards when faced with the righteous use of power. But Harry insisted, and backed his intentions by dragging the chair from Dudley's seldom-used desk into the hallway and taking a seat.

After Hermione told Harry that she'd take his place early in the morning, she went into the master bedroom, enlarged her trunk and unpacked her night clothes. When Hermione looked more closely at the bedroom furniture she noticed with amusement that the bed and dressers were knockoffs in the same style as the antique furniture she had seen and sat on at Buckingham Palace.

The young witch's hand recoiled when she reached to turn down the bed cover. There was a whiff of bleach in the air that matched the stringent, aseptic appearance of the room. Did she really want to sleep in Vernon and Petunia's bed? Not really, but if it kept them from being comfortable tonight then she would. Any chance that Petunia had changed the bed clothes when she was up here earlier? Shuttering at the thought, she raised her wand and cast a *Scourgify* spell on the sheets before she tucked in for the night.

She was asleep almost before her head hit the newly cleaned pillowcase.

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Harry had anticipated a Dursley counteroffensive that night. He was therefore surprised when, not fifteen minutes after his watch began, it was a screech owl rather than his uncle making its way up the stairs. The bird dropped an envelope at Harry's feet and flew off before he had the chance to stop it.

The message was all too familiar.

Dear Mr. Potter:

We have learned that *Finite Incantatum* and *Scourgify* spells were used at twenty-three and twenty-four minutes past midnight within your Muggle-inhabited household.

Your wanton disregard for the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has gone unchecked far too long. Ministry representatives will call on your residence shortly to snap your wand. Any attempt to evade their efforts will be dealt with most severely.

Given your repeated violation of this Decree you should consider yourself expelled from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the unlikely event that it opens this Autumn. Furthermore, you are required to attend a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9am on July 30, where additional disciplinary actions will no doubt be levied.

Enjoy the rest of your evening.

Dolores Umbridge
Office of the Minister of Magic

Harry exhaled a scatological request, then reluctantly woke Hermione.

"Oh Merlin," she said. "I cast those spells on my trunk and your Aunt and Uncle's bed clothes."

"Thought as much," Harry replied. "They detected magic use in the house and assumed that I was the only one here that was magical."

"So couldn't they just check our wands?"

"Doubt that the echoes would be strong enough to show up resolved with *Priori Incantatum* ...not that I expect they'll take time to look. It'll be *Stupefy* first and ask questions later."

They quickly identified their responses, both written and practical. Hermione scrawled a quick reply to send off with Hedwig while Harry roused his relatives.

"What the blazes?" Vernon demanded. "It wasn't enough for you to claim our bedrooms so now you claim our sleep?"

"Sorry," Harry replied, "but there a strong possibility that we may be under attack in a few minutes and I thought you might prefer the relative safety of the upstairs lavatory."

Petunia's face went white. "But I thought Voldemort couldn't hurt you while you stayed in our house."

"That's right," said Harry. "You know that and I know that, but there's no guarantee that the bad guys know that. And even if they did, I doubt that my mother's protection extends as strongly over your heads as mine."

The Dursleys didn't wait to argue with Harry's logic.

Brian, who had been awoken by Vernon's shouts, wanted to call the police; Harry refused, saying that Hermione and he could handle things themselves. He then suggested that Brian slip out of the house in order to keep the royal connection quiet. The Queen's man reluctantly agreed, but said that he'd be watching from across the street with mobile phone in hand.

Harry took the rucksack that McGonagall had given him into the dining room and dumped the contraband onto the table. He was tempted to grab the Sword of Gryffindor, but decided to try to keep the bloodshed to a minimum. Instead, three balls and a saucer-shaped item were tucked into his pockets, and his invisibility cloak tucked under his arm. On a bit of inspiration, Harry activated two pairs of omnioculars that had been within the bag and propped them up on a hallway shelf and the kitchen counter, so that they faced the front and rear entrances to the house.

Harry looked up as Hermione entered the kitchen. She had changed into a dark jumper and black trousers, with hair up in a loose ponytail and her wand out and ready.

"What happened to my little princess?" he asked.

"Laura Croft kicked her bum out of bed," she replied with determination.

Harry snorted. His bemusement was replaced by surprise when Hermione leaned forward and gave Harry a quick kiss on the lips.

"For luck," she explained with a smile.

As Harry tried to compose himself, Hermione ran down the hallway to take up a defensive position. He then ran through the kitchen and out onto the back porch. Before closing the door behind him, Harry reached into a pocket and threw a ball marked "Swamp Surprise" onto the kitchen floor. The thrown ball converted his Aunt Petunia's spotless kitchen floor into muck. The "surprise" came two seconds later, when a concealment charm turned the swamp's surface into a perfect imitation of the original linoleum.

Harry then heard five distinct cracks as he circled around towards the front of the house. He groaned; it was a few more than they had hoped for. Harry ran around the side of the house, and took up a position near the front corner. Now hidden by invisibility cloak and shrub, he spotted a silvery otter as it scampered out the front door and sped off into the night.

It took a full minute for his guests to arrive; Harry noted with some satisfaction that the protective wards had forced them to apparate a good two blocks down the street. There were six in the party. Five moved with a purpose that screamed out "Auror in action," while the sixth (who must have side-along'ed) trailed with a waddling gait. As they approached the house two of the black robed figures silently split off to the rear of the house. The other three waited for the laggard, who chose a position on the street curb, well away from the house.

They didn't bother to knock, unless you counted the *Evan e sco* incantation that made the front door disappear. Two of the men lept into the doorframe and fired off stunning spells without any word or warning. Harry thought he heard a *Protego* called out, but wasn't sure it was done in time.

The Realm's newest knight reacted as soon as the stunners were released. The first ball he threw burst into a cloud of dust that enveloped the three men into pitch-black darkness. The three figures turned and fired spells in Harry's direction, but the Peruvian Instant Blackness Powder and Harry's cloak kept them from aiming with accuracy. When the second thrown ball broke, the men found themselves not only enveloped in darkness, but shoulder deep in the muck of a portable swamp. From the tenor of their voices they were not very pleased.

Harry yelled towards the front entrance. "Hermione, are you okay?"

Panicked by the lack of a reply, Harry grabbed the portable door from his pocket and flung it against the house. He then dove through the hole it had created and tumbled into the living room. His heart sank when he saw Hermione crumpled up against the coat closet's door. Harry called out a second time, and was relieved when her eyes finally opened. She rolled over onto her stomach and dove behind the closet door as a red beam shot out through the blackened front entrance.

"I'm fine, Harry," she said, as she tried to loosen the sore shoulder attached to her wand hand. The crash of a *Reducto* spell against the back door kept Harry from asking a second question. He pulled the cloak back over his head and ran towards the kitchen.

Harry heard someone yell "Clear!" and reached the doorway connecting the dining room to kitchen just as a robed figure cautiously entered the house. The wizard's first step sent him tumbling face-first into the faux linoleum. His partner, who'd stayed at the threshold to cover his back, swore as he tried to counteract the trap and guard against attack at the same time. With attention focused in front of him, the Auror was caught completely unaware when an unidentified kick from behind (and to his behind) sent him sprawling into the swamp. Harry only caught a glimpse of his black-clothed supporter before he disappeared back into the night. He quickly focused on the two men in front of him, and their comic attempts to find solid ground. With the immediate threat neutralized, Harry squatted down under his cloak, wand in hand, and waited.

Meanwhile, Hermione had cast a *Levicorpus* spell at the first sight of fingers reaching out from the darkness and into the front entrance. The Auror sent head under heels cast the counterspell before remembering where he would land. Upon hearing the splash Hermione realized what had happened and modified her defense by casting a freezing charm down towards the front steps. The swamp water quickly solidified, catching two of the three attackers with their wand hands encased in ice. The third was so busy trying to thaw his partners free that caught the full force of the third *Silencio* spell that Hermione had cast blindly into the darkness.

With the threat of attack considerably lessened, Hermione cast a proprietary counterspell to the Peruvian Instant Blackness Powder that she'd helped the Weasley twins develop just two days prior (and two days after its lethal use during the attack on Hogwarts). Three quick *Stupefy* spells found their marks before she ran towards the back.

Harry arm caught Hermione before she went for a swim, which forced her to cast an off-balanced *Protego* when the two assailants tried to fire off curses. The mud-covered wand tips, however, rendered this defense unnecessary; the spells fizzled and dribbled out through the sediment. Hermione nailed the two men with *Stupefy* spells before they had the chance to clean their wands.

It wasn't until the Muggleborn witch had *Accio* 'd the mucked-up wands that Harry remembered about Umbridge. They vaulted back to the front entrance and aimed their wands out towards the street in search of a target.

What they found were two wizards sitting on a bench eating popcorn.

"Fred...George?" Hermione called out.

"Nope, just the cavalry," said Fred.

"Nice show," added George, as he threw a few kernels into his mouth. "We give it two thumbs up."

"You really should have sprung for the Deluxe version of the swamp, though," said Fred. "The crocodiles are worth every extra galleon."

"We're fine, thank you very much," Hermione said sarcastically as she lowered her wand and carefully skated across the icy surface in front of her. Harry followed closely behind, collecting three muddied wands on the way.

"Didn't happen to run into Dolores Umbridge on the way in, did you?" Harry asked.

"Oh, we're on top of that situation," replied George.

"Yeah," added Fred with a grin, "wouldn't want to be accused of sitting down on the job."

As Hermione and Harry reached the street curb they saw that the twins were speaking with uncharacteristic literalism. The "bench" they were sitting on was, in fact, the rigid frame of the former Hogwarts High Inquisitor, levitated two feet off the ground.

"You two are too cruel," Hermione said with a laugh, "but probably not too comfortable."

"It's not so bad," said Fred, as he shifted on his seat.

"Just have to wiggle a bit to get around the lumpy parts," added George. "Popcorn?"

"Erm, no thanks," said Harry. "So did she put up a fight?"

"Dunno," said Fred. "She was standing stunned when we got here."

"Must have caught a stray spell," Hermione surmised, as she looked back at other three rigid bodies.

George tilted his popcorn bag in a futile hunt for popped kernels amongst the duds. Giving up, he looked up at Hermione. "So can we play with your swampcycles?"

"No," said Hermione impatiently, "playtime is over. Don't need the Muggle neighbors seeing any more than they need to."

"Yes, mum," was the sing-song reply, as the twins rose to help Harry and Hermione clean up. It only took a minute to banish the swamps, repair the windows and doors, bind the six rigid assailants, and levitate them into the living room.

"How did you guys get here?" asked Harry, as they regrouped inside. "How did you know we were even here?"

"Didn't you read the note on your trunk?" Fred asked.

"Erm, no," Harry replied, fingering the unread parchment in his jeans pocket with some embarrassment.

"We drew short straws at dinner."

"This was a Weasley operation?" asked Harry.

"Still think Charlie enlarged his straw," Fred muttered to his twin.

"Yeah, not like he hasn't had years of practice."

"Anyway," continued Fred, "we got here and the place was quiet, so we left the note saying we were at Arabella's and to ring her on the jelly-phone when you arrived."

"But I didn't," Harry said.

"I did," Hermione interjected.

"When?"

"When I heard all of the apparitions...thought it was time to ring Mrs. Figg's for some help."

"Anyone ever tell you that you were one smart witch?" asked Harry.

"Oh," said Hermione with a grin, "I've heard that once or twice."

Their banter was interrupted by McGonagall's patronus, who lept into the living room and curled up around Hermione's leg.

"Oh foo, playtime's over," said Fred.

"Yeah, the adults have arrived," added George.

"Hey Harry," Fred asked, "can we take a look at the toys spread out on that table?"

"Sure," said Harry. "Probably a good idea to put them away for the night."

"We can take care of that," George replied.

As Fred and George excused themselves to sort out the dining room mess Harry pulled the hoods back from the heads of their captives. He immediately recognized two; Dolores Umbridge and a tough-looking, wiry-haired wizard that he'd had run-ins with before.

"Good evening, Dawlish," said Harry. "Assuming, of course, you are Dawlish and not some polyjuiced Death Eater."

The auror rigidly raged.

"Oops," said Hermione. She counteracted the *Silencio* and *Stupefy* spells with Dawlish's mouth mobilized in mid-rant.

"..care if you think you're the greatest thing since butterbeer you're going to Azkaban for this one, boy!"

"Over a simple *Scourgify* spell?"

"No," came the snarled reply, "for attacking an Auror and resisting arrest."

"Aren't we getting ahead of ourselves?" asked Hermione from across the room. "Expect Headmistress to be here shortly."

"To do what?" asked Harry, "laugh at their ineptitude? An entire Auror team, brought down by two Hogwarts students using little more than pranks from a joke shop?"

"You knew why we were here," Dawlish spat out. "You got the owl...underage magic use...you resisted arrest."

"No," said Hermione. "Well, actually, yes – we did get the owl message, but you should have gotten our reply, and in any event you can hardly claim that we resisted arrest when you made no effort to identify yourselves as Aurors in the first place."

A flash of twirling light appeared behind them, out from which strode Minerva McGonagall and Gawain Robards, current Head of the Auror Department.

"Was her orders," mumbled one of the other glum-looking men, before he realized that there were more ears listening.

"Really?" asked the tall Auror-badged wizard who had just portkeyed alongside the Headmistress. "And what exactly were those orders?"

"To collect and break the wand of this underage liar," exclaimed Umbridge, as she pointed her triple chin towards Harry. "And to defend themselves if need be from any illegal and foolish attempts to resist enforcement of the rule of law."

"Oh, shove it, Dolores," said McGonagall, with uncharacteristic fervor. "Hermione, will you please explain to everyone what happened here tonight?"

The teen-aged witch quickly summarized the events of the previous hour; her *Scourgify* spell, the Ministry's owl post, and subsequent attack. Both she and Harry handed their wands over to the Head Auror for his review. As Harry had predicted, however, the spells that had last been cast hadn't been dark enough or strong enough to leave discernible residue.

Umbridge shrieked about the spells Harry had no doubt used that evening, while he denied casting any spell and Hermione tried to force Dawlish to admit that the Aurors hadn't identified themselves before they attacked. Instead, Dawlish claimed just the opposite, and accused Harry and Hermione of firing the first spells. The other Aurors remained silent – they were in enough trouble as it was for their incompetence; they didn't want to add insubordination to the list.

When Harry and Hermione accused Dawlish of lying, Umbridge told them in no uncertain terms to prove it...and if they didn't want time added to their stay at Azkaban to immediately remove their bindings. Harry decided at that point that enough was enough. He retrieved the two pair of omnioculars and handed them to the Headmistress and Head Auror.

Hermione smiled when she realized what Harry had done. "You are so...."

"Busted!" Harry said simply.

The Headmistress and Head Auror looked into the omnioculars, then rewound and replayed what had previously been recorded. Auror Robards looked over at Harry during his review.

“Where are the Muggles that live in this house?”

“They were hiding the entire time, upstairs in the loo,” Harry replied. “Still there, actually.”

The Auror nodded and traded omnioculars with McGonagall to gain the other perspective. When he was finished reviewing the two recordings, the Head Auror walked over to Harry and Hermione and returned their wands.

“On behalf of at least my little portion of the Ministry of Magic,” he said, “I wish to extend a sincere apology for the abhorrent behavior displayed here tonight. There was no excuse for it.”

“Erm, thank you sir.” Harry replied.

The Head Auror took a small card from a pocket in his robes, touched it with his wand, and handed it to Hermione. “Miss Granger, here is the contact information in case you wish to press charges against these men. I’ve added my secured floo location information on the back if you have any problems with the paperwork. Our internal investigation on tonight’s activity will be completed within the next few days, and I’ll make sure that you have a copy of the final report.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hermione replied.

The Auror then turned to Harry. “Your Headmistress informs me that Miss Granger intends to stay here through the summer. Rest assured, the detection of anything short of an unforgivable within these walls will be interpreted as having come from her wand.” He jerked his head towards Umbridge. “You will not be bothered by the likes of her again, if I have anything to say about it.”

He then turned towards the Auror team with their wands bundled in his outstretched hand.

“If we weren’t so short-handed I’d snap these wands myself. Right here. Right now.”

The five muddy and bound Aurors looked up with shock.

“As it is, we need every wand we can get, even when they are so poorly and unlawfully wielded... Dawlish!”

“Yes, sir.”

“As of now, you and your team are suspended from active operations. It’ll be desk duties for the lot of you while the investigation takes place. But don’t wait for the investigation’s end to start packing your bags, because whether as guest or guard, you’re heading to Azkaban.”

The Auror’s shock was redoubled.

“And as for you, Dolores,” he said icily, as he turned towards her, “I have, unfortunately, no direct power over you. Merlin knows what keeps you in power at the Ministry...however, on the way here the Headmistress described some allegations of unforgivable use and other illegal acts during your tenure at Hogwarts. I will be investigating these allegations myself. If they bear out you may plan on feeling the full fury of the Auror Department raining down upon your toady-little head.”

Umbridge’s retort was silenced by McGonagall’s wand.

“Thank you, Minerva,” the Auror said. “Now, I believe that your students have been bothered enough for one night.”

He placed his wandtip on his Auror’s badge and muttered an incantation. The badge started to flash on and off as he placed it down on the living room’s coffee table. He then banished the assault team’s bindings. The Aurors morosely reached down to touch the badge as their Head grabbed Dolores’s elbow roughly and did the same. A second later, they vanished as the portkey was activated.

“I think it time for me to take my leave as well,” Headmistress McGonagall said. She handed the omnioculars to Harry. “A very creative, if unorthodox, defense Mr. Potter.” She then turned towards Hermione. “As for you Miss Granger, some fine spellcasting. I have to ask, however, where you learned to cast a *Levicorpus* spell. I don’t recall it being on the Hogwarts curriculum.”

“Erm...Professor Lupin taught it to me, Headmistress.”

“I see,” McGonagall said, with her eyes narrowing just a bit. “Please take care, Miss Granger, when casting spells not found on the Hogwarts standard list. Mr. Potter might share with you the consequences of freelance spellcasting.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hermione contritely replied.

“Headmistress,” Harry cut in, “how did you get Head Auror Robards to come with you...do you think he’s trustworthy?”

“Well,” said McGonagall, “let’s just say that Gawain is a friend of the family. And yes, I believe that you can trust his intentions. Whether he actually has the political capital to boot Umbridge from the Ministry is a different question, though.”

At the sound of a soft knock on the new front door, the Headmistress morphed into her animagus form and took her leave out the back. Hermione and Harry heard a distinct hiss from the dining room as they opened the front door and let a relieved Queen’s man back into the house. Brian’s reappearance reminded Harry that his relatives were still up in the loo; he went upstairs to give them the all-clear as well.

"We repacked your goody bag," Fred said, as he handed back the rucksack.

"But not before we labeled everything that was ours or that we knew about, though," added George. "Hope you don't mind, but there were a couple of items we didn't recognize...wondered if maybe we could bring them back to the lab for a look-see."

"Sure," said Harry, "no problem. While you're at it, can you send me a few more swamps? I kind of liked playing with those tonight."

"Consider it done," said George, just as the Dursleys crept back down the stairs.

"Hello, there," the twins said in unison.

At the sight of Fred and George all three of the Dursleys recoiled, and Dudley broke out into a whimper.

"Nice to see you again, Dudley," said Fred.

The chubby teenager jumped back up a few stairs and whimpered some more.

"What's a matter, Dudley, cat got your tongue?" asked George.

"Or maybe you're just a bit tongue-tied?" added Fred.

"Now boys," said Hermione, "don't scare our hosts. They need to come down the stairs so that we can go back up the stairs and to bed."

"Okay," said Fred. "We'll just have a sit on the front steps, then. Don't mind us."

"They're staying too?" asked Petunia anxiously.

"Erm, just for the night, as guards," said Harry. "Unless, of course, you'd like to see them more often?"

Three heads shook sideways with great vigor.

"Right then," said Brian, "shall we try this once again?"

As the Dursleys set up again in the living room and Brian repaired to the guest bedroom, Harry walked Hermione to the master bedroom's door.

"With Fred and George here you are going to try and get some sleep, right?" Hermione asked.

"I guess so," Harry replied.

"Erm, do you want me to *Scourgify* Dudley's sheets?" she asked.

"No thanks," Harry replied. Not that I don't trust Auror Robard's word, but why test things so soon?"

"Good point," Hermione said, with a bit of nervous laughter in her voice. "So...good night, Sir Harry."

Harry smiled as he squeezed the young witch's hands. "Sweet dreams yourself, Dame Hermione."

Chapter 5 – The New Neighbors

Saturday, June 2

Little Whinging, Surrey

Harry woke to the sound of Dudley pushing a lawnmower. It was going to be a good day.

He got up out of Dudley's bed and rummaged through the closet for an empty coat hanger, upon which he hung the black tuxedo and white shirt that he'd slept in. He opened his school trunk, threw on some of the less heinous hand-me-downs, and headed out into the hall. Harry had to step over his Uncle Vernon, who was struggling to remove the lowermost hinge pin from his old bedroom's doorframe.

"Good Morning, Uncle Vernon," he said. "Sleep well?"

If looks could kill Harry would have had to dodge a curse.

He took the stairs two at a time and headed towards the kitchen, where he found Brian cleaning some dishes in the sink. The Queen's man turned towards him and asked, "Feeling alright this morning, Sir Harry?"

The young wizard looked past Brian out through the basin window to see his clipper-wielding Aunt fight a losing battle against the hedgerow.

"Brilliant, Brian. Just brilliant."

The Queen's man filled a mug and pushed it across the counter as Harry took a seat. "I was told that you take your coffee as black as your hair."

"Hermione knows me too well," Harry said as he took a sip. "Speaking of which..."

"She popped over for Saturday brunch with her parents," Brian replied. "Asked me to have you call her when you woke up. Oh, and she left you the paper."

Harry nodded as he glanced over at the *Daily Prophet*'s headline, "**Ministry Thwarts Crazy Centaur Attack at Hogwarts!**" Brian placed a plate in front of him laden with fresh fruit, a warm bran muffin, and granola-topped yogurt.

"Pardon my initiative," Brian said, "but after taking a look at your Aunt's pantry this morning I ran over to the market for a few things that weren't so... processed."

"Erm, no, no problem," Harry replied, eyeing the yogurt with suspicion. "Looks fabulous."

"Eat up, then, Sir Harry – from the looks of your clothing they must have been starving you at school."

Harry looked at Brian with a bit of confusion. "Just the opposite, actually," he replied. "Foods great at school...a little more traditional than...yogurt...but always plenty to eat."

"So this stapled-stomach look is fashionable in the wizarding world?"

Harry furrowed his eyebrows, wondering why Muggles would want to have a staple gun anywhere near a stomach. He looked down, saw his clothes, and realized Brian's mistaken assumption.

"No, no...these clothes are Dudley's hand-me-downs. Pretty much all my Muggle clothes used to be his, except for the one good outfit that I wore yesterday...that was from Hermione."

"Well," Brian intoned, "to borrow a phrase from your friend, not this summer, Sir Harry, not this summer...we'll visit a clothier's this afternoon."

"Oh, speaking of clothes," Harry said, "I've got the suit and shirt hanging upstairs in the closet whenever you want to take it back to the Palace."

"Take it back?" Brian asked, with incredulity in his voice. "I'm terribly sorry, I should have been clearer yesterday afternoon. The suit and shirt are yours, Sir Harry. You're going to need them."

Harry chuckled to himself. "I really appreciate that, Brian, but I can't imagine needing that tuxedo any time soon."

"Only because we haven't had time to discuss your engagement calendar, Sir Harry," Brian replied. "Of course, since your knighthood is secret and won't appear on the Registry it won't be as busy as it might be, but...you and Dame Hermione will have opportunities...I know for a fact that you're going to be invited for a small reception at Windsor next week, and there's to be a post-concert party with Sir Elton next month..."

"Hmmp," Harry said with a tinge of chagrin. "I don't know why anyone would want to invite me to anyplace fancy. Beside, Hermione and I need to do a lot of...studying...this summer, and a fair bit of travel." He looked back out the window as his Aunt wiped sweat from her brow, hedge shears in hand. "But then again, we might be able to attend a few events...particularly if it gives a few people I know some twisted knickers."

Brian followed Harry's gaze and smiled. "I see...so instead of a single swift blow from your magnificent sword it will be death by a thousand paper cuts?"

"Oh, no," replied Harry. "I've no plans to kill them...I'll probably stop somewhere in the high eight-hundreds."

The front doorbell rang, and Harry looked towards Brian.

"Sorry, Sir Harry, but I believe that is a friend of yours...a Miss Tonks? Dame Hermione and the Weasley brothers vouched for her before they left...she's been here most of the morning."

The doorbell rang again. Then again.

Harry thanked Brian for breakfast as he grabbed his coffee and headed towards the front entrance. The already opened door provided a partial view of Tonks, who was kneeling on the front steps, eye-level with the door bell.

"Wotcher, Harry." She pressed the doorbell again. "These push-the-button-hear-some-bells things are funny aren't they...wonder what'd it would be like to have one hooked up to the floo connection?"

"Careful, Tonks." he replied, "You're starting to channel Arthur Weasley."

Tonks smiled as her hair turned Weasley red. "Not a bad idea, Harry...maybe if there were two Arthurs running about one of them would occasionally get a word in edgewise with Molly."

Harry laughed. "So what brings you to the Dursley residence?"

"Business," Tonks replied, as she restored her hair color.

"Erm...what kind of business?" Harry asked warily.

Tonks gave the teenager a grin. "Head Auror Robards ordered me to do the follow-up field investigation to the pantsing you gave Umbridge and Dawlish last night. Figured you'd be less likely to slime an Auror that you already knew."

Harry nodded, a twinkle in his eye. "So does this take you off the security detail at Hogwarts?"

"Only temporarily," she replied. "With luck and a little cooperation from The-Boy-Who-Swamped I'll be back there tonight."

"The-Boy-Who-Swamped?" Harry asked. "Don't tell me that they are really calling me that at the DMLE."

"Just the ones that either really hate Dawlish or really love him," Tonks said with a grin. "Of course, that's pretty much the lot - he has a rather polarizing personality."

Harry shook his head and sighed. "So tell me, Tonks, which camp is Head Auror Robards in?"

"Don't really know," she replied, as she entered the house and began to examine a small scorch mark in the closet door. "He plays things close to his robes."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Not too much, really," said Tonks. "He's a behind-the-scenes quiet type. Never flashy, rose through the ranks based on his management skills... makes sense, really, since he sorted Hufflepuff."

"Really?" asked Harry. "I can't picture too many Hufflepuffs becoming Aurors or Hit Wizards."

"Well, Harry," Tonks replied, "you need more than bravery and cunning to be a good Auror...or a good leader, for that matter."

"Doesn't sound at all like someone Scrimgeour would pick as his replacement."

"Depends on what Rufus thought he needed, don't you think?" Tonks asked. "Talk to the rank-and-file and most will say that Scrimgeour picked him exactly because Robards didn't seem that ambitious, or power hungry. Gives Rufus more of a shot of staying in control at MLE as well as at the Minister's office."

"Never thought of it in that sort of way, I guess," said Harry. "Sounds like more of that political glad-handing back-stabbing manipulative rubbish that Umbridge seems to excel at."

"I agree that Umbridge has gotten where she has because of her political skills. But that's exactly why those skills aren't rubbish, Harry. Without political savvy, the best-intentioned and brightest wizard will always get cut down at the knees."

"Doesn't seem very fair."

"But that's the way things are. You know, it might be useful for you to learn more about that political rubbish...worked for Dumbledore."

Tonks finished her inspection of the closet door and wrote a few things down on some parchment.

"Okay...I've finished in Hermione's room and downstairs...just need to check your wand and those omnioculars that came in so handy last night."

"Sure thing," said Harry, handing her his wand. "Be right back."

As Harry walked upstairs he passed his Uncle, who had finally removed the door from its frame and was dragging it out as trash. He quickly retrieved the two pair of omnioculars he'd stored in his trunk, and returned downstairs.

"Here, Tonks," Harry said. "Erm, can I get these back sometime soon? They proved to be rather useful."

"Oh, I don't need to take them with me...just need to download the recorded images. Got a spell that preserves them in my wand. It will only take a few minutes."

Tonks placed the devices on the living room coffee table, flicked her wrist in a complex pattern and said an incantation that Harry didn't catch. She then placed the tip of her wand onto the lens of first one, then the other pair of omnioculars.

"So are these the ones you had around your neck at the last World Cup?"

"Erm, no," Harry replied. "McGonagall let me raid Filch's stash of contraband yesterday morning."

"That's strange," Tonks replied, "I've never seen omnioculars on any list of banned items...unless..."

Tonks grabbed one of the omnioculars, put it up to her eyes, and pointed it towards Harry. She turned various knobs and pushed different buttons, until one such adjustment produced a very un-Auror-ish giggle.

"Unless they've had some after-market...erm...capabilities added," she concluded.

"Like what?" Harry asked.

Tonks lowered the omnioculars.

"Hang on a second," she said. She looked away from Harry, as if in thought, then morphed into a frighteningly accurate image of Dolores Umbridge. Once the transformation was complete she handed Harry the viewing device.

"Aim it at me, then hit that red button by your left index finger three times."

Harry followed her instructions, then let out a small scream as he dropped the device back onto the table as if it were on fire.

Tonks let out a good laugh. "What's the matter? Was a naked Umbridge too...hot for you?"

"That's not funny...I almost cast my patronus!"

The teenager's face then turned a deep crimson as he realized what she had seen when the omnioculars had been pointed towards him.

"I'm sorry, Harry, couldn't resist pulling your...your chain a bit. Here, let me make it up to you."

Tonks changed her appearance back to her normal, bubble-gum-haired form.

"Fair is fair."

Harry became even more embarrassed when he realized what Tonks was offering.

"No thanks, Tonks. I've no desire to have Remus kick my arse from here to Argyle."

"And what are you implying, Mr. Potter?" the witch shot back, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Erm, nothing...just that yesterday morning it looked like Remus had finally realized how much of a daft git he's been when it comes to your feelings for him."

"Oh," Tonks said a bit sheepishly, as it became her time to blush. "Well, if you saw that, then it must have been really obvious," she said with a smile. "Or else it takes one daft git to know another."

"Hey, who are you calling a daft git?" Harry asked playfully.

"Know thyself, Harry Potter," she replied, as she morphed once again, this time taking the form of the newest lady knight in England. She picked up the omnioculars and handed them back to a confused-looking young man.

"Safe to look now...unless you're flexible enough to kick your own arse."

Harry was trying to decide between a witty retort and an angsty self-evaluation when the doorbell chimed once again. This time, Brian came in from the kitchen to answer the door.

"Oh, Dame Hermione," he said as he glanced at Tonks and Harry. "I didn't realize you'd returned. Good that you're here, actually."

As Brian opened the door Harry whispered into Tonks's ear. "So what are we going to do now, *'Hermione'*?"

"Have to play along," Tonks replied. "He might be card-carrying, but that doesn't mean he should know what I can do."

"Great."

"So why is he calling you Sir Harry?" Tonks asked. "And why is he calling me damn Hermione?"

"Erm, just an inside joke...tell you later."

Brian brought two men dressed in business suits into the living room. "Sir Harry, Dame Hermione, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Jackson and Mr. Wall. They work Palace security."

"Good morning," said one of the men, "We're sorry to disturb you, but we need your help." The other man opened a small black bag and placed a laptop computer onto the coffee table. He opened the screen, pushed a few buttons, then cursed the lack of an expected response.

"What's this then, Steve...blasted thing was working just before we crossed the street?"

The man's older partner hunched over the computer keyboard and frowned. "That's what modern technology does for you, Wally...told you once, told you a million times, it's the tried and true that you need to do."

Harry noticed that the computer screen was only a few inches away from the activated omnioculars. He quietly reached down and pocketed the magical device.

The older man straightened up and turned towards the two magicals. "Dame Hermione, Sir Harry, my young technogeek partner and I are part of a security team established by the Prince to keep an eye on your respective residences."

"You mean you've been watching this house?" asked Harry, with a bit of alarm.

"Yes, Sir Harry," the man replied. "As well as the Granger residence. And it's about that..." The man reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a photograph, which he handed to Tonks.

"Dame Hermione, do you recognize either of the two men in this picture?"

Tonks and Harry looked at the static image of two wizards poorly disguised in Muggle clothing. One man had matched top hat and tails with speedos and flip-flops; the other (whose attire was at least internally consistent) was wearing leather lederhosen.

"Erm, no, afraid not," Tonks replied cautiously. "Where was this image taken, and when?"

"The picture was obtained about one hour ago. Surprised you didn't recognize where it was taken...the two men were standing across the street from your parent's house."

Harry and Tonks shot looks of concern at each other before she replied. "Well, I've been away at school for so long, of course...guess they must have repainted the house, or something."

"Brian," asked Harry, "we need to talk to Hermione...I mean her parents...straight away."

"Certainly, Sir Harry," Brian replied, wondering why the Hermione in front of him couldn't do that herself. He fished his mobile phone out of his pocket and pushed a few buttons on its keypad.

"Hullo, Mr. and Mrs. Granger? Brian Willox here...sorry to bother you but Sir Harry and your daughter need to talk with you...she's what?" He looked at Tonks rather strangely. "Oh, I understand. Yes, well, one moment please."

He handed the mobile phone to Harry cautiously.

"Thanks, Brian," Harry said, we'll just be a minute. He grabbed Tonks's hand and ran up the stairs to Dudley's room. Having closed the door, Tonks cast a *Silencio* spell as Harry put the phone up against his ear.

"Hullo? Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry, it's me. Can you explain why Tonks is with you looking like me?"

"Erm, long story...that's got to wait though. We've got problems."

"What's wrong?"

"There's a couple of Death Eaters staking out your parent's house."

There was a loud gasp.

"Merlin, Harry...my parent's house? So they plan on...but how did they find out where I live...How did you find out that they're there?"

"The Prince has security people watching both our houses, and the ones minding this house showed me a photograph of the Death Eaters standing across the street from yours. But what's important now is...are you still at the hotel with your parents?"

"Yes, we just got back to their room after brunch."

"Good. Stay there, I'm coming to get you."

Tonks interrupted the conversation. "Harry, you shouldn't go anywhere...you won't be protected yet."

"Is that Tonks, there?" Hermione asked. "Harry, give her the phone."

The black-haired wizard reluctantly gave the mobile phone over.

"Hermione," Tonks said, "I'll have an Auror team there as soon as possible...wait, where are you? No, don't answer that, who knows who might be listening in. Okay, send me your patronus, no wait, don't do that, they might catch that at the Ministry..."

Harry grabbed the mobile phone as if it were a snitch. "Hermione, we're going to find a way to get you guys back here safe...I want your parents here, where we can protect them...wards are up...might be best to use Muggle transport...yeah, I'll make arrangements...call you right back."

Britain's newest knight looked down at the phone keypad until he finally found the "end" button. "Tonks, don't even start about using magical transport for them. Hermione's parents are Muggles, and they will be less likely noticed if they're using Muggle transportation."

"Yeah, you're right I guess. Still think she could use an extra wand there just in case."

"Fine, then, we'll go downstairs and have them take you to Hermione. And don't forget you're still Hermione for now."

"Don't worry, I won't." As she cancelled the silencing charm and opened the door she planted a kiss on Harry's lips.

"What was that for?" Harry asked.

"Thought you might like to kiss Hermione for good luck," she replied.

"I've already done that once this morning, thank you very much."

"Really?" asked Tonks. "Well what do you know...maybe you're not such a daft git after all."

Harry and Tonks found the way downstairs blocked by one very hacked-off familiar.

"Hey Crookshanks," Harry said as he reached down to scratch an ear. The half-kneazle ducked his head away from his hand and hissed at Tonks.

"Wotcher, Crookshanks," she said. "Oh, I see." Tonks said, as she realized what skin she was wearing, "You're probably wondering why..." She quickly morphed back into her baseline bubble-gum colored hair form. "See, it really is me."

The half-kneazle glared at Harry, then back at Tonks, and hissed again.

"Erm, Crookshanks," Harry said, "there is a perfectly good explanation why Tonks looks like Hermione, and why she and I were in...erm, in my bedroom...but we don't have time to explain right now, ok?"

The familiar stared at Harry unconvinced.

"Look, Crookshanks, we really don't have time...Hermione's parents may be in danger, and Tonks and I have to go check things out...Hermione's with them, though, ok?" Harry said, a bit nervously. "Now, while we're gone we'll need somebody to watch the Dursleys to make sure that they don't do anything stupid...will you do that for me?"

Hermione's familiar stared over at Tonks, who'd changed back to Hermione's form. He then looked back at Harry with disapproving eyes and slowly walked back into the master bedroom.

"Geezsh," Tonks said as they headed towards the stairs, "Didn't expect to have a chaperone around here."

"Oh," said Harry, "he's just looking out for his best girl," Harry replied. "Speaking of which..."

Harry ran back into Dudley's bedroom and poked his head out the window. A quick scan revealed his cousin watering the backyard with his sweat, but no signs of Hedwig.

Guessing that his familiar could do a better job of taking care of herself than the Granger's, he pushed finding Hedwig to the back burner and ran downstairs with Tonks. With a street address of the Savoy in hand, the Auror set off on her own to join the Granger family, telling an understanding Brian that she could get there quicker than any Muggle transport.

Once Tonks disappeared the Queen's man suggested that Harry meet the new neighbors across the street.

"Shouldn't we be figuring out how to get Hermione and her parents out of danger?" the young wizard asked.

"Yes," Brian replied simply, as he walked out the front door and crossed the street to Number Five.

Harry didn't know quite what to expect from the two men that had apparently caused such a stir in the neighborhood. He was even more confused when the two Palace security men answered the door.

"Oh, come, in you two, come in," said the younger agent ("*Wally*," the young wizard remembered).

The downstairs rooms seemed normal enough to Harry. The living room showed signs of having been lived in (as opposed to, say, his Aunt's aseptic aesthetic); throw pillows were laying haphazardly on the leather sofa and a matching club chair; magazines and a remote were spread out over the coffee table.

Brian and Steve, the older security guard, bounded up the stairs, leaving Harry alone with Wally in the front entranceway.

"So you guys really have been living here for the past month?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Wally said. "Not such a bad assignment, although Steve is a bit of a pig around the house."

"And you guys aren't really...erm, are you?"

Wally laughed. "No, we aren't a couple. Steve's not my type, and while I might bat from the opposite side he's as painfully straight as they come. We're just partners on the job."

Harry nodded, realizing that by answering a question Harry hadn't asked Wally had answered the original as well.

"So why are you pretending to be, erm...a couple?" he asked. "I mean, if you're trying to lay low and stay undercover...it's not like you two blend in very well around here."

Wally grinned back at Harry. "No...you think? It might be counterintuitive, but acting as a gay couple in this neighborhood actually helps us do our job."

"How is that?"

"Well," said Wally with a smirk, "we've got a job to do minding you, and some equipment to do it with that we wouldn't want the locals to catch on to, right? This way, we haven't had neighbors pounding on our door wondering when we're handing out invitations for a housewarming party."

"That makes sense," Harry said as he nodded. "And given the prejudice around here, they probably expect you having men running in and out of

here all the time, and imagine you two spending all day lounging about snogging each other, so..."

"Yeah, so they haven't caught on and wondered why we don't leave home for day jobs, or why other agents come and go." Wally grinned at Harry. "Not bad, kid...makes me think that it wasn't a fluke how well you handled your guests last night."

"You mean you saw?" Harry asked with alarm.

"Yeah," Wally replied, "where did you think Brian went while you and Dame Hermione were busy?"

"Wait," Harry said, "if Brian told you about us, and our, erm...skills, then..."

"No worries, Sir Harry," Wally grinned, as he produced the same kind of identification card from his billfold that Brian had shown him the night before. "My brother's a wizard, and Steve's mum and sister are witches."

"Merlin," Harry exclaimed as he looked at Wally's card, "does everyone at the Palace have one of these things?"

Wally laughed. "No, Sir Harry, it just seems that way. There's really only a few of us in the know...we're kind of a team, I guess you could say, that handles situations involving both our worlds."

"Wow," Harry exclaimed. "I never realized that there were Muggles out there that didn't always try to pretend that magic didn't exist, even when they knew better."

"Yeah," said Wally, "there are a few of us that aren't really bothered by the thought...sort of like there are some witches and wizards that don't have problems living in the Muggle world, huh?"

Harry's reply was interrupted when Brian and Steve bounded back down the stairs.

"Here's the situation, Sir Harry, best we know it." Brian said. "Remote surveillance indicates that those two badly-dressed blokes are the only threats within a two block radius of the Granger residence. We've got people both inside and outside the Savoy, and they haven't seen anything...our perimeter here is also clean. We'll have on-the-ground confirmation of all this within the next ten minutes."

"Merlin, Brian," Harry said as he shook his head with slight amazement, "you sure that all you did at the Palace was cook?"

Brian nodded his head and blinked in acknowledgement of Harry's insight. "Another time, Sir Harry...we need to make some decisions about the Grangers."

Harry thought for a moment, then nodded his head. "The woman that visited earlier today, Tonks? She's someone Hermione and I can trust with our lives. She's also an Auror...mean anything to you guys?"

All three men nodded their heads.

"Right then," Harry continued, "in a perfect world we'd be able to trust every Auror with our lives, but the fact that our guests last night were also Aurors should kill that idea."

Choosing his path and words carefully he then asked, "You guys know about Death Eaters?"

The nods from all three men were accentuated with eyes that narrowed and backs that stiffened.

"The two blokes in front of the Granger house are probably Death Eaters, or their stooges...no other reasons for wizards that we don't know to be hanging around their house. Pretty surprising that they've discovered where Hermione's parents lived...we've got some hard work to do following up on that question, but I'm thinking that they're just a couple of low-level scouts waiting for the Grangers to return from picking up Hermione at the station."

"We were thinking the same thing," Brian replied.

"If the Grangers hadn't visited the Palace and stayed in town last night...I'm sure the plan was for those two to go get help once they'd returned...they probably could have attacked at the train station, but I imagine that it was pretty heavily guarded, and that the house would be a much softer target. Much more of a statement, as well, if they were able to raise the Dark Mark there."

"Dark Mark, Sir Harry?" Wally asked.

"Oh, sorry, keep forgetting...anyway, important thing is that they are still waiting to ambush the Grangers at their house. Means, I think, that the Grangers haven't somehow been tracked to their current location...you guys certain that there's nothing unusual down at the hotel?"

Brian nodded. "Given what you've just told us, and what we've already pieced together, we think that the safest thing to do is to move the Grangers from their hotel to a safe house...might not take long for the bad guys to figure out what's happened and retrace their steps."

"Agreed," Harry said. "Is there any way that you guys can quietly bring Hermione and her parents here?"

"Here, Sir Harry?" Steve asked. "Not to discount the defensive skills you put on display last night, but if they know where the Grangers live shouldn't you also expect them to know where you are right now? Might just be placing the Grangers out of the frying pan and into the fire."

"Normally, I'd agree, but let's just say that there are some extra security measures in place around my Aunt and Uncle's house...for the next eight

weeks, at least...anti-apparation wards, for example.”

Harry recoiled when he realized that he might have broken some rules talking about apparation with muggles, but the fact that nobody blinked, or asked for an explanation, suggested that he hadn't revealed information that wasn't already known.

The three men silently looked at each other; after getting two curt nods from the security men Brian turned towards Harry.

“We can have them here safely within the hour, Sir Harry,” he said. “Will there be others there to transport?”

“Just Tonks and Hermione, for now,” Harry replied. “I ought to be there as well, but for reasons I can explain later I'm rather constrained when it comes to defending myself...or others, for that matter. Tonks should be already there though, and I imagine she and Hermione aren't going to be shy about having their wands at the ready, so....”

“Not a problem,” Brian said. “I'll knock on their door myself. It'll add an hour or so to the arrival time, but it does sound like a prudent course of action.”

“Right, then,” Harry said. “Sounds like a plan.”

“What about those Death Eaters?” Steve asked.

“First things first,” Harry replied. “I want to make sure the Grangers are safe before we figure out that problem.” Harry paused for a beat. “So Brian, you're going to join Tonks and Hermione, while I probably should wait across the street at Number Four, so...”

“Want some company while you wait, Sir Harry?” Wally asked.

Harry, who had been a bit worried about what the Dursleys might try if he were alone with them, nodded his head. “Thanks, I'd enjoy that.”

“No problem,” Wally said with a wink. “Gives me a chance to dress down your Aunt for her heinous window treatments.”

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It was a painful two-hour wait for Harry, even with the amusing entertainment provided by Wally and his Aunt Petunia. Had he been a normal Muggle teenager, he'd have probably spent the entire time on the telephone with Hermione, ensuring that things were still okay. But Harry wasn't used to the concept of accessible methods of communication that didn't involve fireplaces, so his contact with Hermione had been limited to a single call after the strategy session had broken up.

The fact that Wally wasn't showing a lot of concern was comforting for Harry, up until the point when the man's mobile phone went off. After a brief conversation, he informed Harry that the Grangers would soon be there; he then left to work out some security arrangements with Steve. Harry made his own welcome plans by grabbing his invisibility cloak and heading for the concealment provided by the shrubbery in front of the house.

It was typical weekend afternoon on Privet Drive; the only real difference Harry could detect was that the neighbors all seemed to all have their tellies set to a preliminary match for Muggle football version of the World Cup. With seemingly the entire neighborhood glued to England's eleven it wasn't hard to notice when a large Land Rover with black-tinted windows rumbled down Privet Drive. It slowly passed by, stopping only after it had reached the next intersection and turned around to face back towards Harry. He then spotted a rather large truck as it turned the corner and headed towards him, with an identical black SUV just behind. The second Land Rover pulled-up short as the lorry stopped in front of the house. Two men dressed in gray overalls jumped out of the cab and quickly looked up and down the street. The insignia embroidered on the backs of their coveralls matched the large advertisement painted on the side of the truck.

From all appearances, the Dursleys were about to get some furniture delivered from Harrods department store.

After about fifteen seconds, one of the men walked behind the lorry and opened the doors, while the second watched with one hand inside his jacket. A metal ramp was extended from the trailer down to the street, and several people emerged from the back of the truck carrying pieces of bedroom furniture. They all wore the same overalls, but had matching caps that were pulled down low on their heads.

The man who'd opened the back door of the trailer walked up to the front door of the Dursleys and rang the bell. A somewhat wary Vernon opened the door then stepped to one side, having been made aware of what was expected of him. The mattress-carrying workers marched right into the house. Had anyone been watching the work rather than the match, they may have thought it strange that four of the overall-clad workers who'd brought in the first pieces of furniture never came back out.

It took all of ten minutes for the truck's contents to be emptied, and for the trailer to be filled with what they were replacing. Harry, who had been watching all the time from under the front window, could hear his aunt sob a bit as her faux-French colonial bedroom set was marched unceremoniously out to the lorry.

The swap-out completed, those men who'd finished the job packed up the van and drove off, accompanied by the two SUVs. Harry, wand in hand, shed his cloak and stood out from the bushes. He found Wally and Steve, who both gave thumbs-ups from their locations, and returned their gesture. He then turned to enter the house, relieved to know that those whom he now considered to be his real family were safe and sound within his Aunt and Uncle's house.

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Later that afternoon, Harry was lying on his new bed, flipping through the channels on a ridiculously large television set when his new mobile phone rang.

Hey, what's up Hermione?"

"Oooh, I'm impressed, Harry. You've figured out caller id."

"Erm, no...just figured that you'd be the only one calling me....so what'cha doing?"

"Nothing. What are you doing?"

"Nothing much...watching some Muggle telly."

"Merlin, Harry, listen to us...we sound like a couple of teenagers."

"Maybe that's because we are teenagers, Hermione."

"I know, but you know...it's just that you don't sound like the weight of the wizarding world is on your shoulders right now."

"That's only because I got all this extra support from my new mattress," Harry replied. "But yeah, I know...feeling comes and goes, but...it's nice...erm, so how are your folks doing?"

"Amazingly well," Hermione said. "I mean, here they are, in hiding, sort-of, with Death Eaters staking out their house, and they're acting like it's a walk in the park."

"So what's so bad about that?" Harry asked. "It's not like they're the Dursleys, with their heads up a blast-ended screwt."

"Umm...I guess." Hermione replied. "It's just too weird and scary, though, having my parents suddenly involved in the fight with Voldemort, and seeing them take it all in stride. You should have seen them at the hotel, Harry...they were trying to calm *me* down. Not that I'm upset they aren't cowering in fear, but..."

"But you don't know whether it's the parents that should be taking care of their little girl or the other way around?"

"Yeah, that...that actually makes sense....it's like there's this nexus between our world and theirs."

"Erm, yeah...nexus." Harry said. "That was the exact word I was going to use."

"Oh stop it, you prat." Hermione said tongue-in-cheek admonishment. "So...I was wondering...would you like to join us for dinner tonight?"

"Hmmm, sounds tempting...let me check my engagement calendar...Saturday...Saturday... Saturday...looks good...not scheduled to rescue the damsel in distress until Tuesday."

"Damsel in distress?" Hermione asked. "So who is the damsel, Harry?"

"Erm, usual story. Really pretty, lives in a tower, needs a brave knight to come rescue her from eternal boredom..."

"Don't suppose I'm that damsel?"

"Oh...no," Harry said. "You're a Dame, not a damsel."

"Oh," said Hermione, "so what's the difference?"

"The difference is," Harry stammered. "Erm...."

"Yes, Harry?"

"Difference is...damsels are pretty but helpless...they have to be rescued because they can't save themselves."

"And a Dame?"

"Dames? Well, I've only met one, mind you, but if she's representative, then Dames are pretty and anything but helpless...more likely to save the knight's sorry arse than him save her cute one."

"So, Dames are pretty useful around the house, huh?"

"More like pretty protective of the house – got the video to prove it."

"Oh, that's right," Hermione said, "Tonks was talking about your little toy..."

"My little toy?" Harry asked, thinking back to what Tonks had seen that morning. "You *do* mean my omnioculars... right?"

"Maybe....so do you really think my bum is cute, Harry?"

"What?"

"You said knights have sorry arses and Dames have cute ones."

Oh...Merlin, I'm going to get hexed either way I answer."

"Why would I hex you if you did think my bum was cute?"

"Erm...because that would mean I'd been looking at it close enough to tell."

"I see....so have you, Harry?"

"Have I what, Hermione?"

"Looked closely enough to tell."

"Erm.....right...so...what time is dinner?"

"Seven, and check your closet. I picked out something for you to wear before I left."

"Seven it is, then."

"Oh, and Harry?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"I wouldn't hex you if you looked."

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An hour later, Harry left his Aunt and Uncle's house and waved to Mrs. Number Seven as he crossed Privet Drive. She looked just as shocked as his Aunt had been when he came down the stairs. To be fair, though, it wasn't every day that a teenager strolled out of Number Four dressed in Armani.

Although it had been great sport to shock the Dursleys into thinking that their house was going to get even more crowded, there was never any intention for Hermione's parents to stay at Number Four. Once they'd shed their disguises and showed their disgust at the physical signs of Harry's previous care, the Grangers family had crossed the street to stay at Number Five with Wally and Steve.

Dinner was served in the backyard, on the patio. Standard security procedures frowned upon those facing death threats dining *al fresco*, but given the unprecedented combination of magical wards and muggle electronic surveillance devices, the only thing threatening them that evening were a few fluffy storm clouds.

The patio table was dressed in white linen. So was Harry (although his unlined linen suit was actually more of a taupe that complemented his white silk t-shirt rather nicely).

"So tell me," Harry asked, in between bites of seared tuna, "how did you manage to select an entire summer wardrobe for me without leaving that hotel room?"

"Well, it was pretty straightforward," replied Hermione, who was no less nicely dressed. "Once it became clear that we weren't going to be taking you to the nearest shopping centre tonight, Brian suggested that we pick up a few things while we were still in the City."

"You went out to clothing stores with Death Eaters on the hunt?" Harry asked.

"No, dear," Emily Granger replied, "the clothing stores came to us."

"The concierges were wonderfully helpful," Hermione added.

"I'm sure that they would been just as helpful had they not gotten a call from Windsor telling them to bill the Royal account," Roger deadpanned.

"And they just showed up at your hotel room door with a rack of clothes?"

"Pretty much...yeah," Hermione said. "Of course, we did have to give them a rough idea of your size, so that I didn't have to do a lot of magical alterations once the fittings were done..."

"Fittings?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. "You know, I was about to ask how you'd done such a great job sizing me up blind."

"Oh we didn't do it blind, dear," Mrs. Granger said with a smile.

"Yes, Harry," her husband said, "I'd say that their eyes went quite wide open once Tonks provided them a dummy that was...how should I say it...fully representational."

"She didn't," Harry said.

"She most certainly did," Mr. Granger said.

"You mean Tonks morphed into me just to try on clothes?"

"Oh, yes, dear," Mrs. Granger said, "it so much easier to see what colors looked good on you."

"I can't believe that you guys did that," Harry said, with a hint of a smile and a resigned shake of his head.

"You've got a problem with Tonks pretending to be someone else?" Hermione asked. "Hey kettle, what color is the pot?"

"Yeah, yeah...least I didn't ask her to...so about being fully representational..."

"Well," Hermione replied with a smirk, "how else would we know whether the trousers would fit?"

Harry's ears turned bright red and he stammered for a few seconds before Hermione and her parents burst out laughing at the joke.

And it was at that point, the point where Harry realized that the Grangers were comfortable enough to tease him the same way that they teased Hermione, that he knew for certain that he'd been accepted as part of a very loving family.

It felt good.

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Once they'd finished off one of Brian's signature desserts (Pumpkin Bread Pudding with Candied Ginger and Hot Buttered Rum Sauce), Hermione's dad pushed back a bit from the table, took a deep breath, and smiled.

"You know, a bloke could get used to this."

"I'm pretty impressed," said Harry. "If it had been the Dursleys in your shoes they'd all be looking for a change of pants about now."

"Well it's a pretty low bar you're setting if you're comparing us with the Dursleys," Mr. Granger said.

"Sure, but even against normal people...I mean, Death Eaters staked out in front of your house, waiting to kill you?"

"Balanced against a fine dinner on a beautiful summer's night with our daughter and her best friend...I'm thinking that it's a great day."

"Really?" Harry asked. "Not to take anything away from Brian's seared tuna and Hermione's company, but..."

"Guess we see the glass more than half-full," Emily replied. "Play the hand that's dealt you, make lemonade from lemons, *Carpe diem*...that sort of thing."

"Alright, who polyjuiced my parents?" Hermione asked, "and where did you hide them and their middle-of-the-road, can't-be-any-more-conventional-than-dentists attitudes?"

Her parents laughed.

"Sweetheart, it's all a matter of figuring out what is most important our lives," Roger explained. "When was the last time you ate two dinners in a row with us? And what were the chances that we'd be doing it any time this summer before fate dumped us all on the Dursley's door stoop?"

"It's not that we aren't worried," Mrs. Granger added. "Of course we're concerned; but why let that fear rule us?"

"The only thing I really fear," Roger said, "is that they torch our house before we get a chance to rescue your baby photos."

"Oh, Dad, don't start that again."

Roger laughed. "Frankly, as well as our protection has been, I'm a bit surprised we haven't heard back from Tonks."

"Well," Hermione replied, "she did say it'd be hard to arrest them as it stood...the only rules they're breaking right now are fashion related."

"Might be best to leave them alone, unless you desperately need something from your house," Harry stated. "So long as they're looking for you there, they won't go looking for you here."

"Ah, yes good point, Harry," Roger said. "That brings us around to a question that Emily and I have for the two of you. It's pretty clear that we can't stay at the house, at least until Voldemort's gone and probably even after that..."

"Oh, I feel so terrible, that house has always meant so much to you," Hermione said.

"It's just wood and brick, dear," her mother replied, "and not at all important when it comes to our lives and yours."

"And that goes for the surgery, as well," her father added. "If they know where we live we have to assume that they know where we work."

Harry started to count on his fingers. "So, we've got to find you a new place to live, and a new place to work, and provide security..."

"Hold on, son," Roger said. "You're getting ahead of yourself. Emily and I have been thinking about this, and talked with Wally and Steve...and, well..."

"Hermione, dear," Emily asked, "how long do you and Harry plan on staying here in Little Whinging?"

"Why do you think that..."

Hermione,” her father interrupted, “you were going to tell us that you would be staying with Harry this summer, right?”

“Not that we hadn’t expected you to,” her mother added.

“Well,” Hermione admitted, “I was going to tell you yesterday, but then we got diverted by the Palace, and then today the whole Death Eater thing sprang up...”

“I see,” her father said. “So, about how long are you two staying here?”

“If you’d asked me two days ago, I’d say for as little time as possible,” Harry said. “That would have been two weeks, to ensure that my mother’s protections were up until I turn seventeen on July 31.”

“But now...” Roger said, “Harry, you do understand that whatever it is that you two have to do to defeat Voldemort is far more important than worrying about Emily and myself, right?”

“If you fed me Veritaserum I’d probably be forced to agree,” Harry replied, “But that doesn’t mean that we can’t do both at the same time.”

“Dad, why are your plans contingent on ours?”

“Because, Dear,” he replied, “we don’t want to hamper your fight, but if given a choice we’d rather be with you then holed up in some governmental safe house under assumed names.”

“And not just be with you,” her mother added, “but doing everything we can to help you.”

“So, you want to know if it would be okay for you two to stay here with us?” Hermione asked.

“Well, not with you *per se*,” Roger said, “but we’ve been invited to stay here at Number Five for as long as we like.”

“And not that your neighbors aren’t, erm, lovely, Harry,” Emily added, “but ‘as long as we like’ is only going to be only so as long as you and Hermione are here.”

“Sounds brilliant,” Harry said immediately.

“You and Dad, staying here?” Hermione asked. “Not that I don’t love you both, but what would you do?”

“Oh,” her Father said, “probably drive our teen-aged daughter and her boyfriend crazy...”

“Dad!”

Harry noted with interest that Hermione’s admonishment was delivered with a slight grin. Hermione noted Harry’s interest...and didn’t stop smiling.

The patio door opened and Steve joined them.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we’ve got company.”

Hermione reached for her wand. “Friendly?”

“Well, the old woman and her cats seem harmless enough, but if looks could kill then the sweaty red-haired kid lugging a trunk...”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other before reaching the same conclusion.

“Ron.”

They held each other’s gaze, as if neither wanted to break the spell that had enchanted the last couple of days. It was Hermione who finally broke eye contact and left the table to meet their friend.

Harry looked down at his plate; dessert was long gone. He looked around the table, at the Grangers, at the sky...trying to savor, for one more fleeting moment, the feeling of being part of one big happy Granger family before joining Ron and Hermione out front.

Nexus, indeed.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Knight Protectors of the Realm, Part 2 (part 1)

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

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Chapter 6 – Love Shack

Ron had lived through a terribly rotten, no good, horrible day.

It started that morning, with a row with his mum over whether he would stay with Harry or at home. That argument made use of the Burrow's floo connection out of the question. Planning on trying to hail down the Knight Bus, Ron had then levitated his trunk out to the road and stuck out his wand. And waited.

And waited some more.

It was only until he started to think desperate thoughts about facing his mum again that the bus appeared. With Stan still in Azkaban, Ron had to deal with a replacement conductor, who was anything but friendly. When forced to explain his need for "emergency" transport, Ron was threatened with a citation and hefty fine for a frivolous call. As it was, he was given a stern warning and left alone (again) in the dust.

With no better alternative in hand, Ron made the three mile long walk into town. Since the nearest Muggle household was only a half-mile down the road, he hand carried his trunk for most of the trip. Dusty, sweaty, and extremely irritated, he arrived at Luna's doorstep and prayed that she was home. In his first bit of good luck that day, she was.

Luna almost seemed disappointed when he explained why he'd shown up at her house with his trunk. Her mood brightened a bit, though, when Ron accepted her invitation to stay for dinner. Her father was gone on a special assignment, so they ate a simple meal with only each other's company. Ron had to admit that it had been a lot easier for him to find things to talk about with Luna than he'd ever imagined possible.

Once dinner had ended, his nightmarish journey continued. Knowing that his brothers had stood watch on Privet Drive the night before, he used the Lovegood's floo connection to get to their shop in Diagon Alley. Fred and George had made it clear that that he'd just be getting in the way, given how well Harry and Hermione had dealt with Dawlish and Umbridge. But on Ron's insistence, they'd pointed their floo connection towards Arabella Figg's fireplace and kicked him through the grate. Which led him to present circumstances.

The argument between Ron and Hermione reached Harry's ears well before he reached them. It wasn't a pretty sight...Ron was upset that Hermione hadn't contacted him sooner. She was upset that he was being so presumptuous, that he hadn't bothered to announce that he was coming to Little Whinging, and that he was an overall git.

Once they started talking about the Hogwarts Express and levitation spells, Mrs. Figg tactfully suggested that they find someplace a little less public to sort things out. Harry agreed, suggesting that Hermione go talk to her parents while he took Ron into Number Four.

Introductions went about as well as could be expected. Uncle Vernon whined about running a boarding house, but made sure it was said softly enough not to reach Brian's ears. Ron was quite impressed with Harry's new bedroom (formerly Dudley's old first bedroom), and appreciated the fact that there were two twin beds already in place. The huge telly was fairly mesmerizing, but the promise of a pitcher of iced pumpkin juice was enough to lure Ron out onto the backyard patio, where Harry had told Hermione to meet them.

Ron and Hermione's second attempt at civility went more smoothly. Harry didn't know if it was the pumpkin juice, or diminished shock from Ron's arrival, but really didn't care. Despite how incredibly well things had been with just Hermione and himself in Muggleland, he had to admit that he was glad to see Ron. They talked well into the night about their experiences over the past two days.

Harry and Hermione gave a fairly accurate description of what they'd been through. Sensitive to Ron's periodic fits of jealousy, neither was all that forthcoming about the their new relationship with the Royal household. Harry simply stated that he'd gotten some help from a friend of Dumbledore's, and that Brian and the guys across the street were part of that assistance. They said nothing about their knighthoods, or about their Order of Arthur badges...which, they decided, had been a very good idea when they realized that a certain tabby cat was sitting on the side yard fence.

Harry had been to afraid to ask whether Hermione was going to now stay with her parents, so he was pleasantly surprised when she led the way upstairs, where Brian had already tucked in behind the new six-paneled door to his old bedroom. Hermione stopped at the top of the landing, gave Ron and Harry hugs that were exacting in their sameness, and retired to the master bedroom. As the two boys went to their new bedroom, they passed by the open doorway of the guest bedroom, which, despite the Dursley's protests, had been left vacant...after all, they never knew when Harry's Aunt Marge might stop by for a visit.

Karma's little helpers had done well that day.

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The following morning was blissfully uneventful. Brian eased up on the Dursleys (it was Sunday, after all), and allowed Vernon to take Dudley to the gym for a workout while he took the car into London for a visit to his favorite organic farmer's market. This allowed Harry to cook a yogurt-free traditional breakfast for Ron, Hermione, and himself, and for the three to make plans for the day. During a discussion on where the most secure place would be to make plans, Harry remembered that there was a magical tent inside his bag of tricks. After retrieving his knapsack from

upstairs, they rolled out the tarp in Number Four's backyard and staked down corner poles that magically telescoped out from their grommets. When fully erect, the tent was about the same size as the ones they'd used at World Cup.

"Harry," Hermione asked, "did you say that you got this tent from Filch's stash of confiscated items?"

"Yeah, seems kind of strange for something so innocent looking to be on the banned list, doesn't it?"

Hermione's eyes brightened up a bit. "Not if it's the tent that I heard about at one of the Prefect's meetings last year."

"Nothing dangerous, was it?" Ron asked warily.

"Only if you're worried about your morals," Hermione replied. She looked around the fence line, and not seeing any neighbor's noses, drew her wand. "One way to find out," she said, and dove into the tent flap before either Ron or Harry could stop her.

"Hermione!" Harry exclaimed. He quickly grabbed his wand from his back pocket and followed right behind.

That it was a magical tent, there was no doubt. The interior space was much larger than its footprint. Harry couldn't immediately tell whether there was more than one room, since his brain was too busy processing what was immediately before him.

Hermione was sitting on the edge of a large king-sized bed that was covered with a red, pink and white checked duvet. A very large mirror stood in lieu of a headboard; the ceiling itself was also mirrored. These mirrors reflected red and white blobs which were forming, growing and combining on the walls as if they were wall-papered with magical lava lamps. The floor was carpeted in a thick red shag; the room was lit by candlelight and smelled of jasmine and sandalwood.

"Hermione...where are we...why did you do that?" Harry asked.

"Because I knew you'd be right behind me."

"Well of course I was going to be right behind you," Harry said. "But what was so important to find out that it was worth scaring me to death?"

"Whether you'd be able...erm, Harry, where's Ron?"

"Probably right behind me..." He turned to look back at the flap. Puzzled that Ron hadn't already burst through, Harry poked his head out of the tent flap. His Aunt and Uncle's backyard was still there, but Ron had gone missing.

Harry popped his head back inside and turned back towards Hermione, who now sported bright eyes and a smile.

"Hermione," Harry said, "why do I think you know what's going on?"

"Erm...because I'm the smartest witch in my generation?"

"Well, yeah," said Harry, as he walked up towards a nightstand and spied the kind of "adult" toy not typically left by Father Christmas. "I just wouldn't have expected you to be in the know about this, erm...this kind of magic."

Hermione laughed, a bit nervously. "Well, there's always the possibility that you don't know everything about me," she cooed, as she patted the bed with her hand. "Have a seat, Harry?"

He looked at her within the context of their surroundings and suddenly decided that sitting might be a very useful thing to do. Declining her invitation, though, Harry instead took a seat on the ground with his knees pulled up in front of his lap.

"So where did Ron go?" he asked.

"Probably wherever the distraction spell that we activated sent him."

"We activated a distraction spell?"

"Yes, and a silencing spell as well, if this is the tent that I'm thinking of," said Hermione.

"And what kind of tent is that?" Harry asked.

"It's called a 'Love Shack'," she explained. "Japanese magical import, designed for couples that don't have a place to, erm...to be together when they want to be alone. You know...get away from your parents...or friends...Japanese Muggles have something similar...they're called Love Hotels."

"Oh," Harry said, "well I guess that makes sense, given the décor...so you've been in one of these before?"

"No," Hermione said quickly. "I heard about it only after it'd been confiscated from a couple of Hufflepuffs."

"That's good," Harry said, almost to himself. "So...they wanted something a little less crowded than the Astronomy Tower?"

Hermione returned the look of concern. "Yes they did...and just how do you know about the crowd at the Astronomy Tower?"

Erm...so I've heard..." Harry replied defensively. "Changing the subject, he asked, "So, with the distraction charms in place, how did the owner get caught?"

"With his pants down around his ankles," Hermione said with a grin. "Oh, you mean...well, Hagrid spotted it on the Forest's edge...they must have forgotten that giants are immune to most charms."

It was then that they decided to check out the rest of the tent.

A sliding door along one of the sidewalls revealed a room nearly as large as the first, decorated and furnished to resemble a Japanese bath house. A wall of large stone boulders dominated the left side of the room, with water cascading down from the top in a waterfall that emptied into a recessed pool. Steam rose from the water's surface and spilled over a short stone wall that divided the pool from the central tiled section of the room, which held two wooden benches laden with scrub brushes, buckets and hand-held shower heads. On the right side of the room, an elevated floor was covered with tatami mats made of woven straw. Large throw pillows and cushions were strewn around the floor mats; beyond that a large charmed window showed a blossoming cherry tree with boughs that framed a mountain vista.

Two pair of wooden sandals bounced up and down off the floor in front of Harry and Hermione like excited puppies. They took the hint, and slipped on the sandals before clip-clopping over the tile floor to shoji screens on the far wall. When pulled to the side, the room dividers revealed two separate changing rooms, a full lavatory, and a small, but functional kitchen furnished with a table set for two.

Harry had a mind to inspect the charmed window more closely. Hermione, unfortunately, was too late in warning him not to step onto the tatami with clad feet. As soon as Harry stepped on the mat he was unceremoniously hurled up into the air and thrown head-first into the pool. He surfaced to the sounds of Hermione's laughter and the tatami mat's scolding (its charmed voice that of an elderly Japanese woman).

"Harry, you do know that you're supposed to scrub yourself clean before you enter the bath, don't you?" Hermione asked, as she walked towards the pool. She then made the classic mistake of offering Harry a hand out of the tub. Whether it was that she trusted him too much, or had not seen enough romantic comedies, the result was the same; Harry grabbed her arm and pulled her into the water with him.

"Harry Potter, you are incorrigible!" Hermione shrieked, after she surfaced.

"Yeah? Well, Hermione Granger, you are very wet," he replied, with lips pulled into a grin and two eyes pulled towards the front of her now-translucent t-shirt.

Hermione realized immediately what he was intimating, and dove back down to neck height. Her embarrassment was quickly tempered by agitation as he broke out into laughter.

"Oh, Harry...you are terrible. Just you wait."

"Wait for what?"

The brown-haired witch's eyes narrowed a bit, a clear sign to Harry that she was working something out. Vamping for time, she asked, "So why are you glad that I've never been in one of these tents before?"

"What? Oh...well...why did you say that there's no other boy you'd rather your parents get to know?"

"Oh, I don't know, why did you call me your princess?"

"Princess? Well...what am I supposed to think about you using Tonks to see how well I fill out my pants?"

Hermione let out a giggle, "What's bothering you about the modeling...what I saw, or that I needed Tonks's help to see it?"

Harry sighed. "What did you see anyway?"

"So, do you really think I have a cute bum?"

"Answering a question with a question?"

"Why not? You just did."

Hermione scowled a bit, then finally figured out how she could exact revenge for her revealing wet t-shirt. Pulling her wand out from a submerged pocket, she chanted, "*Evanesco!*"

The look of surprise on Harry's face told Hermione that her little experiment had been successful.

"What did you do that for?" he demanded.

"Didn't want you to think I needed Tonks's help to check you out," Hermione said with a smile. "And if I'm going to be embarrassed about giving you a show when I step out of this tub, it's only fair that you are as well."

Harry looked at her for a second, before smiling. "Your mistake, my dear, is assuming that I would be embarrassed."

He grabbed his wand, which had tumbled out of his back pocket when Hermione had made his trousers disappear, and stood up.

This move gave Hermione a close-up view of his dripping-wet Christmas present from Fred and George ...crimson boxer shorts that sported a

fluttering golden snitch centered on the button fly.

“Fancy a game of Quidditch, Hermione?”

The teen-aged witch looked up at Harry with a bit of awe, then realized that he was challenging her to display the same kind of Gryffindor courage. She stood up on the bench, just a few inches away from him, thrust her chest out with her hands on her hips, and looked straight into her tubmate’s eyes.

“Sure, Harry,” she replied. “Just so long as it’s my snitches that you’re reaching for.”

The-Boy-Who-Lived smiled, straining to maintain eye contact. He pointed his wand towards the wall and *Accio* ’ed a short robe that was hanging on a hook. He then wrapped the garment around Hermione, grabbed the two ends of the sash, and used them to pull her wet body up against his. Her breath hitched as he tied the knot.

“Perhaps another time.”

With a tinge of regret, Hermione nodded her head and summoned a second robe, which she wrapped around Harry. The robes had drying charms within their lining, so that they (and their clothes) were dry before their feet hit the floor. She then hung her robe back on a hook and transfigured Harry’s robe into a new pair of trousers.

“Think it’s time we go find Ron?” he asked.

Hermione sighed. “Suppose so.”

Together they walked back into the bedroom and towards the tent flap. Just before they reached the opening, Harry grabbed both of Hermione’s hands and faced her.

“So,” he said. “Lots of questions that went unanswered.”

“You think so?”

“Maybe...I never could have imagined two more magical days, especially here in Little Whinging.”

A tinge of disappointment crept over Hermione’s face. “You make it sound like the magic is over.”

“Merlin, I hope not,” Harry replied.

And then he kissed her.

His two hands releasing hers to reach up and cradle her cheeks as he turned his head slightly leaning forward kissed her.

It only lasted a few seconds. When he pulled back to break it off, her lips followed his, stealing a second peck before retreating in support of Hermione’s attempts to avoid swooning.

There was a look of wonder on her face...an “I can’t believe I kissed Harry” kind of look. She smiled and said sweetly (and somewhat cryptically), “Tin roof....rusty!”

Harry started to say something but she stopped him with a shake of her head and an index finger pressed up to his lips. Grabbing his hand, they walked back outside to take down the tent.

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Ron was inside Harry’s bedroom, his eyes glued to a screen.

“Oh, there you two are...decided on a place to talk yet?”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and smiled in the midst of Ron’s blissful ignorance. She pulled her wand out and was about to transform one of the twin beds into a meeting table before Harry gave a yell to mind his telly. Scowling a bit at how quickly he and Ron had fallen in love with their new electronic toys, Hermione led them next door.

It was the first Harry had seen his Aunt and Uncle’s bedroom since its redesignation and refurbishment. He noted that there had already been two transformations; one that had replaced Petunia’s pseudo-Provincial dreck with the sleek Scandinavian design furniture from Harrods, and the second that had transfigured the modern pieces into something Hermione called “contemporary castle.” There was a four-poster bed that dominated the room, but it was built of light maple, rather than dark walnut and the curtains were white and gauzy rather than burgundy-colored and thick. She had added a fireplace, but it was trimmed with marble tiles rather than heavy stone. A comfortable reading chair and floor lamp, large maple desk and banks of maple bookcases completed the bedroom set.

Hermione shrank the bed down to doll-house dimensions and elongated the desk’s writing surface to form a table about which she conjured three chairs. Pulling the one nearest her back and taking a seat, she whipped out a blank scroll, quill and ink pot and looked up at her boys.

“Well, come on, take a seat.”

"Right, then...first things first," Hermione said, once they followed orders. "Harry, as much as I hate to see you tempted into becoming a couch potato, you did have a good point about not using my wand in your room. We should designate your room as the Muggle room and mine as the magic room, and try to keep the two separate so as not to fry your new toys."

"Erm, thanks...I guess," he replied with a smile.

"Well, even with Auror Robard's assurances, it would be best not to have too many spells going off in an under-aged wizard's room."

"Good point," Ron said. "Guess that means the Xbox stays, right?"

"Merlin," Hermione exclaimed, "boys and their toys."

Harry tried to steer the agenda back on track.

"Right, well...there's all kinds of things to discuss, but...I think for now we should focus on three issues...schedule, money, and Hermione's house."

"Sounds good to me," Ron said. "The sooner we can get back to the wizarding world, the better."

"Oh, Ron," Hermione lamented, "you've been here all of what, half a day and already you're complaining?"

"Yes, but..."

"Like I was saying," Harry interrupted, "When Dumbledore made me promise to return here he never really said just how long I'd have to stay to extend my mum's protections."

"Well it shouldn't be any longer than the shortest amount of time you've ever spent here, right?" asked Ron.

"Actually, Harry," Hermione said, "I've anticipated this question." She unrolled a parchment, enlarged it, and set it against the wall with a sticking charm. Upon the parchment was a chart with points and a line marked upon it.

"You'll never change, will you?" Ron asked.

Hermione ignored him. "Harry, this chart plots the amount of time you've spent at your Aunt and Uncle for the past six years. After First Year, you were here most of the summer...Ron rescued you about a week before term, right? Before Third Year you stayed at the Leaky Cauldron for the better part of a month. Summer before Fourth Year, you were here a total of six weeks before the Quidditch World Cup. The Dementor attacks before Fifth Year limited your stay to four weeks, and then last year it was all of two, right?"

Harry nodded.

"Now you'll notice that I've connected the points with a line that has a surprisingly constant negative slope. Projecting that line out to this year would suggest that in order to keep your mother's protection you'll have to stay under your Aunt's control..."

"Up until lunchtime?" Harry said with a smile.

"Excellent," Ron said. "So you can tell your relatives to piss off and we can all find someplace magical to live, right?"

"And where do you propose that would be?" Hermione asked.

"No shortage of food at The Burrow," Ron replied.

"No shortage of stress, either," said Hermione. "No thanks."

"Well," Ron replied, "what about Grimmauld Place? Food isn't as good, but we could always get take-out from the Leaky Cauldron."

"That's great, Ron," Hermione said. "Good to know we'd be AK'ed on full stomachs at least."

"Huh?"

"Ron, get a clue," Hermione said. "We lost our secret keeper, so it's not a secret location anymore."

"Why not?" Ron asked. "Are you sure that the *Fidelius* Charm stops working once the Secret Keeper dies?"

"Honestly, Ron..." Hermione fumed. She got up, walked out the door, and returned a minute later with a rather frightened Dudley.

"Now, quit the whimpering," Hermione told him, "I don't want any stains on my new carpet." She then turned towards the other two.

"Ron, would you be so kind as to tell Dudley where the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is?"

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Just do it, Ron," Harry said, as he nodded his head and palmed his wand.

"Fine, but don't blame me," Ron replied. "Oy, Dudley...the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is Number Twelve Grimmau..."

“*Obliviate!*”

Harry and Hermione’s stereo simulcast knocked Dudley right between the eyes.

“Erm...how did I get here?” he asked, looking very worried.

“You walked,” Hermione replied, as she twirled her wand in one hand like a snare drum performer. “Now run along, Duddikins, before we decide to do some target practice.”

Harry’s cousin didn’t need to be told twice.

“Fine,” Ron said, “so it’s no longer a secret location. All we need to do is cast a new *Fidelius* charm that protects the location of the home of the smartest smart-alec witch in all of England.”

“Be my guest,” Hermione said in a huff.

“What...you mean that you can’t cast that spell?”

“Ron,” Harry said, “there’s a reason why it was Professor Flitwick that cast the *Fidelius* charm. He was probably the only wizard in Britain skilled enough to cast it.”

“That difficult, eh?”

“Think about it, Ron,” Hermione said. “If the charm was any easier to perform then Fred and George would have made themselves the secret keepers for Slytherin’s toilets years ago.”

“Oh, good point.”

“Which,” Harry said, “brings us to my second agenda item – money. As nice as we’ve been set up by...Dumbledore’s friend...I don’t want to rely on his generosity forever. I was hoping for Bill’s help getting access to my accounts, but...”

“But there’s no telling when the Ministry will let him out of the restricted ward at St. Mungo’s,” Ron agreed.

“Right,” Harry said. “Frankly, I don’t have a clue how much I have in my vaults. Dumbledore told me last year that Sirius had left me Headquarters in his will, and that a ‘reasonable’ amount of gold had been transferred into my vault, but who knows how he defined ‘reasonable’?”

“How did you get money for books last year?” asked Ron.

“Bill got it for me, remember?” Harry replied. “Breakfast table...day we went to Diagon Alley...visited the twin’s shop and drew wands on Malfoy’s mom...”

“Oh yeah, how could I forget?” said Ron. “Should have cursed her when we had the chance...”

“Malfoy’s mom would well down on my ‘To Do’ scroll,” said Harry. “About eight feet below ‘Take out trash – kill Snape’.”

“But the point is,” interrupted Hermione, “you don’t know how long your gold will last if your full-time job for the next year or so is defeating Voldemort.”

“Exactly,” Harry replied. “I know that my parents had put enough gold into my vault to get me through school rather comfortably...but what if what I inherited from my parents doesn’t get released to my control until I turn seventeen...or twenty-one...or twenty-five?”

“So you’ve got ‘before’ gold and ‘after’ gold?” asked Ron.

“Yup,” said Harry. “Knowing how much of both I have would help a lot. If I had enough money to rent my own apartment, say, then I wouldn’t have to live here any longer than I needed to renew my mother’s protective charms. But if I have to wait...”

“What about that tent that was set up out back?” Ron asked.

Harry and Hermione shared worried expressions before she cautiously replied, “Turned out it was only designed for two people.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Ron replied. “So like I said at the start, there’s always the Burrow.”

“Yeah, I know that,” said Harry. “But with Bill and Fleur’s wedding and all of the planning I don’t want to give your mum something else to worry about.”

“Wouldn’t be a problem at all,” said Ron. “Look, for once you are getting enough food to eat at the Dursley’s, so you won’t be showing up as the summertime skinny you’ve been in the past. Mum’s not going to have to take any time to put meat back on your bones. Second, you being there might actually help with the wedding. Even though she’s warmed up to the idea of having Fleur as a daughter-in-law, they’ve still been knocking heads over flowers and decorations and punch flavors. Enough to keep me out of the house and on our quidditch pitch all day long. I could use the company, and Ginny could too.”

“Ron,” said Harry, “you know how things stand between Ginny and me...we’ve broken up, and that isn’t a situation that is going to change. Period.”

He looked at Hermione, who was looking down at the table, trying to hide a smile. "I don't think that spending time in the same house will help things any."

"Well you never know," replied Ron.

"Let's get back on track, shall we?" interjected Hermione. "Harry needs to find out what is in his vault, and what will be there once he turns seventeen. We all agree that he should avoid Diagon Alley right now, so he can't go to the vault himself. Bill can't find out for him right now, and it might be difficult to sneak a goblin out of Gringott's to visit Harry here."

"So one of us can go for him," replied Ron. "That is, if you trust us mate."

Harry reached under his shirt collar and pulled out the necklace that held his bank vault key. He looked at both of his friends, thought for a moment, then handed it to Ron. "Will you go for me?" asked Harry. "I'd ask both of you to go, but with Hermione's parents here in hiding..."

Ron straightened his back a bit as he reached out for the key. "I'd be happy to help, Harry. You can count on me."

"I know I can, Ron," Harry said. He tried to gauge Hermione's reaction, but his peripheral vision was wretched without corrective contact lenses. "Now, Gringott's won't be open until tomorrow, and there's probably extra security measures and long lines...any chance you could stay with Fred and George tonight and get there first thing in the morning?"

"Depends," Ron said, only half-seriously, "what does that Brian chap have planned for dinner?"

"Didn't you hear him talk about that organic farmer's market?" Hermione asked. "He was planning on cooking up some bean curd and lentils, I think." She flashed Harry a quick wink.

"Erm, right...I'll be at my brother's presently."

Harry looked at Hermione and wondered if she'd wanted to have Ron out of the house as much as he did right about then.

"Finally, last agenda item," he said. "We need to take down the Death Eaters parked in front of Hermione's house."

"And who is we, Harry?" Hermione asked. "It's one thing to defend a house with only your bag of tricks, but to attack without a wand?"

"There has to be a way," Ron said.

"Even if there was, we'd have to wait until Harry's protections are renewed in a couple of weeks."

"I don't want to wait that long," Harry said. "Maybe...I think that it's time for Aunt Petunia to take me on a little car trip. As long as I'm under her so-called care, I should be covered."

"What," Ron asked, "she's just going to wait in the car while you take care of the Death Eaters?"

"Why not?" Harry replied. "It might do her some good to realize what they'll be up against once we've left Little Whinging for good."

"But like Tonks said," Hermione reminded him, "the spotters aren't breaking any laws...last thing we need are charges of vigilantism."

"It's against the law to wear the Dark Mark, right?"

"Yes, but they were wearing long sleeves in the photograph," Hermione said. "We can't go after them on the assumption that they might be tattooed."

"Well, you got to admit, Hermione, long sleeves in the heat of summer is a little suspicious, right?"

"It still doesn't give us just cause...it wouldn't give the Aurors probable cause to make them roll up their sleeves."

"What if we could prove they had the Mark?" Harry asked.

"Then, sure, they are fair game," Hermione replied. "But how?"

"Tonks did tell you about her discovery, right?"

"What, that you have a cute little birthmark just below your left..."

"No, you know..."

"Ok, fine," Hermione replied. "Still we would want to decide whether to take those two alone, or set up a sting to get their support crew as well."

"Sting?" Ron asked. "Shouldn't we be planning on using something stronger than a stinging hex?"

Harry and Hermione looked at Ron and shook their heads.

"Purebloods," Hermione said with exasperation and a smile.

"Hey!" said Ron.

"So should I go round up Aunt Petunia and the omnioculars?" Harry asked.

"Harry, did you hear what you just said?"

"Oh, Merlin...right up there with a skyclad Umbridge...sorry about that."

"It's alright," Hermione replied. "So do you want to hassle with your Aunt, or get a quick answer?"

Harry's eyes narrowed a bit in concern. "Yes, okay, but only if you take Tonks with you and promise not to do anything more than peep."

"What are you talking about, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Hermione and Tonks are going to do a little scouting for us," Harry replied.

"Oy, what am I," Ron asked, "a potted plant?"

"No," Hermione replied, "you are a wizard without a license to apparate."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Ron said, "rub it in."

Harry then nonchalantly turned to Hermione. "I'm going over to Number Five to ask Wally something. Do you want me to say anything to your parents?"

Hermione looked at Harry with one slightly raised eyebrow, then turned to Ron. "I probably should tell my parents that I'll be gone for a couple of hours. Why don't we meet in your room in fifteen minutes, then I can walk with you to Mrs. Figg's?"

Ron thought for a second before saying sure, then made a beeline for the video game console next door. Harry grabbed the omnioculars and his invisibility cloak from their room, handed them to Hermione, and joined her as she went downstairs.

"So what do you need to ask Wally?" Hermione asked, once they were outside.

"Well, to be honest, I was more interested in asking you something without Ron being there," Harry replied.

"Thought so," Hermione replied with a smile. "Not sure it's much better talking right under my parent's noses, but..."

Steve had the door open even before they rang the bell. They asked for a quiet place to talk for a few minutes. Looking around, the only semi-private area they could find was the hall closet. Worried that being found there by her parents would be even more of a problem, Harry and Hermione settled for an empty living room with their eyes peeled for company.

Harry sat on the couch first; Hermione slid in facing him, with one leg tucked underneath, so that she could cover both of his legs with her other leg. She then leaned her side against the back of the couch, wrapped her arm around Harry's shoulder and started to play with his hair. Harry recalled having lots of Common Room discussions with Hermione in this exact position, but never remembered the body contact to be so electrifying. He leaned his head back against her arm and smiled.

"Hermione," he said, "We keep asking questions, and saying that we need to talk, but we haven't...and I know that I've been reluctant to for fear of screwing up this wonderful thing that we've had going the past couple of days and so I haven't pushed it, but maybe now..."

Hermione smiled back at him. "Things have been rather special, haven't they?"

Harry nodded. "You know, as we were taking down the tent I was half afraid that what we did was more of a reaction to our surroundings, but..."

The fingers that had been running through Harry's hair froze into a claw position.

"But," he continued, "sitting here in this living room doesn't make you any less fanciable...and doesn't make me any less needy when it comes to wanting to snog you silly."

Her fingers flattened against the side of Harry's head and pulled it roughly towards hers as their lips connected in a brief but steamy kiss. Hermione pulled her head back and opened her eyes.

"Amazing how we think alike, isn't it?"

Their discovery was bluntly interrupted when Wally cleared his throat from the hallway and announced that Mr. and Mrs. Granger were coming downstairs.

Harry pulled back a bit and expected Hermione to do the same, but she merely relaxed her grip on his head and returned to her hair play. She responded to Harry's nervous glance towards the doorway with a smile, only turning towards the door when it was obvious that her parents had entered.

"Hi Mum. Hi Dad," she said, with what Harry thought was an amazing amount of confidence.

"Well," Mr. Granger said with a broad smile, "hello there you two...I do hope that we weren't interrupting anything."

"You were," Hermione said, "but that's okay...I've got to go out and do something with Tonks for a little bit...you two mind keeping Harry company

while I'm away?"

The Boy-Who-Lived looked at his best friend with a bit of shock. "Erm, thanks but I really should be getting back to the house...don't think my Aunt knows where I am right now."

"So what was it that you wanted to talk about?" Hermione asked sweetly.

"Erm...", Harry replied, a bit sheepishly, "I think that I got an answer to my question."

Hermione's eyes shone brightly. "Good," she said. "I think that I did too."

She stood and pulled Harry up off the couch. She didn't let go of his hand as she walked towards her parents and gave each of them a quick peck on the cheeks. Harry looked a bit flustered by everything, but not enough to pull his hand back as her parents parted and let them pass.

"See you both for dinner tonight, right?" Roger asked.

"Erm, sure," Harry replied, after getting a confirmatory nod from Hermione.

Hermione's dad smiled. "Off you go, then, dinner's at seven."

Roger had enough courtesy to wait until Harry and Hermione were half-way across the street before coughing the word "*Whipped!*" into his hand. The coughs generated when his wife responded with an elbow to his ribs were far less intelligible.

Chapter 7 – Dealing with the Death Eaters

Harry wasn't in the mood for studying or researching while Hermione was in harm's way, so when Brian returned from the market he was more than willing to help put away groceries. That presented the young wizard with the opportunity to thank the Queen's man again for helping secure the safety of Hermione's parents, and for making his stay with his Aunt and Uncle enjoyable for once.

The two talked a bit more about schedules and safety. It helped that Brian was a card-carrying Muggle; it gave Harry latitude when it came to discussing the anti-apparition wards and his mother's protective charm. When The Queen's man pointed out that with those wards in place there would be advantages for staying on at Number Four even after two weeks time, Harry noted that the house was rather crowded. And as much fun as it was to put his Aunt and Uncle in their places, having them camp out in the living room wasn't going to be fun for anyone for more than a couple of days. Brian said that there might be a win-win scenario for all involved, if they looked hard enough.

Harry also expressed concern about now having two houses to potentially defend, and limited options for safe havens if they came under attack. Harry hadn't minded putting his relatives in the bathtub during the Auror incident, but didn't care for the idea of forcing the Grangers to do the same. Again, Brian thought that there might be a solution to that problem, and when asked, Harry agreed that he'd be more likely to stay at Number Four through the summer if that problem was addressed.

Fifteen minutes after she'd left Hermione rang Harry on his mobile phone. He went up to his room to take the call.

"Hermione...please tell me you're safe."

"Harry, I'm safe...please tell me you're breathing."

"Yeah, yeah, can't a guy worry about the safety of his girl...erm,"

"What was that Harry? Did you call me a girlerm? Gee, must of missed that Magical Creatures class."

"Very funny, Hermione," Harry replied. "So did you get a look at them?"

"Yes...yes we did."

"And?"

"And," Hermione whispered conspiratorially, "underneath their clothes they were *naked!*"

"Hermione," Harry said with some degree of exasperation, "did they have the Dark Mark?"

"Yes, Harry, they did. Tonks downloaded the images from the omnioculars to her wand and returned back to the Auror Department to show it to her boss. She's going to get back to me once they've decided what to do."

"Good. So where are you now?"

"At a coffee shop a couple of blocks away from my parents house," Hermione replied. "Just thought I'd call before I apparate so you don't worry when you hear my arrival."

"Good idea. Say, speaking of mobiles and apparation, did you have your phone on when you left here?"

"Erm, I guess I did," Hermione replied. "Forgot to turn it off...funny, it seems to have survived the jump."

"That is strange," Harry said, "but useful to know...wonder if you could use it within a magical area like Diagon Alley."

"That I'd doubt,...but we could always try."

"Maybe so," Harry said, "but rather than Diagon, maybe you could swing by St. Mungo's? I feel so bad that I can't visit Bill right now."

"Why Harry, that's so thoughtful. But what if Ginny or Molly are there, what should I say?"

"Dunno...How about, 'Nice to see you Molly and back off Ginny he's all mine?'"

"So you'd want me to lie?" Hermione asked with a touch of tease.

"What would be the lie? It wouldn't be nice to see Molly there?"

"Oh, Harry, I wish I could reach through the mobile and hug you right now."

"Me too. But that's okay...not like there's going to be anyone stopping us when you do return."

"Yeah, I noticed that," Hermione said with a smile that he couldn't see. "Have you started a list of overnight errands for Ron to run?"

"Hermione, you are terrible...Brilliant, but terrible. Now go say hello to Bill while I start on that list."

Harry played with the Xbox for a few minutes before losing all patience and heading downstairs to wait for Hermione on the front steps. He found the Grangers doing the exact same thing across the street, having received a call from their daughter right after she'd talked with Harry. The invitation to wait with them on the back patio with a pitcher of pumpkin juice was too tempting to pass up, even with the potential for embarrassing questions. After securing his Aunt's begrudged "permission," Harry crossed the street and had an amazingly relaxed visit with Hermione's parents, taking the opportunity to fill them in on the neighbors, the neighborhood, and his life before Hogwarts.

The patio conversation was starting to show inflections of anxiety when, after thirty minutes' time, Hermione still hadn't appeared. It was terribly difficult for Harry to maintain his wits; he was still getting used to the idea of Hermione off on her own, without his help and protection. The wonderful way she'd handled herself with the Aurors had been reassuring, yet he still felt incredibly responsible for her well-being.

The crack of an arrival by apparation was music to their ears, once Harry told Mr. and Mrs. Granger what that sound meant. They were heading through the house to the street when Steve barreled down the stairs with the news that someone had apparently apparated. A quick call to Hermione confirmed that she'd made her arrival, and was only a block away from the house. When Harry and the Grangers walked out to the front curb, they spotted Hermione walking down the street. It was all Harry could do not to charge down the street to snog her senseless.

"Hey, Hermione, how did your 'errands' go?" her father asked, once she'd reached the front of Number Five.

"Fine, Dad," she replied, "back safe and sound."

"Did you get to see Bill?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry. He and Fleur said hello, and thanks for thinking of them."

"Just Fleur was there?"

"Just Fleur," the Muggleborn said with a smile. By then they'd all reached the living room, where Harry and the Grangers sat on the couch. Hermione reached inside her jacket pocket and retrieved the omnioculars and invisibility cloak, which she tossed to Harry.

"Thanks for letting me borrow the cloak," she said. "Came in real handy when I slipped by the scouts."

"Hermione!" Harry exclaimed. "You promised that you'd stay safe!"

"I was safe! Tonks had a wand pointed at the two the whole time I was inside."

"Do I dare ask where inside was?" her mother asked.

"Well," Hermione said, "I couldn't resist picking up a few things as long as I was at the house." She reached into her jacket once more and retrieved two match-box sized objects that she expanded into two large photo albums.

"Oh Hermione, you shouldn't have," her mother said quietly. "You know that your safety was more important than these." The tears in her eyes, however, strongly tempered the admonishment.

"Well, with all of the teasing..." Hermione replied. She gave her parents their wedding photo album, then sat on Harry's lap.

Leaning back, she placed her head on Harry's shoulder, opened the front cover of the second album, and showed him the still image of a two-year old child sitting on the floor, wearing a pink frilly dress and an opened book for a hat.

"Once upon a time," she said using a storytelling voice, "there was a little girl that didn't know that she was a witch..."

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That night's dinner conversation focused on two main topics: how silly it had been for Hermione to have snuck into her parent's house to retrieve the photo albums, and how cute Hermione had been as a child. She was thankful that most of the conversation dwelt on the latter topic. It had only taken a few pages of photos for Harry to forget how angry he was at the risk she had taken, and instead marvel that Hermione was sharing that part of her

life with him.

When the conversation did drift back to the Granger residence the talk was centered around how the Death Eaters might have found out where Hermione lived. It wasn't as if there was a directory of witches and wizards, and even if there was it wouldn't have included Muggle addresses that lacked floo connections. And while Harry suspected that Snape had, at some point in time, been part of the Order's rotation keeping watch over Number Four, neither he nor Hermione had been aware of any similar protection for her or her parents.

Harry and Hermione started to fret when they realized that the Death Eaters might know not just her home address, but the addresses of other Muggleborns as well. They decided that Headmistress McGonagall would be the best person to ask about home addresses and who might have them, but didn't want to discuss the issue with her over the floo. Harry would have owed, save for the fact that Hedwig still hadn't returned from her trip to the Ministry. That, he realized, was a separate problem.

Mr. Granger suggested that they could tell if Muggleborn houses were being watched by ringing them up directly and asking. Harry and Hermione thought that was a smashing idea, and decided that Dean Thomas would be a good test, until they realized just how many Thomases there were in the London telephone directory. Mrs. Granger then suggested that Wally and Steve might be able to help, given the fact that they had somehow figured out how to contact them two weeks past. And so it was that while Roger and Emily stayed on the patio to drink some tea, Harry and Hermione had a little chat with Wally.

They found him in the kitchen of Number Five.

"Wally," Harry asked, "I was wondering if you guys could help us find a friend?"

"Sure, I can try, is this person Muggle or magical?"

"Magical," Hermione replied, "but his parents are card-carrying Muggles and he's probably staying with them right now."

"And I'm guessing you'll need more than a phone directory?"

"Probably so."

"Okay," Wally said, "hold on while I get my laptop."

The security man went upstairs and returned a few seconds later with his portable computer.

"It'll just take a few seconds to start up. I was trying to troubleshoot why it wasn't working across the street."

"Oh, I could have told you that," Harry replied. "You had it set up next to an activated magical device."

Wally thought for a second. "The binoculars?"

Harry nodded as he fished the omnioculars out of his pocket. "Don't worry," he said, "They're deactivated right now."

"I'd like to talk with you about that interference, some time...it might help our security," said Wally. "And by the way, we call ourselves 'c-mugs.'"

"Huh?"

"Card-carrying Muggles."

"Oh," Harry said. "What is it with Muggles and their love of acronyms?"

Wally flashed a smile that would have been emoticon'ed in text. When the image he was waiting for appeared on his monitor he typed a few keystrokes and moved the arrow around the screen with a trackball at the keyboard's base. Harry thought Wally's hand movements weren't any less intricate than those used to cast an average-level spell, particularly when he quickly keystroked in the answers to his questions.

"Right, then," Wally began. "Does your friend have a name?"

"Dean Thomas."

"Thomas..Thomas...Thomas. Right. Not on the list. No worries."

He opened a new window on the screen and did more data entry.

"Do you know his parent's names?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other then jointly answered "No."

"Age and birthdate?"

"Erm...same year in school as me, birthday's March the 24th," Harry replied.

"Do you know roughly where he lives?"

"Pretty sure it's London."

"Blast it. It would have to be London, wouldn't it....bloody fools couldn't compile records if they collated themselves...so, do you know what part of London?"

"No."

"Do you know if his parents both living?"

"Pretty sure that they are."

"Still living in the same place as when he started at your school?"

"Yeah, I think so."

After a few more keystrokes Wally looked up at Harry.

"So tell me everything you can remember about his Muggle life."

"Like what?"

"Anything...brothers and sisters, any schools he talked about, places he visited, names of relatives, old girlfriends..."

"Well, he loves football...still has a West Ham poster above his bed at school."

"Oh, an East Ender, most likely...that helps. Anything else?"

"Erm, sorry...that's about it."

Wally's fingers flew over the keyboard he was hunched over as his eyes scanned window after window as they popped up on the screen. Thirty seconds later, he rolled his shoulders, drew his hands back from the keyboard and sighed. "All that information, and I can't pin him down," he said. "I should be embarrassed, even working with such a common name."

"So," Hermione said, "it was a little easier to track down a girl named Hermione?"

Wally grinned at her. "Once we figured out how to spell your name, yeah...you were pretty unique."

Harry wondered how Wally had gotten Hermione's name in the first place, but held that thought. "Hold on," he said. "Why are you trying to apologize for not finding his address, when all we gave you was a name, birth date and favorite football team? Pretty hard on yourself, aren't you?"

"I need to be, Sir Harry," Wally said, "if I'm to be of any help to you and to the Crown, right?" Wally hunched back down over the keyboard, looking at the different windows opened on his laptop's LCD. "Let me take a look back...you are certain of his birthday?"

"Yes," replied Harry, "we threw him a party this past spring when he turned seventeen...woke up a bit tender the next morning."

"And his parents are both living?"

"He's talked about his mum and dad at school," Harry said.

"I've met his parents at the train platform," Hermione added. "Why do you ask?"

"Well," Wally replied, "there's a Dean Thomas that looks like a good match, except that he was born Dean Wardlow."

"Why would that be a good match?" Harry asked.

"Because," Wally explained, "this boy's father died when he was only a year old. His surname was changed to Thomas when his mother remarried."

"Oh," Harry replied, "he's never said anything about a stepfather."

"Maybe he doesn't know," Hermione said.

"Didn't know that his real father died when he was a baby?" Harry asked, knowing what that might have felt like.

"You never know," Wally said. "One quick way to find out, though."

"How is that?" Harry asked.

Wally took his mobile phone out and dialed a number that he read off of his screen. When it began to ring he handed the phone to Harry. When it was answered, Harry introduced himself and asked for Dean. A few seconds later, an incredulous Muggleborn began to ask questions.

"Harry?" Dean asked. "Harry Potter ringing me on a Muggle telephone? What's going on?"

"Well, hello, Dean...erm..."

Hermione grabbed the phone from Harry's hand.

Hi, Dean, this is Hermione. We're just making sure that all of the DA members got back safe from school and that things are alright at your house."

"Things are fine, here, though they'd be a lot better if the boys were playing better over in Germany...are you and Harry, erm...together right now?"

"Obviously, Dean, since we're in on the same telephone conversation," Hermione replied. "Ron and I are staying with Harry at his Aunt and Uncle's to make sure things are safe for him there."

"Oh...of course, that makes sense," Dean replied.

"So Dean, we're trying to limit communications by owl and floo, for security reasons...is this telephone number going to be a good way to reach you?"

"Sure," Dean replied. "I'm amazed you were able to get it, but I guess you are the brightest witch, right?"

"Something like that," Hermione replied with a smile. "We'll talk to you soon, Dean." As she ended the call Harry looked at Hermione closely, trying to figure out just what his dorm mate had said to make her smile.

Wally had been quietly typing information into the computer screen during the conversation. Harry turned to him and asked, "So, I don't know much about computers...how easy would it be for a Death Eater to do that?"

"It'd be bloody impossible, Sir Harry," Wally said, "unless he had the same security clearances and the same knowledge of on-line databases that I have."

"Don't pay any attention to him, Wally," Hermione said. "Google searching isn't high on the list of Harry's lovable traits."

"Hey!" Harry said. "Erm, well, fair enough, so long as there's plenty of other reasons to love me."

"Oh, there are, Harry, there are," Hermione said with a smile. "So Wally, would you mind sharing with us how you worked your on-line magic?"

Wally looked at her and thought for a moment. "I'd love to, but...hold on a minute. Why don't you guys grab something to drink from the kitchen and I'll see what I can do?"

The c-mug locked his screen and went upstairs. When he returned to the living room he found Harry and Hermione sipping cold butterbeers.

"I'm impressed," Harry said, as he raised his bottle in Wally's direction. "Who's your supplier?"

"The Palace sent over a case this morning," Wally replied. "They have a few connections."

"I'm beginning to appreciate that fact," Hermione said. "So what did you find out?"

Wally grinned sheepishly. "I found out that when it comes to magical issues you have higher security clearances than I do. Who would've known?"

"Erm, certainly not us," Hermione replied. "That's wild...I wonder why ever that is?"

"Perhaps it comes with the badge and hood?" Harry asked.

"Maybe," Wally replied. "What it certainly does mean, though, is that I can tell you exactly how I found your friend's potential home address."

"You were cross-referencing existing electronic databases?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," Wally said. "Although truth be told, I was working primarily with a highly classified database we just finished compiling a couple of months ago."

"So what does this classified database identify?" Hermione asked.

"Muggleborn students at Hogwarts."

"Excuse me?" Harry asked. "You've figured out a way of identifying magical children?"

"No," said Wally, "just those who lived in Muggle society at some point in time, so no purebloods."

"How did you figure out how to identify Muggleborns?" Hermione asked.

"Well," Wally replied, "it all started with Sir Harry."

"And exactly how did I start you off?"

"We reverse engineered you."

"You did what to me?" Harry asked.

"We used you as a confirmed data point, Sir Harry, and worked our way backwards to find out how we might identify you and others like you with the information at hand."

And when did you find out about me...that I was a wizard?" Harry asked.

"Last August, in a meeting with our P.M., your former Minister of Magic...Fudge, right?...anyway, he told our Prime Minister about a 'boy-who-lived'."

"Merlin, no," Harry replied. "I'm never going to live down that nickname, am I?"

"Go on, please," Hermione asked.

"Right then," Wally replied. "In this meeting, your Minister talked about the battle against Mr. You-know-who and his Death Eaters, and the role that Sir Harry has in that battle. Well, the P.M. decided that our government should learn everything we could about this Harry Potter person."

"Why would your Minister want to know about me?" Harry asked.

"I've never been told explicitly," Wally said, "but I suspect that our government was keen on finding you, so that we could offer our assistance."

"And just why would the Muggle government want to help me?" Harry asked.

"Because Muggles are dying in your war, Sir Harry, and should, Heaven and Merlin forbid, the dark side prevail, many more Muggles will die."

"Oh," Harry said quietly. "That makes sense, I guess."

"So what governmental databases did Harry turn up on?"

"Quite a few, actually," Wally replied. "The most telling one was the list of children under guardianship due to deceased parents. You, Sir Harry, are the only Harry Potter on that list plus or minus three year's age."

"Fudge told your P.M. that my parents were killed?"

"Erm, yes, I guess so," Wally replied. "We didn't have a transcript to work off of...just got a summary based on what the Prime Minister could recall once he had the courage to admit to our Director General that he'd been visited by wizards."

"So what else did you figure out about me?" Harry asked.

"Well, from the guardianship records we learned that your parents were both killed on the same day when you were a baby, that you were being raised by your Muggle aunt and uncle, and that you left the public school system at age eleven but still had residence in Surrey. That's actually far more than we needed, of course, but the extra information did provide some nice confirmation."

"So you found Harry...how did you extrapolate from him to other Hogwarts students?" Hermione asked.

"Ah, there's the deductive reasoning part," Wally said. "Harry left the school system at age eleven to attend Hogwarts, and he didn't take any GCSE's. So we compiled a list of all the students that were enrolled in community schools at some point over the past twenty years, but didn't sit for those examinations."

"GCSE's...those are the Muggle versions of our O.W.L's right?" Harry asked.

"Pretty much," Hermione confirmed.

"Why was sitting for these examinations important?" Harry asked.

"Because," said Hermione, "there are quite a few students who first attend local primary schools, then public secondary schools. But unlike Hogwarts students, almost all of these public school students still sit for the GCSE's, right?"

"Correct, Dame Hermione," Wally said. "Even home-schooled Muggle children sit for the exams. And since school attendance is compulsory until age 16, we reasoned that the only students that left a Muggle school at age eleven and didn't take GCSEs were those that moved out of the country, or died. And that information is compiled in databases as well. It wasn't a perfect screening process; mind you; we got false positives for students at a few public schools that use the IB examination program, and those that attended boarding schools outside of Britain."

"That's the excuse my parents used!" said Hermione.

"Yes, we've run into that a fair bit. But the c-mugs in our group were able to validate the model using their magical sibling's names."

"Not to be rude, or anything," Harry asked, "but why was it so important for you to identify Muggleborn students at Hogwarts?"

"Because we have reason to believe that they and their families are at greatest risk for any non-random attack by the Death Eaters," replied Wally. "Should the worst occur, we have contingency plans in place to relocate any who are willing to locations outside of the country."

"Wow," Harry wisecracked, "a government that is actually trying to protect its citizenry. What a novel idea."

Hermione's eyes brightened as she raised her eyebrows a bit and leaned forward. "So why don't you back up a bit, now and tell us more about that list you first mentioned."

"Oh," said Wally, "that's just our list of all known wizards and witches, including the Hogwarts students."

"You've got a list of known wizards?" Harry said excitedly. "How in Merlin's name did you compile that list, and how many names are on it?"

"Well, to answer the second question first, we've got..." Brian scrolled down to the end of a screen window. "Five-hundred forty-seven, of which three-hundred eight are confirmed. Tip of the iceberg, for sure, but one does have to start someplace."

"Well how long have you been looking?" Harry asked.

"About nine months," Wally said. "Your name was first on the list, once we got it from the P.M."

"And who are 'we', Wally?" Hermione asked. "You said something about 'our' Direct General."

"Erm, let's just say a very select group within Her Majesty's Secret Service."

"So that means that you're more than just a Palace security person, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Dame Hermione, it does."

"And Steve, and Brian as well?"

"Yes," Wally replied.

"You mean that you're all spies?" Harry asked with concern.

"No, Sir Harry, it does not," Wally replied. "We gather information on magical threats to our country and its citizens."

"So you belong to MI-5, the Security Service?" Hermione guessed.

"Not quite, Dame Hermione," Wally said. "Our small group worries about both internal and external magical threats, so it includes people from both MI-5 and MI-6, the Secret Intelligence Service."

Hermione let out a small laugh. "Don't tell me...you officially don't exist, but your work involves magic and holds jurisdiction that is between that of MI-5 and MI-6. So logically, if anyone in your group has a sense of humor, you would have called yourselves..."

"We do." Wally interrupted with a smile.

"You do what?" Harry asked.

"Have a rather twisted sense of humor."

"Oh," Harry said. "So who exactly do you work for?"

Hermione answered for the Muggle secret agent.

"Wally works for MI-5 ¾."

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The next morning found Harry and Hermione both thinking about the previous night, and their first quarrel as a semi-official couple (over Wally's revelations about just how much the Muggle government knew about the wizarding world).

The list of identified Muggleborn Hogwarts students that they'd been shown was disturbingly accurate, save for the omission of those born and raised in the Irish Republic. Wally was pleasantly surprised when Harry told him this; MI-5 ¾ hadn't realized that Hogwarts drew students from beyond the borders of the United Kingdom. He had, in fact, been poised to confirm Wally's list right then and there before Hermione stopped him.

Later that night she laced into Harry for his willingness to divulge wizarding world secrets to Wally and the Muggle government that he worked for. Hermione reminded Harry about his obligation not to reveal, to the extent practicable, any information about the magical realm to Muggles. When Harry responded with disparaging comments about the wizard governments that enforced these non-disclosure laws, she reminded him that running afoul of the Ministry put him at risk for sanctions and/or jail time in Azkaban that would hamper his horcrux hunt.

The one good thing that came out of that discussion was their willingness to find common ground. Harry had seen Ron and Hermione have similar arguments many times before, but they rarely were able reach consensus. But last night, Harry had been willing to accept that he'd been a little too loose with information, and Hermione was willing to accept the idea that there were extenuating circumstances that clouded what would otherwise have been a black and white issue (like the fact that without Wally's list there wouldn't have been the surveillance in place to warn her parents away from their house). They finally resolved to obtain some wizarding world legal advice from someone they could trust.

Wally had provided them with the list of suspected Hogwarts students, and they'd spent a good deal of time figuring out how to enter the contact information onto the laptop computer that had been included in Harry's refurbished bedroom. While they'd been encouraged by the fact that Dean Thomas's house hadn't been hit by Death Eaters, they wanted to confirm that observation with the other Muggleborns. By the time they decided to call it a night neither was much in the mood to deal with the possibilities afforded by unchaperoned adjacent bedrooms; that would have brought on an entirely new discussion and some probing self-evaluation. So they parted not that much differently than if Ron or her parents were right there with them - a hug and quick peck on the lips before retiring to their separate rooms.

It had been too late to contact the other students to confirm their phone numbers and addresses the night previous, so Harry and Hermione were now calling on some of their classmates as they waited for Ron to return from the bank. In doing so they spread word of the Death Eater sightings

at Hermione's house and gathered additional contact information. As Hermione had pointed out, it was unlikely that the Ministry of Magic was currently monitoring instant messaging or e-mail traffic.

Ron returned to Privet Drive much sooner than expected. The trip to Gringott's had been very short; the goblins had ratcheted their security procedures up to 11 on a scale of 10. Only the vault owners were allowed access, even if they'd authorized another person to use their key. Had Harry shown up in person there still would have been a day-long queue to get through their verifications. When Harry observed that he would have to make a trip himself, Ron told him that the goblin they had spoken with was most apologetic, and seemed to understand why Harry couldn't be there. Arrangements had therefore been made for Harry to meet with a Gringott's representative at a Muggle bank in The City the following morning. Harry wondered just how the goblins would swing that one off once Ron confirmed that his brother was the only human that worked directly for Gringott's.

They ended their conversation just as the doorbell rang. The man at the door introduced himself as Robert Baxter, and while his business card read "Royal Historian," his laminated identification card credentialed him as a member of MI-5.

Harry showed him into the kitchen, where Brian had a fresh pot of coffee waiting. The historian stated that the Prince had asked him to visit Privet Drive and answer any questions they might have about the extent of Muggle knowledge of the wizarding world.

Ron looked rather skeptical. "I didn't know Muggles knew anything about the wizarding world."

"Mr. Weasley," Baxter replied, "royal families have long been aware the world of magic, and for good reason."

Harry asked a more probing question. "So who do you work for...the Prince, or for MI-5 ¾?"

"Both, actually," the historian replied.

"Well can you explain something then?" Harry asked. "When I talked with the Prince he made it sound like he was operating independently of the Prime Minister's office...and that he knew much more than the P.M did about the wizarding world. Yet now we're being told that the P.M. created MI-5 ¾ and has been getting information independent of the Royal household. And we've got people like yourself that say they work for both...so what's going on?"

The historian looked at Harry appraisingly. "It is a rather complicated situation," he finally admitted. "The Royal household has always been aware of the wizarding world, to some extent. In contrast, up until the past year the civilian Muggle government knew very little about the wizarding world. That all changed when your Minister of Magic told our P.M. about your troubles; there has been a massive ramp-up in information gathering by the civilian government since that time, led by MI-5 ¾. This effort necessarily involved the recruiting of new agents, and focus was made on enlisting the help of c-mugs and others already aware of the wizarding world. Brian Willox and I were part of that first recruitment class. But since we kept our jobs with the Royal Household, we're currently working undercover, so to speak.

"So the Royal Household doesn't know about MI-5 ¾?" Hermione asked.

"No," Baxter replied, "well, to be precise, not the Prince or the Queen. And the Prime Minister, in turn, doesn't know that the Royal family knows about the wizarding world."

"Why all the secrecy?" Harry asked.

"Plausible deniability," the historian replied.

"Plausible what?" Ron asked.

"Plausible deniability," Hermione explained, "is when people that work for a political leader keep sensitive information from him or her, so that the leader can truthfully deny any knowledge of that information if things go wrong."

"Well put, Dame Hermione," Baxter said, "although in this case the knowledge is withheld so as to protect it."

"What," Harry asked, "you can't trust the Royals or P.M.?"

"On the contrary, Sir Harry," Baxter replied. "It's that we don't trust their occlumency skills. Since they come in contact with wizards as part of their duties, it's important that their knowledge of the wizarding world be kept to more or less what the wizards think they should know. And it's all the more important for the P.M to keep clear of our work, given the fact that he's got one of your wizard policemen sitting outside his office door."

"An Auror working at Number 10?" Harry marveled. "Wonder if Tonks knows who that is."

"Speaking of withholding knowledge, *Sir Harry*," Hermione chided. The historian chuckled as she turned towards him. "No offense, Mr. Baxter."

"None taken," he replied. "I rather like the current contents of my brain, and don't fancy the thought of it getting erased."

"Then perhaps we should focus on what you already know about wizards and Muggles."

"A captial idea," the historian replied. "Perhaps you can tell me how much history they teach at Hogwarts?"

Hermione was fairly forthcoming. "Every Hogwarts student studies the history of our school, and that necessarily spills over into more general wizard world history. But while I've always been fascinated by the subject," she continued, making a pointed glance towards Ron and Harry, "some others find it hard to apply themselves."

Ron smirked, "Well, Hermione, you have to admit that the instructor wasn't the *liveliest* on staff."

"Ah, I see," said the historian, "and how much do you know about the history of Great Britain, or the Muggle world in general?"

"There is a Muggle studies class, but from what I hear the textbooks are more than a century old," replied Harry. "Hermione and I attended Muggle primary schools, so I guess we know the basics."

Harry was amazed to see Hermione shake her head in agreement. An admission that she had only a rudimentary understanding of anything under the sun was a rare event.

The historian nodded, and began his story with the days of Camelot, when the realms of magic and monarchy openly coexisted.

Merlin served as King Arthur's closest advisor and sat at the Round Table amongst other wizards, knights and paladins. Subsequent kings and queens had a Royal Wizard on staff to advise them as well. This situation wasn't unique to England; kings and queens on the Continent had their own wizards as well. As a result, when one king warred with another, the wizards on each side joined the battle.

He then jumped a few centuries to 1066, when William the Conqueror and the Normans invaded England. The Normans brought their wizards with them, and they fought the English wizards in a battle separate from the defeat at the Battle of Hastings. The historian noted that in contrast to the Muggle armies, the English wizards actually defeated their Norman counterparts, under the inspired leadership of the King's Wizard Gryffindor.

"So Godric Gryffindor was the English King's wizard?" Hermione asked. "That's not something that's well known in our world."

"Wait a minute," Ron said, as he worked out the math. "Isn't Hogwarts supposed to be more than a thousand years old? Godric would have had to be at least 150 years old by 1066."

"Ron," Hermione said, "maybe you want to recall how old our last Headmaster was?"

"Oh yeah," he replied. "Never mind."

"Now when the Norman King William took control of England," Baxter continued, "he demanded that Lord Gryffindor swear fealty to him. But Gryffindor was tired of battle, and tired of being intertwined in Muggle politics. And so he quite simply vanished, and took the wizarding world with him."

"He went back to Hogwarts," said Harry. "That makes sense, since it is in Scotland, which wasn't under Norman rule at the time, right?"

"Correct, Sir Harry," the historian said. "Legend has it that he had joined forces with the great wizards of Wales, Ireland and Scotland and formed a magical United Kingdom long before the Muggle version came into being."

"So the other founders were also king's wizards?" Hermione asked.

"That, Dame Hermione," he replied, "we do not know."

Ron looked at Hermione and Harry with no small amount of confusion over why the historian was calling her "Damn Hermione." Harry looked at Ron, and acknowledged his confusion with the one word promise of "Later."

"So," the historian continued, "wizards and witches have lived amongst us but apart from us for the past thousand years. Given things like the Spanish Inquisition, I can't say I blame them. But there have been times when our worlds have collided, or at least overlapped a bit more than either side might have liked. There has therefore always been a need to keep Muggle leaders in the know about the wizarding world. These days, it is your Minister of Magic and our Prime Minister that meet from time to time, but back in the old days, when the monarchy had a bit more power than it now enjoys, it was the Queens or Kings of England and Scotland that were kept in the loop."

"Interesting," Hermione said. "But why does the Queen's family still know about the wizarding world now that they don't actually run the government?"

The historian smiled and gave a partial answer. Given the frequency of changes in Muggle civilian government, there were probably advantages in maintaining long-term contact with the Royal family. He also noted that since members of the Royal family almost always married members of other European royal families, that there weren't that many people that had to be trusted with the truth.

The next hour was spent talking about intertwined histories since Godric's time, and the interactions between wizards and kings over the centuries. The three teens were shocked to learn that some prominent wizarding families had rather close relationships with the Crown before the division between the two worlds was made permanent by a secret treaty. Before he left, Baxter gave Hermione a DVD that contained scanned images of a few centuries-old historical texts that could provide additional information.

Ron's questions started in not five seconds after the historian had left.

"Right then," he began, "Who is this Prince that you were talking about, why was that guy calling you Sir Harry and Dame Hermione, and when did you plan on telling me that there were Muggles that aren't as stupid as they're made out to be?"

"Oh Ron, you are...you want to talk about stupidity?" Hermione asked. "How long did you stand in front of the toilet the other night waiting for the seat to magically pop up for you?"

"Oy, Muggles do nearly everything different...how do you expect me to absorb it all at once...I'm not some bloody sponge, after all."

"That might be her point," Harry tried to gently interject. "We did tell you about the Prince the other night, just not by name...we thought, particularly after your rough time getting here, that it'd be best if you eased into your new world."

"Would've been nice if you'd given me the choice," Ron said.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't like we got to pick and choose how we learned about the magical world, was it?" Harry replied. "Look, mate, all of this came out of the blue, what...three days ago now? Hermione and I are still trying to sort most of it out ourselves."

"Fine," Ron muttered. "So now's your chance to bring me up to speed."

Harry and Hermione then proceeded to fill in some of the gaps to the story Ron had been told two nights previous. They explained their knighthoods as ceremonial recognitions...the equivalent of being awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, and conveyed to Ron the Queen's message about his involvement within the Order of Arthur.

They then backed that message up by giving him his own Order of Arthur badge.

Ron's fears about being excluded from Harry and Hermione's activities were placated by their explanations, and by reassurances that neither of them planned on pretentiously throwing their titles around any time soon. Somewhat surprisingly, he spent more time dwelling over the fact that he'd distinguished himself in a way that none of his brothers had before. He also worried about them accepting too much help and becoming too dependent on Muggles. Harry suggested that if Ron wanted to start down that path that he would return the telly and videogames.

Ron thought that a tad extreme.

oo000000oo

A flustered familiar joined the Trio after lunch, bearing a letter for Harry and a thick envelope for Hermione. After giving Hedwig some much-needed attention, Harry opened his letter:

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please forgive the unfortunate delay in your owl's return from the Ministry. My investigation has revealed that your name and address was placed on a Level III watch list just prior to her arrival here early Saturday morning - the work of someone from the Minister's office, apparently. All letters and packages sent to the Ministry by persons on this watch list are considered high risk for hexes and/or curses, and standard procedures for handling this type of post include owl isolation and containment within a high-security stasis field until the safety of their delivery can be determined. Current backlog for this type of post is about three weeks.

Placing your name on this list (which includes, by the way, Tom Riddle, Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy) ensured that any reply that you provided to Umbridge's letter Friday night would not have been received and read. Which was entirely the point, I imagine. Rest assured that your owl was unharmed by the stasis field.

I wish I could say that the person who did this would be held accountable, or that I have the power to immediately remove your name from this watch list, but I can not. Your owl now knows a reliable alternative delivery address, should you or anyone that you trust care to contact me directly. Since all of your owl post communication is subject to isolation, please feel free to route posts addressed to other ministry addresses through me; I will see that they are delivered without delay.

Again, my apologies to you and to your familiar.

Gawain Robards, Head
Auror Division, Magical Law Enforcement Office
Ministry of Magic

Harry traded letters with Hermione. Her package, also from the Head Auror, included the incident report that she'd been promised. The investigation had confirmed their version of events last Friday, and that the disciplinary action promised that night had, in fact, been metered out. The Head Auror also indicated that plans were in place to arrest the two Death Eater look-outs on her parents's doorstep. He asked that they allow the MLE to handle the situation from here on out, and expressed his hope that Harry, Hermione and her parents would trust his department to perform better than they had at Number Four. As an aside, he also stated that the MLE had placed a rather large requisition with the Weasley Twins for their after-market omnioculars.

Harry asked Hermione what she thought about letting the Aurors handle that operation. She said that she would have to check with her parents, but that she was inclined to let it go - the three of them certainly had more pressing issues to attend to. Still, she made a note to track down Tonks to find out when the arrests were to be performed.

Later that afternoon the three decided to undertake a fitness regimen, and ran a few laps around the neighborhood. None of them handled the exercise pain-free, and Ron had a rather difficult time keeping up with Hermione's pace. They squabbled most of the distance, to the point where Harry suggested that they might need a neutral third party to lead their workouts. Mr. Granger, who found them on the front lawn winded and aching after their run, thought that was an excellent idea, and promised to make arrangements for some coaching.

oo000000oo

It was movie night at the Granger's.

Well, actually it was at Number Five, and it was the Granger residence that they were actually watching, but there was popcorn, at least.

A quick chat with Tonks had confirmed that the Auror's operation was planned for that night, and the Trio had decided to honor Auror Robard's request to stay away from the area. Hermione's parents had suggested a movie, so after dinner (and with Petunia's permission, of course) the Trio

had crossed the street and were finally given a full tour of Number Five.

They hadn't been shown the upstairs bedrooms before, and when they were led into the largest bedroom they understood why Wally had asked them to check their wands at the door. The room had been transformed into a command and control center/surveillance post, with banks of flat-panel screens displaying live video feeds from not only Harry's neighborhood, but within Number Four itself. Wally had three of the largest monitors set up side-by-side on a table pushed up against the wall, and once they were shown in he switched the video feeds so that the left monitor showed the two Death Eaters standing on the street corner down from the Granger's house and the right monitor showed a wide angle view of their entire street. With little activity shown on either screen Wally popped a DVD into the desktop computer that sat beneath the central monitor.

There wasn't much room to sit in front of the screen...a couch and two sturdy chairs. Wally and Steve sat in the chairs, while Mr. and Mrs. Granger sat on the couch. At their insistence (and to her father's great amusement) Hermione and Harry gave Ron the other spot on the couch. That left Harry and Hermione sitting on the floor together, in front of her parents.

Given Wally's sense of humor (and personal preferences), Hermione wasn't at all surprised by the cinematic selection.

"Friend of Dorothy's, eh Wally?" she asked.

Wally laughed. "A flaming fan," he replied. "Watch it, though, or I'll ask Harry in front of your parents whether you are a good witch, or a bad witch."

"Oy, quiet down," Ron said in between handfuls of popcorn. "I want to hear those munch-people sing."

Dorothy and company had just made it to the Emerald City when Steve jumped up to the table, minimized the movie's window, and opened up a new feed. When Harry looked at the right monitor he understood why.

A black sedan had pulled into the Granger residence's drive.

The new video image that Steve had opened was from inside the Granger's house. Wally had already repositioned himself in front of a separate computer, and was typing at a furious pace. Ten seconds later, an emerald-tinted image appeared on a monitor directly above the center screen.

"High altitude infra-red," Wally said simply.

"You've got a spy satellite taking pictures of our house?" Emily Granger asked incredulously.

Wally shook his head. "Unmanned aircraft," he replied. "Our spy satellite passed over a couple of hours ago...it can't hover over a target like this."

Hermione looked at Wally in wonder. So did Ron, although his was wonder "I wonder what in Merlin's name he's talking about?"

They all watched as a young woman that looked remarkably like Hermione and a man and woman got out of the car and walked inside the house.

"Tonks," Harry said in recognition.

Once inside Tonks and her Auror pretend parents shed their Muggle jackets, drew their wands, and took up a defensive position around a shoe that one of them had taken out of a coat pocket. Moments later, the two Death Eaters crossed the street and approached the Granger residence. A large crack was heard from the inside feed just before the screen went black. Harry looked up and counted eight newly formed black spots within the infrared screen that were within the Granger residence footprint. Then, almost as suddenly, a large black spot that included the entire Granger property appeared on the satellite feed.

"They used magic of some sort," Wally said. "That black spot is magical interference with the infrared waves, and something fried the camera inside the house."

"A group must have apparated inside the house just before an anti-apparition ward was established," Harry reasoned.

"But were they good guys or bad guys, and who set the ward?" Ron asked.

"Good or Bad...can't tell based on their infrared profiles," Wally replied.

"Oh, I hope that Tonks isn't trapped," Emily Granger exclaimed.

"They're fine, I bet," Hermione said. "that shoe was most likely a portkey."

Sure enough, just as the left monitor went to black the long-range street view on the right-side monitor showed three figures appearing across the street holding a shoe in their hand. They dropped the shoe and immediately fired spells towards the two Death Eaters on the Granger's doorstep. The next thing they knew, there was an even larger black spot centered on the infrared view of the house.

"So," Ron decided, "the Aurors just overlapped their own anti-ap ward on top of the Death Eater's...and now that Tonks is out it is just Death Eaters that are trapped inside."

"Smooth," commented Steve.

Perhaps realizing their predicament, the Death Eaters blasted a huge hole out of the back of the house and tried to fight their way out. Several Aurors, however, were able to cut them down easily from well-fortified and hidden locations around the house perimeter.

The fight lasted all of three minutes. In the end, two Aurors were down and being tended to while all of the Death Eaters were immobilized, bound,

and spirited away. A second group of Aurors appeared on site; one group ran into the house while the other fanned out and established Muggle-repelling wards as they looked for Muggles to obliviate. Not five minutes later, the men that had been inside the house reappeared with bags over their shoulders and then disappeared once they'd cleared the wards. The Aurors that had been covering this movement themselves disappeared, until only the Obliviators were left. Two started to mend the gaping hole in the house wall, while the others stood guard. Once repairs were complete, someone canceled the wards and then they themselves disappeared.

Ten minutes, two casualties, ten Death Eaters in custody. It seemed like a good day's work, even to Harry.

Chapter 8 – Clan Chief's Consort

Tuesday, June 5, London

The following morning's trip to the bank provided Harry, Hermione and Ron with an opportunity to plot and strategize from the backseat of the Bentley.

They started with a discussion on the previous night's battle between Aurors and Death Eaters. Tonks had visited Privet Drive about an hour after the attack; having decided it best to stay silent on Muggle surveillance capabilities, they had to feign ignorance of the operation and its results. She did have some information that they hadn't gleaned from the video feeds. It turned out that Death Eater assault on the Granger household had been something of a father/son affair, with Crabbe, Goyle and their fathers comprising half of the raiding party. While the interrogations hadn't yet been completed, Harry and Ron were quite certain what the two Slytherin students would have done to Hermione had they been successful in capturing her and their parents. Hermione seemed rather calm over that point, commenting that it was too bad that the Malfoys hadn't been there as well.

Tonks had informed them that the Aurors that had entered the house immediately after the battle were a moving company of sorts; they'd shrunk and lightened as much of the furniture, wardrobes and other household items as they could in the time available and hauled it away in large bags. Not knowing where Hermione's parents were now staying, the Auror Department was storing what they'd recovered until she could provide a delivery address. Tonks agreed with Hermione and Harry when they decided it best if the Granger's location was kept from the Ministry – there was no way to know who might pass that information along to the wrong people.

Wally had spent a bit of time right after the battle digitally manipulating and enhancing the images of both the Aurors and the Death Eaters. The three had been amazed at how well the computer software was able to create headshots of the wizards, both good and bad. They had been even more amazed when Wally then matched the mugshots against those stored in his database. It turned out that three of the Death Eaters had profiles that matched those taken by CCTV security videos and other recording devices present during previous attacks on Muggles. Wally also identified four of the Aurors involved in the attack as having been present at King's Cross the previous Friday. He laughed when Ron had asked how they'd manage to take pictures at the train station; the Ministry of Magic's request for the Muggles to close off the entrance to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ to outside eyes all but announced the fact that there'd be a high proportion of wizards and witches amongst the faces captured by the Station's security cameras.

The fact that they'd been allowed to see Wally work his computer magic was something they all had noted. Ron's suggestion that the Muggle security men had been too dense to realize what they were revealing was shot down fairly quickly by Hermione. She said it was much more likely that MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ wanted the Trio to know what they were capable of doing, and what they knew of the magical world. Whether this was to advertise how they might help the Trio, or assure them that the knowledge was gained independently of anything the three might have let slip, was unknown.

Hermione stated that the Muggle video images might have helped them more than Wally might have imagined. She reviewed what they saw on the video feed provided by the high-altitude drone-mounted camera, and did a backseat physics lesson on electro-magnetic radiation (her knowledge bolstered by a quick read of one of Dudley's unused textbooks the night before). She expected Ron to have been completely befuddled by the notion that heat was related to colors, and that Muggle technology existed that could translate infrared radiation into something within the visible spectrum. He displayed, however, a surprisingly good level of understanding that (much to Hermione's chagrin) he attributed to his time spent on the Xbox (specifically, the night vision goggles used by his terrorist-hunting SAS alter ego).

The fact that anti-apparition wards had created dark spots on the infrared image was most intriguing to Hermione, and something she (rather sheepishly) noted she didn't fully understand. It might have been that the magic within the ward had disrupted the ability of the satellite to image that portion of its field of view. But if the attack had been in day time, they should have been able to see "through" the magic, given the fact that anti-apparition wards are transparent within the visible range of light.

Hermione then described a possible scenario that left Ron and Harry rather dumbstruck. If anti-apparition wards consistently created black circles on infrared satellite images, then the Muggle government, if it chose to, might be able to identify the exact location of every single magical structure or area protected by those kinds of wards. Harry was quick to catch on how that could help them find Voldemort (anti apparition wards set up at the Riddle mansion, perhaps?), but he voiced that idea just as they pulled up to their meeting location, so the point was left for later.

They'd been told to travel to Prescott's, which was one of the older and more reputable banks in Britain. Brian babysat Petunia in the car while the three teens walked up the wide marble stairs and into the sturdy, stone-walled building. As instructed, they told a receptionist that they had a meeting with a Mr. Nigel Nilbog; the Trio was promptly led by a guard towards an elevator bank.

After a short trip several floors downwards they were shown to a rather austere conference room and introduced to a Mr. Jenkins, whose business card indicated was the Bank's president. Mr. Jenkins showed them a side table with tea and coffee service; they'd just returned to their seats when a rather small door opened from the wall opposite and Headmistress McGonagall entered the room, followed by three goblins. They'd half-expected to see the Headmistress; Tonks had conveyed for them word of the meeting time and place (although they imagined she would have met them on their side of that door). Harry recognized one of the goblins as Griphook, who'd taken him on his very first roller-coaster ride to his

Gringott's vault. His eyes went wide when they were introduced to the other two goblins; Griphook was accompanied by no less than Ragnok, Goblin Clan Chief, and Earchewer, his Clan Champion.

Given the amount of material covered, the first part of their meeting went surprisingly fast. The human bank president did most of the talking, explaining that Prescott's had been a goblin-owned Muggle bank for over two centuries (the Trio didn't bother asking him for his Muggle identification card, considering the fact that he didn't bat an eye when the goblins showed up as proof enough). The bank was the main conduit for money exchanges between pounds sterling and galleons; whether they knew it or not, most Gringott's patrons also had accounts at Prescott's. Griphook then passed out six rather thick portfolios; four to Harry, and one each to Ron and Hermione. Each portfolio contained an inventory of a vault, any associated Muggle bank accounts, and investments both (Muggle and wizard-related).

Ron and Hermione were rather shocked when they looked at their individual net worths. Griphook explained that their vault contents reflected the disposition of Albus Dumbledore's estate. Their former Headmaster had, as a result of his partnership with Nicolas Flamel and other shrewd investments, been one of the richest wizards in Britain. Not wishing that the use of Harry's money (or their willingness to accept it) become an issue for either Ron or Hermione, Albus had bequeathed to each of them the sum of one hundred thousand galleons, as well as a few personal mementos; Hermione had been given all of Dumbledore's books, research notes and journals, while Ron had been given the former Headmaster's entire collection of chocolate frog cards. Each, of course, thought themselves the richer.

As might be expected, Harry's finances were a little more complex. Each of the four portfolios was associated with a specific vault within Gringott's. The first covered the vault he'd had access to since his First Year at Hogwarts; Harry was rather surprised to see just how much money was within it. Griphook noted that the balance reflected not just the remainder of the "school" money left by his parents, but the money that had been bequeathed by Sirius. All of those funds were available for his immediate use. The second portfolio described the contents of the Potter family vault, which he'd gain access to upon his seventeenth birthday. The vault contained not only a large amount of gold, but two pages worth of itemized magical items, which McGonagall explained were either Potter family heirlooms or the salvageable contents from their house at Godric's Hollow. The Headmistress then added that while Dumbledore hadn't left Harry any money, he had been bequeathed the pensieve, as well as all of the Headmaster's bottled memories. She passed them to Harry in two small boxes, which he handled as if they were the most priceless artifacts imaginable.

When Harry opened the third and fourth portfolios he found single pieces of parchment within each that didn't provide an inventory, but rather noted that Harry held a disputed or unresolved interest in the vault contents. One was associated with the Black family estate; apparently there were investments and other financial holdings that weren't directly owned by Sirius, but rather, by the Estate. While Sirius had been the last Black by name, there were still a few surviving members of the Black family through maternal bloodlines (including, McGonagall noted, Nymphadora Tonks and Draco Malfoy), and the disposition of this portion of the Black family fortune was currently under review by the Wizengamot. A resolution was expected sometime in the next decade.

Harry found the last portfolio by far the most interesting and terrifying; the vault was described as belonging to Lord Gryffindor. When he asked the goblins how they knew he might have an interest in Godric Gryffindor's estate, Griphook smiled, and suggested the sword that Harry had stashed in his rucksack was proof enough.

The Headmistress then identified a final sum to be under Harry's limited control. Dumbledore had specified that the bulk of his estate (more than thirty million galleons) be placed in a trust for the defense and support of Hogwarts. The trust, which had been established prior to his death, identified Harry as its executor, with the power to spend any or all of the funds for that purpose.

When Hermione asked about establishing pound sterling accounts at Prescott's, the bank president handed each of them an envelope that contained account information and debit cards, which they could use to draw against their accounts. Griphook further explained that each of the portfolios were charmed to facilitate transfers between their Prescott and Gringott accounts; they merely needed to touch their balance sheets with their wands and drag numbers from one account to the other. Similarly, their wands could be used to write down a new location on the ledger, and funds (or items) could be dragged with their wands from their vault to that spot. If that new location was, for example, their residence, said cash (or item) would be delivered directly to them.

Harry, who was looking over the inventory of his personal vault, asked if he could do a test run. The Headmistress objected to his underage wand use, which made the goblins all laugh; the use of their magical items was untraceable by any Ministry magic. Harry then used his wand to write "Number Four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging" on his balance sheet, and dragged a single item from his vault to that written address.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Knight Protectors of the Realm, Part 2 (part 2)

At that point Clan Chief Ragnok spoke his first words of the meeting, stating that with the financial issues dealt with that it was time for important issues to be discussed.

"Issues more important than finances?" Harry asked with a slight grin.

"Indeed," Ragnok replied. "We wish to speak with you alone, Harry Potter."

The bank president was already gathering his things, and the Headmistress stood and asked if he would show her to a secure apparition point. Harry, however, blanched at the idea of asking Ron and Hermione to leave.

"I do not wish to offend, Clan Chief Ragnok," he replied, "but you should know that anything you say to me in private I would share with them later. I trust them with my life."

"Then they are of your Clan?" Ragnok asked.

Harry turned towards Ron and Hermione and got the answer he was looking for just from their eyes. "Yes," he said, "Ron is my champion, while Hermione is, erm..."

"I am Clan Chief Potter's Consort," Hermione said with authority.

That comment earned her some sharp glances and intakes of breath from both Ron and the Headmistress (who had almost been out the door). From Harry she got eyes full of wonder and breath that was a tad ragged.

"*Hell of a way for Ron to find out,*" Harry thought to himself.

"Very well, then, Clan Chief Potter," Ragnok replied. Once the bank manager and Headmistress had left, he added, "I wish to speak with you of alliances and the future of our Clans."

"I would be honored to hear your thoughts on these matters, Clan Chief Ragnok," Harry replied, with all of the diplomacy he could muster.

"As you are no doubt aware," Ragnok began, "your champion's older brother has spent a fair bit of time trying to convince me to side with those who fight Voldemort. It is only because Bill Weasley has been such a trustworthy Gringott's employee, and that he spoke on behalf of Albus Dumbledore, that he didn't suffer the fate of the Ministry representative that made that very same request."

"What happened to the Ministry's representative?" Ron asked.

"My Champion lived up to his name."

"Oh."

"With Dumbledore's passing to the next plane of existence, we asked Bill Weasley for whom he now spoke on behalf of...and he chose you," Ragnok said, "thereby reconfirming our opinion of the soundness of his judgement."

"Your words are too kind, Clan Chief," Harry said.

"But not too overblown," the goblin replied. "We have no faith in the ability of the Ministry of Magic to protect its own, much less the rest of the magical realm. You, on the other hand...well, let's just say that the goblins see their interests and their futures closely tied to yours and your Clan."

"I am honored, Clan Chief," Harry replied. "I would value your counsel on how I might act to preserve those interests."

"A wizard asking for a goblin's advice?" the Clan Chief's champion blurted out in Gobblygook. "It must be some trick."

"Hold your tongue, Earchewer," the goblin chief said sharply. "His humility only supports our assessment, and planned course of action."

The goblin then turned towards the Trio. "You have entered into an alliance with the Muggles against the Dark Wizard," he simply said. "Now, no need to deny this fact," he said, as Harry's face turned a bit white, "it was strategically a wise move. Had you not done so I may have been courting favor with the Prince myself."

"I am sorry, Ragnok," Harry said, "but we had hoped to keep my relationship with the Muggles quiet. Might I ask how you knew?"

Griphook smiled. "Last Friday you were authorized to use the bank card owned by the Prince of Wales...did you notice the name of the bank that issued that card?"

"Prescott's," Harry said, with a nod of comprehension.

"The Royal family has one of the larger vaults beneath Gringott's," the goblin said. "Not as big as yours, of course, but then most of their wealth is managed by the Bank of England."

Why would you consider a Muggle-goblin alliance?" Ron asked.

"Self-preservation," the Chief replied simply. "Voldemort...the Ministry of Magic and their kind...they all underestimate the powers of the Muggle clans even more than they underestimate goblins. We have envisioned a future under the Dark Mark and it is, quite simply, disastrous."

"Haven't Voldemort and his kind been courting goblin favor, promising power and playing on injustices both past and present?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, Consort, they have," Ragnok replied. "But the Death Eaters foolishly believe that should they gain power that the Muggles would leave them alone, or would perhaps be too ignorant to even notice the difference. Do you believe that likely?"

"No," Hermione replied. "They will not stand for the killing of Muggleborn wizards and the Muggle hunting that no doubt would follow Voldemort's success...and if they don't already have the means to destroy Voldemort, they certainly have the will and resources to acquire those means in short order."

"We agree," Ragnok said, "and fear greatly the consequences of that battle. At best it would destroy much of the wizarding economy, and at worst...well, at this point in time goblins enjoy a certain amount of economic leverage over wizard humans. We have nothing close to that leverage and control over Muggle humans, and expect that the war against Voldemort would also bring an attack against our clans and other magical sentiments."

"That is a dark vision of our futures, Clan Chief Ragnok, and one that I would like to prevent," said Harry. He thought for a moment. "Your decision to even consider a goblin-human alliance must have been controversial within the Goblin Nation."

"That, Clan Chief Potter, is a slight understatement," Ragnok replied with a chuckle. "There are some who can not see beyond the dishonorable actions of the Ministry, and their continued protection of Bagman the Thief."

"Would your position be strengthened if the money he stole from the Goblins was repaid?" Harry asked. "Depending on the actual amount, I might be in a position to help."

"While you do have funds sufficient to cover our losses," Ragnok replied, "this has grown to much more than a simple reconciling of bank accounts. Any government that harbors a known thief can not be trusted...and even if you brought me Bagman's head on a spike that would not change."

"I understand, Clan Chief," Harry said. "Perhaps, then, we will look at ways of changing the Ministry's position on this matter."

"That would be most helpful, Clan Chief Potter." He stood up. "We have given you much to consider, I am afraid. Perhaps we should meet again soon?"

"We would enjoy just such a meeting," Harry said, as he stood and shook each of the goblin's hands. Earchewer then went to Ron and (after a close physical appraisal) shook the hand of his counterpart. Griphook in turn approached Hermione.

"I believe that congratulations are in order, Consort," he said quietly, and with a slight smile. "We were unaware of your position within Clan Potter...you have chosen wisely."

"Thank you, Griphook," Hermione replied, "and yes, I believe that I have."

She glanced over at Ron, who was watching her with a frighteningly cool expression.

Hermione did not look forward to their next conversation within the back of the Bentley.

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Harry's queasiness about discussing Hermione's status as his "consort" was replaced by a different kind of stomach distress when the lift opened to the main lobby.

Their exit was blocked by a rather stern looking Headmistress.

"Follow me, the three of you."

With nothing short of complete expectation that they'd follow, McGonagall turned and walked into a rather large conference room set against the back wall of the lobby.

Not that far gone from school, the three teens did as they were told. Once inside, the door slammed behind them, accompanied by loud clicks and clanks within the walls and windows that left little doubt that their conversation would be private.

All but four chairs surrounding the conference table disappeared; with three of the four on the side closest to them the three didn't wait for orders to sit down. The Headmistress started to pull the fourth chair away from the opposite side of the table, but changed her mind and launched into her tirade whilst pacing back and forth in front of them.

"In all my years at Hogwarts," she began, "in all my years as Head of Gryffindor House...never have I seen students act with more rashness and presumption than the three of you just displayed. Mr. Potter, do you have any sense of what you just did in that meeting...do you have any sense? Proclaiming the existence of your Clan...bypassing the delegate authority of the Ministry and negotiating directly with the Goblin Clan Chief...you might just as well announce open sedition!"

Harry was too stunned to reply.

“And you, Miss Granger...let’s just gloss over the “consort” business and focus on the fact that you are very likely the only female that has dared speak to Ragnok before being spoken too and lived to tell the tale. Surely you know something about the patriarchal clan system within the Goblin Nation?”

“But...”

“As for you, Mr. Weasley,” the Headmistress continued, as she ignored Hermione’s protest, “Harry proclaims that you are his Clan Champion and you just sit there like a fish out of water? After the meeting you shook hands with Ragnok’s champion, right? Do you know why he’s called Earchewer? Let me tell you...he wasn’t given that name, he earned it.”

Ron let out one-half of an “Eek” before swallowing the remainder.

“And here we are, barely a week after Dumbledore’s passing...what do you think your former Headmaster would say if you were in his office right now?”

Harry thought for a moment before replying.

“Care for a lemon drop?”

A slight smile erupted on the Headmistress’s otherwise stern face. “Yes, Harry, I imagine you’re right.” She transfigured the conference table into a couch that faced the other three and took a seat.

“So,” she said, “perhaps you’d consider telling me what happened after I left?”

Harry smiled and proceeded to give her an abbreviated summary of the discussion (leaving out the bit about his relationship with the Prince). The Headmistress was initially amazed at the prospect of a Muggle-goblin alliance, and seemed a bit skeptical of the goblin’s assessment of Muggle capabilities. Nevertheless, she was understandably quite pleased that the goblins had finally gotten off the fence and decided not to join Voldemort’s forces.

Headmistress McGonagall’s tone of voice and demeanor grew progressively warmer as they talked, and Harry picked up on the fact that much of her warmth was directed towards Ron. She mentioned that she visited The Burrow the day before, and told Molly in no uncertain terms that Ron’s efforts that summer would be vital to the Order’s mission. She said that she was inclined to return that afternoon to share the additional good news, certain that Ron’s parents would be immensely proud of what he’d done. She then noted that while Bill had certainly laid the foundation it was Ron that had helped cement the ties between the goblins and wizards, and that while Percy had been a Head Boy that there’d never been a Weasley named Clan Champion...and that Dumbledore no doubt thought Ron’s efforts valuable, or else he wouldn’t have made him wealthier than either of the Twins.

It was a pretty blatant attempt to boost Ron’s ego, and Harry was more than grateful to see that it worked. With every comment Ron’s back grew a little straighter, and his eyes a little brighter. Harry thought those eyes actually sparked a bit when the Headmistress casually mentioned that while she was at The Burrow that Luna Lovegood had stopped by, hoping to hear news about Ron.

Hermione chose that moment to announce their need to take their leave for lunch. When the Headmistress asked how well they were eating at the Dursleys, she received some muttered “It’s alright’s,” prompting her to call out for Dobby the house elf. He instantly appeared with a rather large picnic basket filled with the staples of a Great Hall feast. Ron eagerly grabbed the basket and spent a few seconds with his nose hovering over the top, savoring the smells of all his favorite comfort foods. Wondering out loud whether they’d be allowed to eat in the back of the limousine, Ron headed out into the main lobby to find Brian.

Harry and Hermione couldn’t help but laugh as they watched Ron leave. Their eyes met, and they turned to offer the Headmistress their thanks.

“You really knew how to punch all of his buttons,” Harry said with some wonder.

“I should,” the Headmistress replied, “I have been his Head of House for the past six years.”

“And you’ve been ours as well, haven’t you?” Hermione asked rhetorically.

McGonagall smiled and nodded. “I trust,” she asked, “that your self-identification as Harry’s consort doesn’t have any legal underpinnings...at least for now?”

The two blushed a bit as they looked at each other. “No,” Hermione replied, to which Harry added in his thoughts “*Not just yet.*”

“Yet I sense the two of you have taken a few steps down that path together?” she replied with a small grin.

“Is it that obvious?” Harry asked, as he tentatively grabbed Hermione’s hand.

McGonagall chuckled, “It has been, for quite some time. Care to share when the two of you realized it yourselves?”

Harry said “Friday” at the same time Hermione said “Sunday.” Hermione looked at Harry with an arched eyebrow as he shrugged his shoulders. “At the Palace, seeing you in the periwinkle blue dress,” he said simply. She nodded. “And seeing you in the tuxedo...” She turned to the Headmistress. “Harry’s right...it was Friday.”

McGonagall nodded with a terse smile of recognition. "Like the phoenix, rising from its ashes...so that would be June 1...ah, I believe Poppy will be delighted to hear the news."

"Why is that?" Harry asked.

"Because she won the betting pool, of course."

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"So you are Harry's consort?" Ron asked, in between mouthfuls of Yorkshire pudding. "What's that mean exactly?"

They were being driven back to Little Whinging, and well on their way to finishing their back-bench feast.

"Well," Hermione replied, "in the context of that conversation, it meant that I'd be allowed to stay for the rest of the meeting...Ragnok expected some level of authority, after all."

"Yeah, but what's it mean?" he asked, rather coolly.

"Erm...in the Muggle world, a consort is the husband or wife of a king or queen."

"Brilliant," Ron replied, "much better I be the champion and you the consort, then."

"Yes," Harry said with a nervous laugh and a glance towards Hermione. "I agree."

"So, the goblins, they have clans, and each clan has a Chief, who has a champion fighter and a wife?"

"Erm, pretty much," Hermione replied, "except that from what I've read, goblins chiefs don't necessarily have to be married to their consort."

"Oh," said Ron, who'd moved on to tackling a ham shank. "So you wouldn't have been lying to the goblins if you were Harry's girlfriend."

"Erm...yes, you're right."

Ron thought for a few seconds. "Goblins are sticklers when it comes to the truth, you know...liars are just one step below thieves in their eyes."

"Yes," Hermione said with a slight pause. "I think I read that someplace once."

"Of course you did," Ron replied. He pointed the shank of ham towards Hermione. "So were you lying?"

Hermione looked at Harry, who took the initiative to answer. "No Ron, she wasn't."

Ron dropped the shank on his plate and fished through the basket, looking for some dessert. After picking out three different types of pastries, he looked straight at Harry.

"So were you cheating on Ginny, then?"

"No, Ron, I wasn't," Harry replied. "What Hermione and I have...it's just at the start, except of course it isn't since we've known each other so long, but...it happened after I broke up with Ginny."

"I see," Ron said quietly. He then turned to Hermione.

"Tart."

"Excuse me?"

Ron clarified by pointing towards the pastries.

"Fancy a tart, Hermione?"

"No thank you, Ron."

Ron nodded as he sipped from his goblet of pumpkin juice.

"You know, Hermione, I fancied you for the longest time."

"Yes, I know."

"Snogging Lavender Brown wasn't exactly the best way to show it," Ron continued, "But I did."

"Past tense, mate?" Harry asked with some degree of hope.

Ron looked closely at Harry.

"Yeah, past tense."

"As of when?" Hermione asked.

"Dinner Saturday night, Luna's house."

"Oh."

"She likes me," Ron said simply. "She likes me as Ron Weasley, and not just the package deal of Harry and Ron...or worse, as Harry's mate."

"She's a sweet girl," Harry said. "Brave too...showed that at the Department of Mysteries."

"Yeah," Ron agreed, "but so did Ginny."

"Yeah, she did...but that's over, Ron...we broke up and it's over."

"Sure, Harry, I know it is." Ron said. "Plan on telling her anytime soon?"

"Erm, well, don't know when I'll see her...got to stay at the Dursleys, after all."

"Yeah, guess that makes sense," Ron replied. "We could have visitors, though, right?"

"Sure," Harry replied somewhat tentatively. "Thinking of inviting Ginny to dinner?"

"No, of course not," Ron replied. "You think I have problems in Muggleland, can't imagine what she'd do without a magic mirror telling her how pretty she is every morning...actually, I was thinking of Luna."

"We'd love to have Luna visit," Hermione said.

Ron looked at her cross-eyed as he hunted for any missing treats in the basket. "Nice pronoun, Hermione."

"Oh...yeah, sorry about that," she said.

"It's alright," Ron replied. "I can deal with plurals...just promise not to snog under my nose, okay?"

"Sure, Ron," Harry said with some relief. "We can work with you on that one."

Ron shook his head. "So about that lying to goblins thing...were you serious when you told them I was your champion?"

"Of course I was, mate," Harry replied.

"Good," he said, "wouldn't want it any other way."

Chapter 9: Normality

The Trio arrived at Number Four to find that the goblins had already completed Harry's portfolio transaction. They also discovered that Harry's delivery instructions should have been much more specific, as the coffee table in his Aunt and Uncle's living room had been replaced by Sirius's motorcycle.

Harry couldn't decide what was funnier; his Aunt Petunia's shock over the new piece of furniture, or the fact that the goblin who had made the delivery had forced her to sign for it. With more empathy than she knew she possessed, Hermione shrank the motorcycle just enough for Ron and Harry to roll it out the door and onto the drive.

The arrival of the classic motorbike brought Wally, Steve and Roger out from Number Five for some fawning. Harry, who had only half-believed that the motorcycle would really materialize, balked when they encouraged him to go for a spin. Hermione saw his hesitancy and had grabbed his hand in support.

"You know, guys," she told the men, "there's a good chance that the previous owner installed some rather nasty theft deterrence charms." Her warning caused the men to back up and give the motorcycle some space.

"Thinking about Sirius?" she asked Harry, rather quietly.

"No," he replied, "well, yes, but more than that...I was thinking about the last time this motorcycle was in front of this house."

Hermione realized what he was alluding to. "Hagrid used this bike to bring you to the Dursley's all those years ago, the day after your parents...."

"Yeah," Harry said, cutting her off before she could complete that sentence.

Hermione let go of Harry's hand and pulled him close, reaching under his arm to grab his waist. Harry responded by wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

"You need to learn how to ride this, and quick," Hermione said.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because this is how you got to your Aunt and Uncle's, and by Merlin, this is going to be how you are going to leave it...how we are going to leave it...when the time comes."

Harry looked at her and kissed the top of her head.

And Hermione's father, who had seen and heard all and was always quick with a snarky quip, for once held his tongue.

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Neither Harry nor Hermione was surprised when Ron later announced that he wanted to pay Luna a visit. They all agreed it was a good time for him to do so...it gave Ron a chance to process both what he'd heard at the bank and in the Bentley. Hermione suggested that it'd also be a good time for him to patch things up with his mum. The newly announced Champion, however, seemed hesitant to lose his excuse for needing to use the Lovegood's floo connection.

Ron had the bright idea of using his wand and portfolio to transfer fifty galleons from his vault to his school trunk. He had originally wanted to write down "left front trouser pocket" as the delivery address, until Hermione suggested that a less than accurate delivery might be rather painful. With more than enough "date money" for the first time in his life, Ron whistled a happy tune all the way to Arabella's house. Had it been more on-key, Harry and Hermione would have recognized it as the melody from "Weasley is our King."

With Ron gone, Harry and Hermione were faced with a number of competing uses for their time. Tempted to either set up the tent or dive into Dumbledore's siveve, they instead chose to take advantage of the sunny weather and walk hand-in-hand about the neighborhood. Of course, Hermione thought of a way to justify their decision. She wasn't entirely happy with the apparition spot she'd been using, so they walked the neighborhood scouting potential alternatives, using a spell that Tonks had shown her that identified the limits of an anti-apparition ward. They then marked this boundary on a neighborhood street map that also showed Wally's camera locations within his monitoring network.

The charm that Hermione used turned her wand into a sort of dousing rod that twitched whenever it encountered an anti-app ward. This allowed her not only to hold Harry's hand, but to hold a conversation with Harry while the charm was working.

"So I hope that you didn't mind too much that I proclaimed myself your consort," she said with a smile.

"I'd be a daft git if I did," Harry replied. "Besides, I was the one that decided I was a Clan Chief in the first place."

"You had to do that, you know," Hermione said. "Ragnok wouldn't pledge cooperation with anyone that he didn't consider his equal in rank."

"Yes, I know," Harry said, "I just don't like it very much...makes it sound as if I buy into this 'Chosen One' business."

"Well, with Dumbledore gone..." Hermione said relatively tentatively, "Look, I know you don't feel worthy to lead the forces of Light, but it's not as if the Ministry has taking the lead. And besides, there's a lot of people that do think you're worthy, and would support you in a heartbeat."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Sweetheart," Harry said, as he gave her hand a small squeeze. He got a bit nervous when his endearment caused Hermione to blush. "I hope you don't mind that I, erm...well, Hermione do you think things are going too fast between us?"

She stopped and turned towards him with a smile. "Too fast? It's only been, what, six years now that we've been nearly inseparable?"

"Yeah, but, you know what I mean," Harry replied. "It's because of that that I want to make sure that I don't muck anything up...I feel like such a git sometimes, not knowing what to do or say around you, and I'm terrified that if I screw this up that we'd lose our friendship as well."

Hermione gave his hand a reassuring squeeze and backed that up with a tender, if brief, kiss. "So long as you're my 'just Harry,' you don't have anything to worry about," she said. "It *is* a bit backwards, I suppose."

"How's that?"

"Well, think about how a lot of relationships begin," she explained. "Couples swapping spit in the Common Room before they bother to find out if they're compatible over the long term...not to mention the 'three date rule.'"

"What's that?"

"Something I read about," Hermione said., "Supposedly, when you are, young, single, and sexually active, if you don't shag a person by your third date then the relationship isn't going anywhere."

"Oh...so remind me how many dates we've had?"

Hermione gave his shoulder a punch. "Officially, none, you prat...my point is, instead of shagging then finding out if you could live with the other person's faults over the years, we've already gotten the second part out of the way. Our level of compatibility is, well, off the charts, in my opinion."

"I agree," said Harry. "Which bring us back around to the original question...what do we do now, and when do we do it?"

"I don't know. I love where we're at right now, and I love the thought of where this is going. But most of all, I love the idea that I can trust you utterly and completely."

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said. "Not to test that level of trust, but does it bother you that we've started something so soon after I broke up with Ginny?"

"Didn't I just say I trusted you utterly and completely? Would you like the aid of a *Sonorus* charm?"

"No, it's just...well I just wanted to be incredibly different I feel with her," Harry replied. "I mean, Ginny's a sweet girl, but my time with her was just an escape, I'm afraid. I feel bad for her, actually...she wanted a lot more than I felt comfortable giving her."

"How was it an escape?"

"Well, I've been trying to figure that out," Harry replied. "The time I spent with Ginny...it was like I was a normal teenager, with normal worries...that sense of normality that I've always yearned for. But my time with her...I couldn't integrate that with my real world."

"So Ginny is normal, and I'm abnormal?"

"No, silly," Harry smirked. "I'm talking about what I've wanted, what I thought I've wanted...when I was with her, I felt normal...But we were both deluding ourselves, I think."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because when it comes down to it," Harry said, "I'm not normal, and Ginny wouldn't have wanted to date me if I really was."

"You think so? Even if Voldemort hadn't marked you you'd have been captain of the Quidditch team."

"Nah, I'm pretty sure Ginny would be looking for a knight in shining armor, and I'd...I'd still rather be out the spotlight."

Hermione thought for a moment. "So if she made you feel normal, then I make you feel how?"

"You mean besides the warm fuzzy-butterflies in my stomach-luckiest bloke in the world feeling?"

"Sorry, guess I was fishing for a complement."

"You shouldn't have to fish," Harry replied. "This might sound strange, but you make me feel capable...like I can love someone and kick Voldemort's bum at the same time...like I have a fighting chance to survive...like I have the motivation to survive."

Hermione's eyes narrowed a bit as her heart skipped. "And when Voldemort is gone, won't you want to go back to normal?"

It was Harry's turn to punch Hermione's shoulder. "Will you stop, already? Why would I want to settle for normal, now that I'm feeling the way I am right now?"

Hermione cocked her head sideways a bit with a smile. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Sir Clan Chief."

"Will it get me a third date?"

"Let's work on the first one, sweetheart."

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They completed their neighborhood tour without finding any better spots to apparate than the small copse of trees Hermione had used near the playground. There was, however, a rather nice vacant home for sale just beyond the wards, a few houses down from Arabella's (which, not surprisingly, was just inside the wards). Hermione suggested that they could apparate inside the home to contain the noise, but worried about spooking the neighbors. Harry, recalling the new found extent of his wealth, suggested the simple solution of buying the house. Hermione thought that a tad extravagant, given how long they planned on staying in Little Whinging, but Harry thought it worth checking, and asked her to start looking into what it would take to maintain the wards beyond his birthday.

Having already promised to eat dinner that evening with her parents, Hermione sent Hedwig to Tonks and Remus with a request to meet later that night. They wanted to talk about their goblin meeting with magical people they trusted, and thought that Remus might be able to show Harry how to use the charmed motorcycle.

They enjoyed another fine meal on the backyard patio of Number Five that evening, with Harry and Hermione's bank visit the main dinner table topic. Until, of course, Hermione's parents decided it was time to drop their own bombshell.

"So, Hermione," her father started out, "your mum and I have had a few days to sort things out."

"The past few days have been exciting," Emily added, "and we're a little reluctant to pick up our dental drills and go back to our old lives."

"Wouldn't being hounded by Death Eaters wear thin after a while?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, I'm sure it would," her father replied. "Not that we aren't confident that the two of you will take care of that problem in the very near future. We're talking about what to do right now, though...about starting our new lives."

"You're thinking about new identities...moving to the States...something like that?" Hermione asked.

"Well, not quite," her dad replied. "The government has offered to put us into a long-term protection program...new house, new identities, new jobs...it's very generous, but they've also given us a much more appealing alternative."

"What's that?"

"They've made us a job offer," her mum replied.

"Work for the government?" Hermione asked, a little nervously. "What...the Queen's men need some dental work?"

A light bulb flipped on above Harry's head. "You are going to help Wally and Steve, aren't you?"

"That's the idea," Roger admitted.

"Oh my...erm...just what...MI-5 ¾?" Hermione stammered. "No offense, but you two will need more than dental drills to fight Death Eaters."

"That's what we tried to tell them when they made the offer," her mum said with a smile. "But they said that we possessed a few key qualities that made us perfect for what they had in mind."

"What's that?"

"Well, for one thing, the perfect cover..."

"Cover?" Hermione asked with alarm. "My parents, the dentists, working undercover?"

"Well, not exactly undercover," her father replied. "We are your parents, after all, it's nothing we aren't already doing now."

"But you don't know the first thing about security, or defending yourself against attack, or any number of things."

"True enough," Mr. Granger said, "but we do have eyes, ears, and a strong incentive to pick up the rest as soon as possible."

"So what will you need to do," Hermione asked, "attend some sort of training academy?"

"Ordinarily, yes, we would," Roger replied. "But given the circumstances, they're going to bring the trainers to us, so that we'd be able to stay with you."

"And what kind of training would you receive?" asked Hermione. "I can't believe it'd be enough to keep you out of harm's way."

"Don't know exactly what kind of training," Roger admitted. "Imagine we'll find out soon enough. Look...we know you'd be worried, and we thought about not telling you, but...well, your mum and I have no intention of being helpless Muggles, and I was serious the other night when I said that we wanted to do whatever we could to help you two."

"It's our fight too, now," Emily declared. "It has always been so...ever since you and Harry were targeted for attack."

"You've been pretty quiet about all this, Harry," Roger noted. "What do you think?"

With all three Grangers looking for his response, and one in particular looking for some support, Harry decided to tread carefully.

"Well," he began, "you might think that you have limited job opportunities given present circumstances, so I was thinking that I'd like to offer you both an employment alternative."

"My parents working for you?" Hermione asked. "Don't you think that'd be a little...weird?"

"No, Hermione," Harry replied, "I don't. Look, it's because of me that they've lost their house and surgery, it's the least I can do, and you know I have the means to offer."

"Harry," Emily said, "we appreciate your offer, but it really isn't necessary."

"Why don't you hear what I'm offering first?" Harry said. "Look, it seems like every day there are at least two or three 'top priority' things added to our 'To Do' list. Hermione and I could really use your help."

"Harry, I thought the idea was keeping them safe?" Hermione stated, with a bit of exasperation.

"They could work within the wards, or otherwise be with one of us," Harry explained.

"What sort of work do you have in mind?" Hermione's father asked.

"Well, Mr. Granger," Harry replied, "I learned this morning that I'm even wealthier than I imagined, but I really have more important things to do than keep track of that money. I could use a financial manager to do that for me. And you also saw for yourself that we could use some sort of personal trainer for physical fitness...we also need to learn how to drive, and to do so just a little better than the average teenagers that don't have bad guys chasing after them."

"So I'd be your personal assistant?" Roger asked.

"No, more like my Dad, only you'd get paid for it," Harry replied with a smile.

"Any specific ideas on who'd be providing this training?" Roger asked with the beginning of some understanding.

Mr. Granger, have you ever heard of the term 'plausible deniability'?" Harry asked. When Roger nodded his head Harry continued. "I don't think I really need to know where the trainers come from, though it sounds like you've already got a good handle on where to look...and maybe you could even get a group discount, so that you and your wife could join us as well?"

Hermione looked at Harry a little crossly. "Harry, I don't think this is helping..."

"Hermione...your parents want to help, and since they're your parents I'm guessing that I'll have as much luck pushing them away as I had leaving you behind last week."

His Consort sighed, seeing the logic in Harry's argument and silently cheering that he'd taken one more step away from his misguided notion of meeting his fate alone.

"Mum, Dad, are you sure about this?" she asked.

They both nodded.

"Well, then, Mum, unless Harry has a better idea...we need your help organizing all of the Muggleborn Hogwarts students and their families into a support group or network...set up e-mail lists, arrange for computers for those that need them, maybe even a secure web site."

"Sounds like a plan, Dear," her Mom said with a smile, "although you know that computers aren't my strong point."

"Yes, I know," Hermione replied. "But I imagine you might be able to find someone in the neighborhood that could give you some pointers." She looked at Harry and grabbed his hand tightly. "Not that Harry and I need to know who that person is, or whom he might work for."

"Great," Roger said with a smile. "Now, there's just one more thing that your mum and I would like to ask you and Harry."

"Oh, Merlin, what now?" Hermione asked with a chuckle.

"Are the parents of the Clan Chief's Consort automatically members of the Clan, or do we have to fill out an application form?"

Hermione did a "fish out of water" routine while Harry gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"I don't think we need to mess with the paperwork," he told them. "Speaking as Chief and on behalf of my Consort...welcome to Clan Potter."

Chapter 10 – Life on Privet Drive

Friday, June 8, Little Whinging, Surrey

As a charmed boombox belted out encouragement to "Fly into the danger zone," two wizards engaged in a mock dogfight above an open meadow on a hot summer's day.

Broomsticks roared like the afterburners on a Muggle fighter jet, and had wands strapped to their handles facing the direction of flight. The two wizards used Sonorus spells to communicate with each other, combining clips of borrowed movie dialogue with disparaging comments about the other's sagging Quidditch skills.. Whenever one thought that they had the other in his "sights" he'd reach down to the wand and fire off a series of white projectiles, which splattered paint whenever they made contact with a solid object.

It was only after each was nearly completely covered with paint that the two wizards, wearing goofy grins and helmets bore the monitors "Prongs" and "Padfoot," responded to the beckoning of a very-pregnant witch and a wizened old wizard and landed for a picnic lunch .

It was the fourth time that Harry had poured this memory into the pensieve, and for the fourth time he failed to hear or see anything that he thought shed light on horcruxes and the battle against Voldemort. Not that that was the point of this trip into the mist; this particular memory had almost reached Mirror of Erised status as something he wanted to experience over and over again.

The most pressing topic of conversation during the picnic lunch was potential baby names. Harry's given name was apparently a fused compromise between his father's first choice (Horatio) and his mother's (Charlie). Sirius fought hard for the name "Regulus," noting that the firstborn son of Lily and James was destined to be a "Little King," as well as the brightest star in the Lion's House at Hogwarts. Lily, however, expressed some understandable reservations about naming her child after Sirius's Death Eater brother. On that note the three wizards changed the conversation topic; they were trying to keep the conversation light. His mum wasn't very comfortable physically, and was concerned about giving birth to a magical child with a mediwitch on hand rather than an obstetrician. The memory ended with Dumbledore reassuring his mum that Poppy would be there when it came time for the delivery.

Harry scribbled down a reminder to ask Madame Pomfrey if his first visit to her infirmary (and to the bed he knew far too well) had been made while still inside his mum. He then scooped the memory out of the pensieve, and set the stoppered vial back into the tray that Dumbledore had conveniently labeled "Happy Memories for Harry."

Fancying a break from his study, he placed the pensieve and vials back into Hermione's trunk, and restored the security wards that guarded it. Harry then walked next door, where Hermione was reviewing the information provided by the Royal Historian on a DVD disk. A nuzzle, a kiss, and a whisper provided all the incentive she needed to join Harry for a brief respite.

They walked hand-in-hand downstairs and out to the garage, where Ron and Steve were doing a collaborative study on the magical/Muggle interface within Sirius's motorcycle. They were quite pleased with themselves, having just discovered that the motorbike's alternator had been encased in a thin layer of dragon hide. Ron needed no convincing when it was suggested they break open some butterbeers on the backyard patio.

"Hard to believe that we've only been here a week," said Harry, as the three plopped down on comfy deck chairs. He gave a wave to the next-door neighbor, whose attitude towards him, likely nearly everything else in Little Whinging, had changed markedly from the previous year.

"Yes we have been rather busy, haven't we?" Hermione said with a smile, as she reached for her boyfriend's hand.

Harry waggled his eyebrows and started to sing in a low voice. "*I'm heading down the Atlanta highway ...*"

"Not right now you're not, Sweetheart," the teen-aged witch said with a chuckle.

"Cor, Hermione, what have you done to my best mate...he's singing?"

"*Lookin' for a love getaway .*"

Ron winced. "Erm, too much information, Harry."

"Sorry," Harry said, with a goofy grin. "probably too knackered after this morning's workout, anyway."

Ron took a swig from his bottle. "With you there on that point...at this rate that slave-driver will have us outrunning hexes by end of Summer."

The physical training regimen that Roger Granger had set up was breathtaking in an entirely literal sense. The three had been roused early that morning by a retired SAS drill sergeant, who led them on a three-mile run, which they then unhappily learned was just the warm up. Calisthenics, push-ups, crunches and a second, even longer, run followed. Any resentment the three might have held towards Roger for finding such a sadistic taskmaster to train them was countered by the fact that he and his wife were suffering right along with them. It also helped that Hermione's dad had arranged for a full-time massage therapist to set up shop across the street to work out at least some of their aches and pains.

"Well, you better hope you can run faster than a hex," Hermione replied, "because you certainly can't drive faster than one."

"Why would he bother driving away from a hex?" Harry asked. "With all his experience he'd be better off crashing into it."

"Oy, don't start that again," Ron complained. "It's not my fault Muggles put curves in their roads."

Hermione sprayed her butterbeer as Harry broke out into a hearty laugh.

The driving lessons had been less stressful physically, if not mentally. A private driving instructor took the three out in the Bentley in the afternoons. This gave each of them a turn behind the wheel, and gave Hermione ample opportunity to practice her obliviation and magical dent removal skills.

"Well then, Ron" Hermione said, "why don't you show us what you've learned in your Muggle studies field course and fetch us another round from the Muggle refrigerator."

"Very funny, Hermione," Ron replied as he headed towards the kitchen.

Roger had also arranged for tutors to provide instruction on individualized topics. Hermione was taking lessons on the Muggle sciences of physics and chemistry from a local college professor, a London-based martial arts instructor was instructing Harry on the basics of swordplay, and Ron was learning how to make toast.

Ron really didn't mind the chiding he took from the other two; that his field-based Muggle studies program began with Brian working in a Muggle kitchen meant that he was always close to a hearty snack. Having grabbed three more bottles of butterbeer he tucked a bag of crisps under his arm and headed back to the patio, where he found Harry's chair shoved next to Hermione's and her head resting on his shoulder.

"Oy, find a room, you two," he chided.

Harry broke out the falsetto.

"*Love Shack, baby Love Shack... Love Shack, baby Love Shack...*"

Hermione sat up and punched Harry's shoulder. "Save it for karaoke night, Potter,"

"Yes, dear," Harry he replied with a grin.

Ron chose to ignore their intimacy. "So Hermione....who these chems are and why you're learning about their history?"

Hermione scowled. "That's chemistry, Ron, not 'chem history'."

"Alright," said Ron, "same question."

"Thought we went through this after our meeting with Professor Lupin the other night?" asked Harry. "Muggle chemistry is sort of like potions class, except without the greasy git instructor."

Tonks and Remus has visited Number Four the same night Harry had made job offers to Hermione's parents. Even though Tonks had told them

earlier that week that she and Remus were finally connected, it had been great to see them stroll up Privet Drive holding hands. In fact, between the two of them, Harry and Hermione, and Ron having returned from his date with Luna with a grin on his face and a small bite mark on his neck, it had been hard to get beyond the gossip.

Harry had asked Remus what he was doing for work as he showed Harry how to control Sirius's motorbike. Remus had replied that his job prospects were now especially limited, given that Snape was his wolfsbane supplier and Slughorn had resigned his post on the day of Dumbledore's funeral. Since wolfsbane had a short shelf-life, he'd been forced to ask Headmistress McGonagall if she'd allow him to spend the next full moon in the dungeons of Hogwarts, under guard of the House Elves and some of their unique confinement wards.

Hermione's suggestion that they could try to brew the potion themselves was appreciated, but not very helpful given the fact that the recipe required the fresh flowers of some particularly rare magical plants. It turned out that Snape's value as a potions master wasn't just due to his skill...it was in no small part derived from his private contacts and network of suppliers. Dumbledore's death and Snape's disappearance had dried up the supply of standard potion ingredients, as wizards and witches began hoarding and stockpiling for what looked like dark days ahead.

The chemistry class that Hermione was taking was providing the background she needed to discern whether a solution to this problem could be found in the Muggle world. She was hoping that at least some of the standard potion ingredients were needed for their chemical, rather than magical, compositions. In the interim, she had added "Potions Laboratory" to the list of things for Clan Potter to acquire.

Having polished off the bag of crisps, Ron went back into the house for another. He returned to find Hermione and Harry swapping stories about their independent studies. Harry reluctantly reported on his afternoon's work. He knew he should have been reviewing stored memories that were more likely related to the horcrux hunt, and was joking about almost being named after a Death Eater when Hermione's eyes went wide and she attacked Harry with a huge bear hug.

Ron's restatement of the need to find a room was ignored, as Hermione exclaimed that with Harry's description of the memory she knew not only who R.A.B. was, but where Slytherin's locket might be located. But before she could explain herself, they heard the squeal of brakes, the slam of a car door, and the roar of a very irate uncle. Curious as to what the fuss was all about, they headed inside, where they found Vernon Dursley displaying a deep shade of red.

"You," he hissed, as he pointed at Brian, "this was you're doing, wasn't it?"

"Whatever do you mean?" the Queen's man asked with a slight grin.

Petunia rushed to her husband's side. "Vernon, what's wrong?"

"They've transferred me at work," he replied.

"Transferred?" Petunia asked nervously. "You mean to a different division of the company?"

"No," Vernon scowled "To a different country."

Dudley, who'd been doing his best to stay away not just from the Trio but from Brian and his list of jobs, entered the kitchen and the conversation. "Where we moving to, Dad?" he asked.

"Romania...we opened a new plant there this past spring."

Petunia felt faint, as she grabbed the back of a kitchen chair.

"Could be worse," Dudley said. "Heard there's plenty of pretty girls in Rome."

"Rome is in Italy, you dolt," Vernon replied.

"Oy, Vernon, my brother the dragon tamer lives in Romania," said Ron. "I'm sure he'd be happy to help you get settled."

"Say, there's an idea," Hermione chimed in. "Charlie might even be able to introduce you to some friendly vampires."

Harry found it hard to do anything more than smile and repeat the word "Brilliant" as a mantra.

"So Vernon, when do you start your new position?" asked Brian.

"Week from Monday, as if you didn't already know," Vernon replied as he stared at Harry. "Least you'll lose your precious protection without us around."

Harry thought for a second. "Suppose you'll be leaving next weekend?" When Vernon nodded, Harry nodded back as he looked to Brian and said "Two weeks." Brian returned the smile as Harry turned back to his Aunt and Uncle. "Suppose we'll muddle through somehow...imagine you'll be looking for a housesitter?"

Vernon renewed the lustrous shade of red around his collar. "I'll burn the house down myself before I let you..."

"Say Vernon," interjected Brian, "is it true that your company has a distribution center in Nigeria?"

Vernon held his tongue as his brain wrapped around that threat. "I imagine we can work out a rental agreement."

"Rent your house to your own flesh and blood?" Brian asked, as he reached for his mobile phone.

"Fine!" shouted Vernon, who stormed out of the house and into his car, followed by a worried looking wife and child.

The Trio had the decency to wait until the door slammed behind Dudley before breaking out in laughter, and congratulatory handshakes for Brian, who then asked, "You did say that two weeks was all you needed to spend tethered to your Aunt, right?"

"Yes, I did," said Harry. "Merlin, you've outdone yourself with this one."

"Now wait," said Brian, "you really ought to hear about some remodeling ideas that Roger and I have been kicking around before saying that." He then reached into a kitchen cabinet drawer and pulled out a roll of blueprints.

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Later, once the excitement over the Dursley's imminent departure passed, Hermione pulled Ron and Harry aside and reminded them that they'd seen a locket similar to the fake that Harry still carried in his pocket back at Number 12 Grimmauld Place. She then linked the initials to Sirius's brother, and theorized that Regulus had hidden the horcrux at the Black mansion for safekeeping. Harry then reminded Hermione that even if the real locket was at Number 12 that they couldn't risk trying to retrieve it, given the broken *Fidelius* charm.

They'd almost decided to file that potential horcrux information away for later consideration when Ron got the bright idea of getting Kreacher to retrieve it for them. Before Hermione thought to object, Harry had summoned both Kreacher and Dobby to Number Four. While Hermione spent a few minutes coming up with specific instructions that Kreacher couldn't twist to his own ends, Ron and Harry enjoyed some semi-obligatory terrorizing of Vernon and Petunia (with instructions for the elves to enjoy Muggle piggy-back rides).

Even with some air-tight legal language, it was all Dobby could do to drag Kreacher out to the mansion and bring him back, with the disappointing news that the locket was no longer where Kreacher had stashed it two years previous.

Discussion drifted towards the topic of what to do if and when they did recover the locket. Ron's simplistic notion of "We destroy it, of course," was dismissed by Hermione's reference to Dumbledore's right hand. Though any of them might have made the same sacrifice, if pressed, it was thought best to explore alternative options prior to going down that path.

"Hold on," thought Ron, "you destroyed a horcrux without losing an arm, didn't you Harry?"

"Well, yes," replied Harry.

"So why don't you do the same thing over again?"

"If only it were that simple," interjected Hermione. "There are probably far too many variables to control."

"Like what?" asked Ron.

"Well," thought Hermione, "you get the parchment and start taking notes, then." She turned to Harry. "Let's play newspaper."

"Hold on," said Ron, "this isn't some kinky role-playing thing is it?"

"You wish," replied Hermione. "I was suggesting that we use the same techniques that responsible journalists use when they write stories to describe how Harry destroyed the diary...who, what, where, when, why and how. You wouldn't know about this, of course, since you've only been exposed to the *Quibbler* and *Daily Prophet*."

"Oh, yeah," replied Ron, "see your point."

"We start with the who, then...obviously, that's Harry."

"Right," replied Ron, as he chewed on his quill tip. "So tell me something we don't already know."

"Cor, Ron, sometimes..." Hermione took a deep breath. "The relevant point is that Harry, unlike Dumbledore, was able to destroy a horcrux without getting injured."

"So there might be a reason for that...my connection or something?" asked Harry.

"Exactly," Hermione replied with a smile. "Now, doesn't mean that Harry has to be the one to do the job, but it might be. Let's move on to 'what.'"

"It was a diary, while Dumbledore destroyed a ring," replied Harry. "Though he didn't actually burn a hole in the ring, did he?"

"Maybe because there was already one there?" asked Ron, earning a reproachful look from Hermione.

"Harry's got a point," said Hermione. "Harry destroyed the diary's utility...couldn't write in that diary afterwards could you?"

"But Dumbledore didn't crack the ring into two or melt it down," Ron added. "When he was done it was still a ring, just without the trapped soul fragment inside of it."

"No, that's not entirely true," said Harry. "The gold ring wasn't broken, but the stone mounted within it was cracked."

"That's right," thought Hermione. "So there might be something said for extreme violence. Let's move on, though, so we can take a look at the entire picture ...who, what, now *where*."

"Where was the Chamber of Secrets," replied Harry. "Don't know, really, where Dumbledore destroyed the ring...suppose we could ask his portrait if and when it wakes up."

"Why would the Chamber be someplace special?" asked Ron.

"Besides the fact that it was built by Salazar Slytherin, was home to a basilisk, and was only accessible to someone who, like Voldemort, could speak Parseltongue?"

"Fine," snapped Ron, "besides all that then...."

"So what you're suggesting, then," asked Harry, "is that all things being equal it'd be safer to try and destroy the Horcrux within the Chamber than someplace else?"

"Exactly, Harry," replied Hermione, with a beaming smile that threw Ron into a slight funk. "Which brings us to 'When' and 'Why.'"

"Pretty obvious why we want to do it," groused Ron, "and Harry and Dumbledore had the same motivation, didn't they?"

"Not exactly," Hermione said, "Harry didn't know it was a horcrux when he destroyed it, while Dumbledore did...although I doubt it's a huge difference. Same thing with when he did it...it could be something like a full moon having an effect, like lycanthropy, but it doesn't seem like something Voldemort would get hung up on."

"So then we're left with how to do it, aren't we?" asked Harry. When the other two nodded agreement he began thinking out loud. "Let's see, I was in the Chamber, and just pulled the poisonous basilisk fang out of my arm, and I was a bit angry at Tom's echo so I speared the diary with the fang, and then the book caught on fire and I heard a loud scream. Don't remember if it was the echo screaming, or the soul fragment."

"How did the book catch fire?" asked Ron.

"Dunno," replied Harry. "The burnt hole just sort of grew away from the fang. By the time it was done the hole was a lot wider than the puncture mark."

"So it could have been the use of the fang, the poison in the fang or both that destroyed the horcrux," said Ron.

"Yeah, sounds about right," said Harry. "We left the dead basilisk down there, so it's possible we could find a fang...maybe even the one I used. But I imagine that the venom would have dried up by now."

"Doesn't matter," Hermione concluded. "Either the fang would work or it wouldn't...remember what we did trying to open the locket in the first place? Ron, I think you were banging it against a table."

"Merlin, you're right," said a Weasley Gone White.

"So," said Harry, "when we find the locket, or the cup, or some other horcrux, we'll just go to Hogwarts, use Parseltongue to enter the Chamber of Secrets, slide down the chute, clear out the caved-in passageway, nick a fang from the basilisk's skeletal frame and then I'll use it to poke Tom's soul fragment. No problem."

"And even if it didn't work," said Hermione with a smile, "I'll get to see the Chamber and we can collect some basilisk bones and fangs to barter for potion ingredients."

"Great," said Ron, rather weakly. "Day in the park, stroll by the lake...let's bring a picnic lunch and spread it out inside Salazar's statue mouth. And now that's settled, can we get back to the Xbox?"

Hermione shook her head as she allowed her boys to return to their games.

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Wednesday, June 13

The sound of steel striking steel provided a rather incongruous overlay to the staccato *chug-chug-chug* of the neighborhood hosepipes. Nobody within earshot of Harry's sword fighting lessons in Number Four's backyard paid any attention, however; they were either in the know, or had been gullible enough to accept a rather implausible explanation (namely, that he was training for the Olympic longsword event).

After a full week of lessons Harry felt as if he'd progressed from totally awful to merely dreadful. His muscles burned from the workouts; one hour each day spent hacking at a stout wooden post, followed by a second hour of sparring with the master swordsman. Those parts that didn't burn were battered and bruised from the hits he took from his instructor's dulled edge. Fortunately, the instructor seemed to think that things weren't all that bad.

"You know you're a natural at this," the swordsman said, as he picked Harry up off the ground for the tenth time that afternoon. "I'd almost say it's in your blood."

"Must have been a vampire hunter in a past life," Harry joked.

"Well you certainly have the sword for it," the instructor replied. Harry looked down at Godric's sword and cursed himself for slipping. Even with the leather straps that covered the sword's blade it was easy to tell that it was pure silver.

He tried to laugh it off. "Too bad, then, that the prospects for that line of work are slim."

The master swordsman gave him a careful look. "That's only because English vampires are so docile," he replied. "Now, down in the Baltics, that's a different story."

"Ha ha, that's a good one," Harry replied nervously, wondering just how much his instructor knew about vampire hunts.

The man nodded with a glint in his eye. "Yes, well, Mr. Potter, we'll take it as that." The instructor began unwrapping his sword so that it could be sheathed for transport.

"So," he asked Harry, "have you decided whether you'll be using the left or right hand yet?"

"Right, I hope," Harry replied, "but as I'm not completely certain I'll still need work with both." Sword hand was an issue he'd been grappling with all week. He'd been working on simple spells using his left hand, but hadn't progressed to the point where he felt he could imagine fighting with sword in one hand and wand in the other. Of course the ability to do wandless magic would solve the problem, but that was something currently beyond his reach.

With the day's lesson's over Harry went upstairs to take a shower. As he entered the Muggle room to store his sword he marveled at the latest phase of remodeling. Brian hadn't waited for the Dursley's departure; taking a cue from the control room across the street. They'd replaced the single desk and chair with smart looking modular workstations that took now took up one entire wall of the room. Four separate computer systems were set up, with large flat-screen monitors, scanners, and color laser printers. Their telly had been remounted on the wall above the workstations, end-to-end with two new identical screens, creating a seamless video display roughly two-feet high and nine-feet long.

Ron was presently standing behind Fred and George as they hunched over laptop computers on an L-shaped extension that jutted out from the wall.

"Oy, George, how many times do I have to tell you?" Ron asked, peering over his older brother's shoulder. "It's swish and *click*, not swish and *flick*."

"Worse than McGonagall, you are," George lamented. "Why couldn't the Muggles have invented a wand-shaped mouse?"

"Hey, be thankful for small favors. I could have forced you to use the trackball."

"Oy, Ron," Harry interrupted, "Not showing them sites your mum wouldn't approve of, are you?"

"Now, Harry, you know Hermione's installed *NetNanny*," Ron replied. "Of course, she only did that on the old desktop," he said with a smirk. "And now that I've got administrator-level authorization for the new network..."

"Thank Merlin you've taken to your Muggle studies, little brother," Fred said with a smile.

"So, really, what are your big brothers doing in the Internet?" Harry asked.

"Oh, a little market research, some new product development, a healthy bit of industrial espionage..." George said.

"Okay, I'll bite," Harry replied, "how is your net surfing helping the shop?"

"Simple, really. We're looking at how Muggles compensate for their non-magical limitations, then borrowing their ideas to make magical versions of their inventions."

"Got the idea from Ron," George admitted, as he held up one of the pairs of night vision goggles that Ron had bought on-line. "Any wizard worth their salt wouldn't need these spectacles to see in the dark...they'd simply cast the right charm. But same thing could be said of shield charms, and look at all the money we've made selling shield-charmed clothing to the Ministry of Magic."

"So you're going to make magical night vision goggles?" Harry asked.

"That's right...ones that'd work not only in areas where magical interference would trash the Muggle goggles, but ones strong enough to work inside areas affected by Peruvian Instant Blackness Powder."

"I thought you guys and Hermione developed the counterspell against that powder."

"Sure," Fred agreed, "but why banish the powder that blinds your enemies if you can still see?"

"Makes sense to me," Harry said. "So what else are you into?"

"Working with Hermione to look for raw materials. Stuff we need for our potions and powders."

"You expect to find potion ingredients on the Internet?" Harry asked. "How many wizards you think are e-Bay power users?"

"There's the beauty, Harry," George replied. "We've found Muggles selling ingredients that they don't even know have magical properties. One place ships out salamanders by the dozen, another sells valerian root and astragalus. There's a site that sells Chinese herbs that's going to be practically a one stop shop for us."

"What about delivery, though?" Harry asked. "It's not like FedEx ships to Diagon Alley."

"Ah, yeah, we thought about that," Fred replied. "Had a talk with Wally and Brian, and they suggested a work around."

"You're going to smuggle your supplies in?" Harry asked.

"No," said George, "although that's not a bad idea. Fred and I figured it'd be easier if we just had a Muggle shipping address. Now, don't worry," he said, noting Harry's arched eyebrows, "we aren't planning on setting up shop here at Number Four."

"But Number Seven, on the other hand," George said with a gleam in his eye.

"Prefer Number Twelve myself," said Fred. "although any house with a backyard free of gnomes works with me."

"You two are thinking of moving to Little Whinging?" Harry asked. "Aren't you a bit afraid the Death Eaters will recognize the new address?"

"It's not like they don't know where to find us in Diagon Alley, right?" Fred replied. "Besides, from what we've seen, there's a rather attractive combination of protections available here on this street."

"Not to mention the fact that it'd be an honor to live so close to the Great Clan Chief Potter."

"And his Consort, don't forget," said Fred with a wink and a nudge.

"Yeah, 'bout time on that one, Harry," said George. "Wish you'd have smartened up a few months ago, though...had the month of March all to myself."

"Oy, will you give the Clan Chief business a rest?" asked Ron. "It wasn't Harry's idea in the first place."

"Works for us, though," replied Fred. "Which reminds me...we want in."

"In where?" asked Harry.

"Into the Clan, of course," said George. "Oh, and if it's not too much trouble, we'd like to have Clan titles, just like little brother here."

"Can't you prats let me enjoy something on my own?" whined Ron.

The twins looked at each other, then dead-panned back to their brother.

"No."

"So what were you thinking?" asked Harry, more bemused than bothered by the idea.

"Well, 'Clan Beaters' would be nice, if you decided to field a quidditch team, but..."

"What about Clan idiots?" suggested Ron.

"Not a bad idea, actually," thought Harry, "assuming that we tweek it a bit...I could use a jester or two."

"Erm...maybe 'Clan Fools?" suggested Fred.

Harry thought for a few seconds. "Fine, on condition that you both wear foolscaps at all official Clan functions."

The twins looked at each other with a gleam in their eyes and replied in unison.

"Consider it done."

Chapter 11 - Sir Evan of Eastleigh

Friday, June 15

Little Whinging, Surrey

The day the Dursleys moved out would have been bright in the bleakest of weather; that it was sunny and warm seemed downright decadent as Harry Potter rolled his motorcycle out of the garage.

The morning's driving lesson had been canceled in lieu of driver's examinations for Ron and Hermione; given circumstances and status, the examiner had been brought to them. Harry had promised Hermione that he'd stay out of trouble, but there was only so much driving to be done within the wards, and he intended to keep a watch out for them as they drove out into Little Whinging proper.

Harry rolled the motorcycle around the loading ramp of the lorry that was hauling the Dursley's belongings off to the Balkans and gave a wave to Roger, who was standing on the curb with a mobile phone to his ear. With a look up and down the street to confirm that no other eyes would be watching him, he kick started the bike and sped off down the street.

Though Harry was some six weeks away from eligibility to take his license examination, he figured that his "Doing Queen's Business" card would

get him out of any trouble with the authorities. Besides, he only needed to break the law for a half-block, at which point he had enough speed to lift off and engage the cloaking device.

Shivers traveled up and down Harry's spine as he flew up and through the anti-apparation barrier. Hermione had warned him that he might notice a surge of magical energy at the ward boundary; Ragnok had sent the Gringott's ward master the night previous to overlap goblin anti-apparation wards on top of his mother's protections. Though Harry had been quite confident that he'd been under Petunia's care long enough to maintain those wards until his birthday, he was more than happy to have an extra layer of protection that would last beyond July 31. The goblin's wards also provided a bonus that he'd wished he had years before; the Ministry's remote sensors that monitored magic use were useless within the protected area.

Harry leveled off at about five hundred feet and looked down upon the neighborhood that his Fools had recently renamed "Little Wizarding" (or "Little Wiz", for short). They hadn't been jesting about their choice in accommodations; over the past week Roger Granger had arranged for Harry's new holding company to purchase fifteen of the seventy-five houses located within the two block radius of Number Four. Offers that were well above market value had been made, in fact, to every owner of a house within the zone. There were reasons both practical and moral; fewer Muggles around the neighborhood meant less worry about secrecy laws, and less worry about collateral damage when the Death Eaters decided to attack.

Three other moving vans could be seen on neighborhood streets, as families took advantage of financial incentives to leave as soon as possible. Whether the empty homes would be filled, and by whom, was open to debate. The Twins were talking openly of bringing in other Order members and members of the DA into the neighborhood for some on-site security. Plans were also afoot for MI 5 ¾ to grow right along with their little community; he'd caught Wally and Brian with blueprints and construction talk over the past week, but gotten nothing more than smiles when Harry asked what they were scheming.

It didn't take long for Harry to spot the black Bentley that Ron and Hermione were using for the exam; it was currently negotiating a parallel parking attempt (that it was faring poorly led Harry to suspect that Ron was presently behind the wheel). With his focus on the car he didn't notice Hedwig's arrival until silent wings had delivered her to his shoulder.

"Hey, girl, I'm supposed to be invisible," he admonished with a grin, as he reached into his pocket for an owl treat. Hedwig's hoot in response sounded not the least bit remorseful. Harry decided to tease her by asking, "How's Pounce and the boys?" That earned him a nip on his ear.

With his newfound wealth Ron had decided it was finally time to get a familiar that he could be proud of, and had purchased a male Great Horned Owl that he'd named "Pounce" (after the way he snatched his meals). With Charlie's help, they'd also imported a half-dozen owls from the Continent to become Clan Potter's Mail Service. Harry had spent a lot of time with his familiar reassuring her that she was his first and favorite, and she'd responded by organizing the new arrivals into an ersatz air force. These days, there was always at least two owls flying over Little Wiz on surveillance missions, and if they happened to pounce upon a gangly rat with a silver paw sneaking amongst the shadows, so much the better.

Harry watched as the Bentley pulled to the curb and Ron and Hermione traded seats. After a few more minutes he started to search for two other vehicles that were supposed to be making their way towards Number Four. It didn't take to spot long the convertibles driving down the arterial with identical mops of red hair in the front passenger seats. Harry grinned and swooped down towards them.

He pulled out of his silent dive fifteen feet above the two cars and followed them until they reached Privet Drive. Once he caught sight of the straight patch of empty street in front of him, Harry flipped off the cloaking device and silencer, and inverted his motorcycle. With toes gripping under the seat and a roar of his engine he buzzed the two cars upside down with a modified sloth move.

It said something about Wally and Brian's comfort level with magic that they didn't crash the two cars as Harry flew over their heads. At the end of Privet Drive Harry flipped the bike back upright, nudged it down to the ground and pulled it back around in front of Number Five. He got a look of admonishment from Hermione's mother, who'd been chatting with her husband in the front yard.

"Harry Potter," she said, "if you think that your antics will make me more likely to allow Hermione to ride on that bike with you..."

Harry replied with a grin, "Yes, mum."

"Give him a break, dear," Roger said, "were I in the same situation I'd be doing cartwheels over the Dursleys departure."

The two vehicles that Harry had been chasing finally pulled up next to Harry and the Grangers.

"Oh my goodness, Harry," Roger said. "What have we here?"

"What we have here, Mr. Granger," replied whichever twin was in the lead car, "are two certified wizard-friendly automobiles...tested them out ourselves, we did."

"Is that true?" asked Emily Granger.

"Yeah, it is," Harry confirmed. "Took a bit of work to find cars old enough to have computer-free engines and the bare minimum of electronics."

"Doesn't hurt that they are both classics either, eh Harry?" Brian asked.

"Well then, go on," Roger said with impatience, "pop the bonnet and let's have a look."

"Which one?"

Roger snorted. "Like you even have to ask."

"It can wait, can't it?" Emily asked. "Harry did say these were going to be presents, and they'll be around presently?"

"Yeah, I guess," Roger mumbled. "Hey Harry," he asked, "who gets the red one?"

Harry broke out into a deep laugh.

"Like you even have to ask."

Just then the door to Number Five open and Steve yelled out. "They're coming around the corner." That gave the Twins just enough time to conjure tarps that covered the two cars before Hermione carefully pulled the Bentley up and into the driveway of Number Four. After putting the car in park she and Ron bounded out of the vehicle and ran across the street.

Harry asked, "Hey, how did it go?"

Hermione, who had reached him first, grabbed his arms and gave him a quick kiss and a smile. "It went great. I think Ron did well enough."

"No question that Hermione passed, of course," said Ron with a bit of whine in his voice. They looked back over at the examiner, who at that moment handed some papers to Brian and shook his hand. Steve crossed the street to drive the man back to the examination station, passing Brian as he approached the Trio with a smile on his face and valid licenses in each hand.

Hermione squealed and gave Ron a bear hug. "We did it...we did it both!" she exclaimed.

"Do you have to sound so surprised?" Ron asked, as Harry shook his hand with congratulations.

"Well, we didn't know you could stop a car without the Womping Willow's help," explained Fred.

"Sod off, Fred."

"Hey now, mind the language," Harry said, "lest I reconsider your rewards."

"And what might they be?" Hermione asked, as she appraised the two covered cars with interest.

"What, my kiss isn't reward enough?" Harry asked in mock pain.

"Not when you're teasing, it isn't."

"Fair enough," said Harry, as he threw two sets of car keys at his friends. "One for you, and another for you."

With the sound that was the closest that Hermione had ever come to a squeal, she pulled the tarp from first one car, then the other. She and Ron then both stepped back and gawked.

"Merlin, Harry, they're beauties," Ron exclaimed.

"Oh Harry," Hermione said, "they're wonderful...which one's for me?"

"Like you even have to ask," said Ron, as he walked towards the second car.

Roger look towards Ron with a tinge of sympathy. "You know, Ron," he said, "the Morris Minor is probably the most beloved classic car in all of Britain, and it's pretty rare to see a convertible like this one these days."

"No, it's great," said Ron, as he opened the door and sat behind the wheel. He gave the horn a good honk, then looked down with some confusion at the floorboard.

"What's this other brake pedal for?"

"Oh, that's the clutch," said Harry. "We were only able to find one magic-friendly car with automatic transmission...sorry, mate, but you'll have to learn to drive stick."

"And that car with automatic transmission would be this one?" Hermione asked, as she ran her hand along the side of her shiny red car.

"Yes," said Roger with no little amount of awe.

"It's a Bentley, isn't it?" she asked.

Harry opened the door and she sat down on the white leather seat. "1962 Bentley S3," he said, more for Hermione's father's benefit than for hers. "With a 6.2 litre eight cylinder engine, duel carburetors, and...." He leaned over the car door, reached around Hermione's shoulder, and pointed towards the steering column. "Four-speed automatic transmission."

Hermione turned and kissed Harry's cheek then whispered into his ear. "Thank you Harry...it's beautiful."

"Not even close as beautiful as you are, Sweetheart," he replied.

"Flattery will get you everywhere, you know."

"I'm counting on it," Harry replied with no small amount of cheek.

"Why don't you kids go for a ride?" asked Emily.

"Good idea," chimed in Brian. "we canceled your afternoon classes."

"But what about the Dursleys?" Fred asked. "They ought to hang around to give them a proper hexing at their send off."

"What do you think, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked at her, then stood and looked around at Fred and George, the Grangers, Brian and Wally. He then turned towards Number Four, where he spied his aunt, uncle and cousin looking out from the living room window in utter disbelief.

"You know," he said, "with all of the changes, all of the good that's happened these past two weeks, it's like they're already gone. The Number Four and its neighborhood that I knew and dreaded returning to each summer...they're gone too." He walked around to the front passenger side and climbed in. "I think I've got better things to do and better company to keep than to dwell in the past just to wait to see them leave."

Hermione's eyes glistened as she leaned over and kissed Harry again, this time on the lips. "Oh Harry, I'm so proud of you."

Harry looked over at Ron. "So are you coming, or not?"

Ron jumped into the back seat. "I'm in, but where to?"

"I'm thinking we should take a nice ride out to Devon," Harry replied with a wink.

"Excellent idea," beamed Ron, as he leaned back and imagined Luna by his side on the rear bench.

"Have a nice time kids," Emily said, "but remember that we've got a little celebratory dinner planned, so be back by seven."

"Yes, mum," Hermione said excitedly, as she turned the ignition and revved the engine. Harry reached into the glove box and pulled out three pair of Oakleys and a white silk scarf. "Have to be properly attired to drive this vehicle, my dear," he grinned, as Hermione wrapped the scarf around her hair and all three of them donned their new black sunglasses.

"Hey Fred and George," Harry said, "just because we won't be around doesn't mean my Clan Fools can't give my Aunt and Uncle a proper send off, right?"

"You can depend on us, Chief" the Twins replied, as they clicked their heels together and gave salutes.

Hermione put the car into gear, and the Trio sped away.

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A few minutes later, as she found the entrance to the motorway, Hermione asked, "So when do we pull off?"

Harry reached into the pocket and pulled out his MI-5 standard issue mobile telephone/ computer/global positioning system. After a few screen touches and pips he shouted back, "Just past Basingstoke. It's the A303."

Ron leaned forward to be heard from the back seat "How long will it take to get Luna's house?"

"Projected time is two hours and thirty seven minutes," Harry said, "and that's without stopping for lunch."

"Blimey, that's five hours, there and back," shouted Ron. "How do Muggles stand all the time it takes to travel?"

"Well, we find ways of passing the time," said Hermione. "Like listening to the radio." She frowned when all that she heard was click when she twisted the radio knob.

"Erm, sorry," said Harry, "that was apparently the one part of the car that didn't survive Fred and George's road test."

"Oh, makes sense," said Hermione. "So what kind of magic were they able to do with the engine running?"

Harry grinned. "They claimed to have *Reducto* 'd a pillar box at 100 kph."

Ron's eyes lit up as he leaned forward in his seat. "So can we try?"

"No," was the unified response from the front seat.

"You're not even driving," said Hermione. "Why don't you sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride?"

Ron did as he was told...for all of five minutes.

"Are we there yet?"

Hermione shook her head as she scanned the horizon ahead of her. "Well, it does look like rain," she replied.

Fifteen minutes later they'd pulled off the M3, attached the car's protective soft-top, and used their mobile's wireless internet service to locate a Muggle restaurant with positive on-line reviews. As Hermione expertly parallel parked her vehicle Harry caught sight of a dark green car parked a discrete distance away. He smiled and pointed their tail to Ron and Hermione as they entered a traditional-looking pub.

The three found an empty table amongst the lunchtime crowd. "Order us a round of butterbeers, will you Ron?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked quizzically at Hermione as Ron headed up to the bar to speak with the publican.

Hermione just winked, and watched as Ron returned empty-handed.

"They don't have butterbeer," he said.

"Sure they do," Hermione deadpanned, as she pointed behind the bar. "Tell him that it's right next to the butterscotch."

As Ron returned to the rail for additional embarrassment, Harry leaned over to Hermione.

"You are a *wicked* witch," he told her with a smile.

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It was raining heavily by the time that they'd finished their meal and fizzy drinks (the most potent brews Ron could garner from the ill-humored licensee). Hermione had called home to confirm that the following car's occupants were friendly (they were), and in the process learned that they weren't particularly wanted back in Little Wizarding (at least not until that evening).

"What's that about, then?" Ron asked.

"Mum was rather evasive," Hermione replied. "Your brothers are no doubt planning something."

"Are the Dursleys still there?" Harry asked.

"Yes," she replied, "though I wouldn't be surprised if they decided to leave for the airport early...George apparently decided that your Aunt and Uncle would blend in better with the locals if he lengthened their canines."

"Brilliant," Ron said. "Hope they took pictures."

"Any ideas on what we can do this afternoon, then?" Harry asked.

"Mum chatted with Brian while I was still on the telephone, and he suggested that it might be a good day to visit Sir Evan."

"Who?" Ron asked.

"The only other living member of the Order of Arthur," Harry said. "So does he live anywhere near here?"

"Turns out he does," Hermione replied. "Nursing home in Eastleigh, down by Southampton...Mum's e-mailing directions."

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"Did you say *Sir* Evan, luv?" the nurse asked incredulously when they asked for him at the front desk. "You mean he actually is a knight? Next thing you'll be telling me that there are witches and wizards running about as well."

The three laughed nervously before Harry leaned forward with some disarming candor. "Well of course there's witches and wizards," he said with a wink. "What do you think we are?"

The nurse chuckled. "Really?"

"Swear on Merlin's beard," Harry replied. "Of course, that's top secret information...Sir Evan will have to answer to the Queen for that one, he will."

The terribly anxious moment that followed was punctured by a roar of laughter that would have given Hagrid's bellowing a run for its money. "Well don't worry about me, lad," said the smiling nurse, as she led them down the hall to the elderly knight's room. "I won't tell a soul." She knocked on a door then opened it just a bit to shout inside.

"Oy, Sir Evan, got some witches and wizards that are wanting to talk with you."

"About bloody time," came a strong voice in reply. "Show them in."

Sir Evan Turnbill was the kind of sprightly old man who wore his eighty-eight years quite well, thank you very much. He credited his vigor to a daily regimen of five walked miles and four gin and tonics, and had been rather put off that a broken hip had confined him to the bed of a nursing home.

"Good afternoon, Sir Evan," Hermione said as the three approached his bedside. "I'm..."

"Dame Hermione Granger, here with Sir Harry and Mr. Weasley, I presume?" the old man interrupted. "So, tell me how I know you lot aren't Death Eaters."

The three looked at each other, slightly taken aback, before Hermione reached into her purse and retrieved her Order of Arthur badge. With their identities thus confirmed, the three were treated to the very same stories that the nurses had proclaimed so fantastical; which they were, of course, unless you happened to have lived in both the Muggle and magical worlds.

Evan Turnbull was card-carrying Muggle (younger brother a Hufflepuff, Class of '37) who joined the Royal Air Force at the onset of the Second World War. He had spent the first few years as a Spitfire airplane mechanic, with an excellent service record that was nonetheless rather ordinary. That all changed, however, when he was ordered to report to an airbase in East Anglia, along with five other men from different service branches and fronts. A sonarman whose submarine had been ordered home just to deliver him to shore, an army attaché based in India, a tank driver, a codebreaker, and a cook...they thought that they had absolutely nothing in common until Albus Dumbledore strode into the room in full wizarding regalia. It was then that they realized they all were Muggle soldiers with magical siblings.

The Muggle government's war against the Germans and Dumbledore's battle against Grindelwald had reached a point where collaborative efforts had been deemed necessary. Dumbledore had learned that Grindelwald, a Dark Wizard based in Bavaria, had begun to work openly with the Nazi government. Unlike Voldemort, Grindelwald didn't despise Muggles; in fact, he hid from wizarding world by living with the Muggles, and helped Hitler with things like the initiation of a nuclear weapons program (theoretical physics not all that different from the study of arithmancy). Deciding to fight fire with fire, the Muggle and magical governments of Britain had allied to develop a small, integrated team of wizard and Muggles in the know to defeat Grindelwald and thwart Hitler's plans for world domination.

Each of the Muggle servicemen was paired with a hit wizard save for Sir Evan, who was paired with Dumbledore himself. The reason for this pairing became clear rather quickly; Muggle skills were critical to the team's success (much to the consternation of the Aurors). Most of their initial missions involved information gathering; since Grindelwald was living and dressing like a Muggle in the Muggle world, English Muggles were needed to do things like drive vehicles, coordinate clothing, and spot things that just seemed out of place.

The first attempts to side-along apparate Evan and the other Muggles behind enemy lines had been near-fatal; it was only after the King had knighted the six Muggles and six wizards and invited them to join the Order of Arthur that they were able to get around this transportation problem.

"How did knighthood make side-alonging any easier?" Harry asked Sir Evan, as he, Hermione and Ron stood around his bedside to hear his story.

"The badge" replied Sir Evan, "is a instantaneous transportation device."

"Really?" asked Harry.

"Yes," Sir Evan said. "A very convenient way to travel. Safe for Muggles, too."

"I've never come across this in *Hogwarts, A History*," frowned Hermione.

"Oh, well then it's not possible, right?" Ron chided.

"Dumbledore had said that there had been rumors of the badge's powers, but with no living member of the Order there wasn't anyone to pass that information on. Took him almost two years to find Merlin's research journal."

He pointed towards his badge, noting that it was shaped like the sun, with twelve golden rays pointing out from an amber core (each representing a member of the Order).

"The magical properties of each badge are activated when the user calls out the war cry used by Arthur and his round table knights," said Evan.

"What was that?"

"Well," said the elderly man, "for some reason, the cry was 'Clarence!'...now, you see, when I used the war cry my badge was activated." He held his badge up to reveal four of the twelve sun rays lit, one at each compass point. "My ray is the East," Sir Evan said. "You can tell it is the only one activated because it's brighter than the rest."

Sir Evan urged the Trio to try out their own badges, only to be disappointed by the fact that Hermione was the only one that had hers on her person. When Hermione used the rallying cry her badge lit, with both East and South rays glowing brightly and the North and West faintly. "Ah, Dame Hermione, so you are the South....or would you prefer six o'clock?"

"I think 'South' has a better ring to it," she said in reply.

"Now that the badge is activated you can transport to my position merely by saying the word *Socioarus*."

"And I'm transported exactly to your position?" she asked with a tinge of concern.

"Well, actually, you'd end up in a safe piece of unoccupied airspace a few feet away."

"So does it work like a portkey?" asked Harry.

"I'm not sure," Sir Evan said. "Never used a portkey."

"What does it feel like when you are transported?" asked Hermione.

"Well," said Sir Evan, "it feels like you're being pulled backwards by a fishhook stuck in your navel."

"Portkey," said all three in near unison.

"Is it traceable? Does it work in places that are warded? Does it have a range limitation?"

"I'm not sure. You folks are the wizards, imagine you'd know better than me. I can tell you that back during the war we used it to travel between England and Germany, so it works that distance at least. Beyond that, I'm not sure." He went on to explain that when a Muggle-wizard team went on a mission the wizard would apparate to a target area, then the Muggle would use the badge to catch up with his partner. He then added that the badges also acted as a communication device.

"Like a two-way radio?" asked Hermione.

"More like a twelve-way radio, if you wanted to talk to everyone in the Order at the same time," said Sir Evan. "To talk with a specific person, you touch a specific ray and say "*Confabulus*."

"What if you want to talk with more than one person?"

"Then you simply press a finger on each of the target rays as you say the activation word. If you are in a hurry, or wanted to create a conference call, you can press your palm against the badge centre and contact everyone in the Order.

"Does the person you want to speak with have to have their badge activated to talk with them?"

"Yes they do. If you try to call someone whose badge is turned off, that person's badge would vibrate and warm to the touch, so they'd know to turn it on. The connection would be established once they say the war cry; you don't have to say *Confabulus* to receive a call."

"So it's a medieval mobile phone?" asked Harry.

"Yes, I imagine you could think of it that way," said Sir Evan. "Of course, fifty years ago we didn't have mobiles to compare it with. Even so, there are some advantages today to using your badge...you don't need to be near a transmitting tower to talk, they work inside caves and underground, and you don't need to recharge a battery."

"Or worry about going over minutes," mumbled Hermione, speaking from experience.

The Trio chatted with Sir Evan for a few more minutes about his wartime experiences. Harry wanted to learn more about the missions Sir Evan undertook by Dumbledore's side, but the elderly knight suggested that those stories could wait for another day...particularly since they had some new toys to play with when they returned home.

And so the three bade Sir Evan goodbye with promises to make a return visit soon.

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The conversation was rather animated on the return journey to Little Wizingard.

"Do you believe those stories that the old Muggle told?" asked Ron.

"Why shouldn't we?" Hermione asked, "because he's a Muggle?"

"Course not," Ron replied rather defensively. "Just the idea of powerful magical devices being held in the hands of Muggles, and worse still, them knowing about it."

"He's a c-mug, remember?" Harry replied. "And if being around Brian and Wally these past couple of weeks have taught me anything, it's that there's a lot more of them and they know a lot more than I ever imagined...and that's not a bad thing."

"Why do you say that?" asked Ron. "Keeping our magical existence quiet from the Muggles has been the key to our world's existence, hasn't it?"

"To what end, though?" Harry said. "Our Ministry seems much more interested in keeping its secrets than defeating Voldemort, and Muggle lives are being lost as a result. It'd be different if we could handle our internal battles, well, internally, but that's not how it's working out is it?"

Ron thought about that for a second. "So if defeating Voldemort requires breaking our secrecy laws..."

"Then I'll break them," Harry replied firmly, "And anyone who wants to be a part of Clan Potter should be willing to do the same."

Ron leaned back a bit in his seat, wondering if Harry was issuing a defining challenge. "I'm with you, Harry, no worries there," he replied quickly. "I'm just worried about having to fight Voldemort and the Ministry at the same time, especially with dad being on the other side."

"Don't sell your dad short before he's asked to make that choice," Hermione replied. She tried to defuse the situation by changing the subject. "So do you think Sir Evan will be able to help us?"

"Don't see how, given his bad hip," Ron replied.

"Think about how the badge operates, though," Hermione said. "If they work like he says, then we could always transport to his location if we ever got into trouble, or stuck within an anti-apparition field. Assuming," she added, "that we all have our apparition licenses sometime in the next decade or so."

"Yeah, yeah," Ron replied. "Kind of limited use, though, if it means we'd always end up in Eastleigh...without someone being badged inside Little Wizingard...too bad we can't get our hands on more of those things."

"Well," said Harry, "I can always talk to the Prince about getting more badges, though I think we'd have to think hard about who they'd go to. And as for having a badge in Eastleigh but not one in Little Whinging, there's a solution to that, isn't there?"

"Think he'd want to move?" Ron asked.

"In a heartbeat, if it meant spending some time with Hermione," Harry replied with a grin.

"Oh stop," Hermione said. "He's a very nice man, and if he flirts a bit, well, at eighty-eight he can get away with it." She took a hand off the steering wheel and, after activating the badge she was wearing over her summer jumper, touched Sir Evan's ray.

"Oh, Sir Evan?"

"Yes, Dame Hermione, brightest ray of the sun, what can I do for you?"

Ron grinned while Hermione shook her head at him. "We were just wondering if you'd like to stay with us for a while up in Surrey."

They heard something mumbled on the other side, and a moment later Ron had company in the back seat.

"Thought you'd never ask," Sir Evan said with a frail smile, as he leaned back on the rear bench of the Bentley.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Queen's Wizard, Part 1 (part 1)

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

Chapter 12 – Queen's Wizard

"The wards are still up," Harry said, as the tingling sensation traveled down his spine even before Hermione had turned onto Privet Drive. "I do hope that isn't because Aunt Petunia is still here."

The chances that the Dursleys were still in Little Whinging, and any thoughts that there would be anything "small" about the dinner celebration that evening were quickly dispelled by the sight of the circus tent that covered a good portion of the street between Number 4 and Number 5. Hermione parked the car just outside of a barricade set up at the end of the street. Wally and Brian were waiting for them with umbrellas and a wheelchair.

"Good evening, Sir Evan," Brian said as he opened the rear door. "Sir Harry's mobile call gave us the opportunity to ready a place for you to stay. Would you like me to take you there?"

"Not unless it has a stocked wet bar, thank you very much," Sir Evan replied. Ron rolled his eyes; the elderly knight had been badgering them to stop at a pub ever since he had popped out of thin air and into the Bentley.

Brian smiled as he helped the elderly man into the chair and handed him an umbrella. "I believe we will be able to accommodate your request under the tent."

As Brian pushed Sir Evan past four parked motor coaches Wally hung back to chat with the other three.

"I hope you don't mind our initiative," he said, "but we're going to make Number Twelve wheelchair accessible and convert its living room for Sir Evan's use."

"That's fine, Wally," Harry replied. "We had been talking about turning one of the houses into an infirmary...this just moves that construction schedule up a bit." Harry crunched his eyebrows as he thought of something. "Do we have anyone lined up to take care of him?"

Wally nodded. "We had the same concern...there aren't any c-mug geriatric nurses on MI-5 ¾'s payroll. But in a rather happy coincidence, one of your guests this evening is a card-carrying registered nurse."

"And who would that be?" Harry asked.

"A Mrs. Janet Miller," Wally replied, "the Muggle mum of a Hogwarts student from Chelsea."

"Oh great," groaned Hermione, "she must be Amy Miller's mum."

"Who's that?" Harry asked.

"Third-year Ravenclaw," she replied, "and one of the more ardent members of the Harry Potter Fan Club."

Ron chuckled. "And how would you know about the membership rolls of just such a club?"

Hermione blushed. "Well, I thought it my duty as Harry's friend to keep tabs on what his fan girls were up to."

Harry grabbed Hermione's and pulled her close. "And I suppose that was the only reason for joining my fan club, huh?"

"Maybe," she replied, before sticking out her tongue.

Harry tried to catch her tongue with a kiss, then laughed. "Well I suppose it's time I break little Amy's heart, along with those belonging to any of the other witches in that club that are here tonight."

Hermione's eyes sparkled. "Who said it was only witches that fancied you?"

"Too much information," Ron yelled, covering his ears with his hands.

"Speaking of guest lists," Harry said quickly, as he turned to Wally, "I thought we agreed that tonight's dinner party was going to be small."

"Well it is, actually," Wally said with a smile, "when you compare it with the Solstice Celebration that Fred and George have planned for next week..."

"So what about the neighbors?"

"We put them on a bus and sent them to the West End for the night...they've got tickets for the revival of *Camelot*."

That wasn't the only clue that someone from the Muggle world had sprung the surprise, rather than the Weasley Twins. A yellow-brick road lay along

the street, leading to a tent decorated like Munchkinland. Young children in brightly-colored costumes were running around with huge lollypops in their hands, or waiting in line for pony rides and candy floss. Their parents and older siblings were mingling under the tent and in front of a stage set with musical instruments and loudspeakers; Harry recognized the faces of several Muggleborn Hogwarts students sprinkled within this crowd.

"Looks like Mum put her mailing list to good use," Hermione said with a smile, as they were approached by a blond wand-bearing teen that wore white silk, corkbottle caps, and a goofy smile.

"Erm, I'm supposed to ask whether you are you a good witch, or a bad witch."

Hermione and Harry laughed, while Ron stood gobsmacked.

"Merlin, Luna, you look...you look beautiful."

"Thank you Ronald," she replied sweetly, as she walked up to him and gave him a kiss that turned Ron's face beet-red.

Harry reached his arm around Hermione's shoulder and hugged her close. "Oy, Weasley," he said, "save the bashful bit for the Snow White party."

Ron overlaid befuddlement on embarrassment as Luna took his arm and led him towards the tent. A great cheer arose when the four were spotted, and Harry, Ron and Hermione were quickly enveloped within a sea of handshakes and backslaps as thirty-seven muggle-born Hogwarts students angled for a chance to introduce Harry to their family. It took the better part of an hour for them to meet everyone; Harry might have spent the entire night within that crowd had Brian not saved him with word that he had another guest to meet. He led Harry, Hermione, Ron and Luna inside Number Five, where they found the Prince of Wales and his Royal Historian chatting with Hermione's parents.

"Oh, there you are, Sir Harry...come in, come in," the Prince said. "And this must be Dame Hermione," he said, as he kissed the back of her hand. "It is a true honor to finally meet you, my lady."

Hermione blushed, not knowing whether she should pull her hand back, curtsy, or give some sort of formal response. "Pleased to meet you, Your Highness," she finally replied.

Harry then introduced the Prince to Ron and Luna, and started to introduce Luna to Hermione's parents before they stopped him with word that they had met before the party started.

"So what brings you to Little Whinging, Your Highness?" Harry asked.

"Well, I did hear that there was cause to celebrate your freedom," the Prince replied. "And I as I already had a few things to discuss with you, I thought I'd come out and do it in person."

"How can I help you, Your Highness?"

"Now you see...there you go again," the Prince replied. "Please remember that I am the one that is supposed to be asking how I can help you."

"Erm, yes, Your Highness."

The Prince suggested that they all sit down. "Firstly," he began, "Her Majesty and I were wondering if you would join us for lunch on Tuesday. We're having a little get together out at Windsor, before taking in a bit of racing."

"Racing...on Tuesday?" Hermione asked. "Isn't that the day that the Queen reopens the Royal Ascot?"

"Why, yes it is," he replied. "Don't worry...lunch won't be anything too large, and it's only a short ride from the castle down onto the course. Supposed to be nice weather, I hear."

"You...you aren't asking us to ride in the Queen's procession, are you?" Hermione asked incredulously, looking from the Prince over to her parents and then back.

"Erm, yes, I am, actually," the Prince replied. "I know that it's rather last minute, but..."

"But we aren't royalty," stated Harry.

"Is that so, Sir Harry?" the Prince replied with a smile. "Well, perhaps we can decide that part later, then? Good. Onto the second point. I understand that you've met with Mr. Baxter already? He's been doing a little research for me, and we've come upon something that you might wish to consider...Mr. Baxter?"

"Thank you, Your Highness," the Royal Historian replied, and he turned towards the teens. "Over the past week I have been reviewing some of the treaties signed between the leadership of the Muggle and wizarding worlds, with particular interest on the position of Royal Wizard."

"You mean like Godric Gryffindor, when he was King's Wizard?"

"Exactly," the historian replied. "You see, there hasn't been a Royal Wizard for quite some time, and we weren't sure whether the position had been eliminated by treaty, but it turns out that it hasn't been."

"So the Queen, if she wanted to, could appoint a Royal Wizard even today?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Baxter replied.

"What does a Royal Wizard do?" Ron asked.

"Well, the Royal Wizard was the sovereign's representative in the wizarding world...an ambassador of sorts. They also led the wizarding forces loyal to that king or queen, in the days when the two worlds hadn't completely separated, and advised the ruler on magical issues."

"But there aren't any wizard forces under control of the Queen, are there?"

"No, neither directly, or under Her government," said the historian. "That right was ceded by treaty in the Sixteenth Century...but the position of Royal Wizard wasn't ceded...it was kept for ceremonial purposes, much like the Swiss Guards that work for the Pope."

"Which brings us around to a question for you, Sir Harry," the Prince interjected. "Her Royal Highness would be pleased to have you serve her in that capacity."

"What?" asked Harry. "Why?"

"Because of the advantages that come with the post, I imagine," the historian said. "We understand that you have to worry about just how much information about the wizarding world you can legally share with Her Royal Majesty and her government. As Queen's Wizard, we do not believe that would be an issue...there is no treaty limitation on the position's advisory role."

"So there's an exception to the secrecy regulations for Royal Wizards, so long as it's the Queen he's talking to?" Harry asked.

"Again, that is our interpretation," the historian said. "The Royal Wizard is also allowed to use magic to support and defend the Crown, and there is no limitation made based on the age of the wizard."

"So you think that if I were Queen's Wizard that I wouldn't have to wait six more weeks to use a wand legally?" Harry said. "Sounds like an attractive offer...Hermione, any drawbacks that you can see?"

The bushy-haired witch thought for a moment. "Besides the obvious political fallout?" she asked. "Can't imagine Scrimgeour will be too happy about you working for the Queen instead of him. It would also probably limit your future career options...forget working for the Ministry, or as an Auror."

"The pay is pretty good, if that is an issue," the Prince said with a smile. "Although we were also considering combining the ceremony with an investiture for the new Lord Gryffindor, and that would certainly involve some additional financial resources...."

"I'm not worried about money," Harry said, "I would like to be able to do something interesting after all of this, though...I imagine that I could always track down Dark Wizards in defense of the British Empire, right?"

Hermione turned to the historian. "Was Albus Dumbledore asked to be King's Wizard during the war?"

"As a matter of fact he was," the Prince replied. "Unfortunately, he felt that his first loyalty had to be to Hogwarts. Of course, that didn't stop him from acting as a de facto advisor," he said with a smile, "Or from leading the Order of Arthur...oh, that's right. I almost forgot. As Queen's Wizard you would have control of the remaining eight badges...I understand that they might be useful when placed in the right hands."

"Yes, I imagine that they would," said Harry, thinking furiously. "I hope this doesn't offend you, Your Highness, but it sounds like some of this is based on treaty interpretations by your staff. Not that I doubt your skills, Mr. Baxter, but I might want to get a second opinion from a wizard barrister."

"No offense taken, my boy," the historian said. "That does sound like a prudent idea."

"I'll take that as a provisional yes, then," the Prince said, "and trust that you'll be able to establish a legal opinion from your side in the near future?"

"I'll try to be quick about it, Your Highness," Harry said.

"Excellent. Then it's time to head out to the tent and celebrate. Dame Hermione's parents have arranged for a splendid band to play tonight."

As the group headed back to the tent Harry grabbed his girlfriend's hand and held her back.

"Hermione," he asked, "you know how I talked about breaking some Fan Club hearts tonight?"

"Yes," she replied with a slight smile.

"Well, I've been having second thoughts."

"What about, Mr. Potter?" she said with a tinge of concern.

Harry quickly realized the multiple meanings of his last comment. "Not about us!" he quickly reassured her. "It's about...about whether we should keep our relationship a secret. And no, it's not because I'm not proud to be your boyfriend, or afraid of Ginny, but...."

"But what, Harry?"

"Well, I'm afraid that it would be too dangerous for you if word got out that you were my girlfriend."

"You mean closer than I already was, or in more danger than I already was?" Hermione asked incredulously. "Harry, I'm already marked, probably number two on their hit list, since I'm a Muggleborn, and our friendship's been no secret. And I mean, really, they've already tried to kill my parents

and take me out, how much worse could it get?"

"Are you sure?" Harry asked skeptically.

"Are you sure you don't want to see who else is enrolled in your Fan Club?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Harry said with a bright smile and a quick kiss. "Have it your way, then...just don't say I didn't warn you."

"Whatever do you mean, Harry?"

"Oh, nothing," the teen-aged wizard replied with a smirk.

They got to the tent just as his girlfriend's mum had stepped up to a microphone at the front of the stage.

"Good evening, everyone, I'd like to welcome you all here this evening," she began. "My name is Emily Granger, Chief Information Officer for the Fawkes Foundation, and, more importantly, Hermione Granger's mum." (cheers and laughs from the crowd). "The band will be starting up in a few minutes, but before that I have a few announcements to make."

"Those families that that requested mobile telephones or laptop computers can pick them up at the back of the tent. There are also sign-up sheets there for anyone who needs high-speed internet connections installed, or computer lessons."

"Secondly, the summer lecture series '*Muggles 'R Us*' will kick off next Thursday, with a presentation by Robert Baxter from the British Museum titled 'Merlin's Legacy.' Place and time will be posted this weekend on the muggleborn.com website. Which reminds me...if anyone hasn't gotten their secure login codes yet please see me before the end of night."

"And last, I'd like to ask that each family introduce themselves to their club leaders this evening. We are hoping that each club meets sometime in the next week or two. Now, we've already heard from a few students that wish to be in the same group with best friends or housemates, but we ask that everyone give their assignments a go. Groupings were based on geography, but we also made it a point to see that each club has different houses and years represented. Remember kids, on this side of Platform 9 ¾ you've all been sorted into the same house."

"And now, I'd like to turn the microphone over to a very special guest. Please give a warm Little Wizarding welcome to His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales."

The Prince strode up onto the stage, producing a raucous round of cheering. While Harry looked on with no small amount of apprehension, the Prince began to speak.

"On behalf of Her Majesty's Government and the residents of Little Wizarding I'd like to thank all of you for coming out to this event. We are here to celebrate a liberation of sorts...not just Harry's liberation from his tyrannical relatives, but the liberation of all of us from the tyranny of isolation and fear."

After the cheers and clapping subsided he continued.

"But perhaps I should step back and explain why I am here this evening. Two weeks ago, when I first met an amazing young man named Harry Potter, I was reminded that I am heir to the throne of all of Great Britain, and not just its Muggle bits."

That comment drew laughs from the crowd.

"Now there are some who believe that Her Majesty's government has no interest in protecting British witches and wizards from magical threats, but I think that this is rubbish. Young witches and wizards do not forfeit their rights as citizens of the United Kingdom upon their entry to Hogwarts...and the most basic of those rights is the expectation that their government will protect them from all threats, be they external, internal, Muggle or magical."

"Some might argue that the wizarding community has the resources to handle magical threats on its own, and that the Muggle government of Great Britain should mind its own business. Well, it is the unfortunate truth that over the past year the wizarding community has been unable to thwart the Dark Wizard and his minions. The evil one who fancies himself Lord Voldemort has even purposely attacked Muggles in an attempt to reach his intended goals. While we have no intention of getting in the way of the Ministry of Magic's efforts, neither will Her Majesty's government stand idly by in the hope that things will get better on their own."

"And this is where all of you, this young man, and this community enter into the story. I'm sure that most of you have heard the story of Harry Potter, of how he has seemingly been destined since birth to face Lord Voldemort. In the short time that I have known him, he has done nothing to diminish my confidence that he is up to this task, but he can not do it alone. Her Majesty's government has made certain resources available to him for this fight, but this help alone is not sufficient. It is up to all of us, and all of you, to do whatever you can to help him in this fight. It is my hope that you will consider any help you give him to be as if you were giving it to the Crown itself. And it is my expectation that even in the darkest of days, you will all display the stoic resolve and strength that is at the very heart of what it means to be British."

The Prince then decided that it was time for Harry to make a few remarks. Saying that he wasn't used to being a warm-up act but that in this case it was entirely appropriate, he pulled Harry up onto the stage. The young wizard looked as if he'd rather face Voldemort than a live microphone.

"Well, erm...look, I'm pants at giving speeches," he began, "so I hope you're not expecting anything fancy coming out of my mouth." Sprinkles of laughter arose from the crowd. "It's great seeing so many of my schoolmates here. Looks like we have a few Gryffindors here tonight (cheer), not to mention Ravenclaws (cheer) and Hufflepuffs (cheer)...if anyone out there is from Slytherin House (jeers and catcalls), the Death Eater's Friday-night Fish Fry is next street over (big laugh)."

"I love seeing all of you with your families, because that's what this is all about," Harry continued. "It's what the work of the Fawkes Foundation is all about. I want all of the Hogwarts students out there to think about your parents, and brothers and sisters. If you think we live our lives in the Twilight Zone, what about them? When they're at work and a co-worker starts bragging about their son's play on the pitch what can they say...yeah, but you should see what my kid can do with a broom?" (laugh). When the neighbors bring around pictures of their children dressed for school socials can ours share moving pictures of us in our dress robes? (someone shouted "No great loss for Weasley," to the crowd's amusement). While we're away at school its the parents that have to always watch what they say, or do, to keep our world secret, and up to now they've had to shoulder that responsibility pretty much on their own. If the Fawkes Foundation can do anything to help support our families, to ease the burden they carry... through a network of Muggleborns and their families, then it will be an investment well made."

"The Prince talked about the challenge we face tonight. In a perfect world Voldemort would have no power. In a slightly less perfect world, the Ministry of Magic would be powerful enough to handle him. But we all know the reality...and we also know that on its own the Muggle government would find it hard to defeat a dark wizard. This is why a third way is so necessary...a path along which muggles and wizards march side by side, with those allied against the Dark forces."

"I've seen some amazing things these past weeks, and imagined amazing possibilities...Muggles and wizards collaborating in ways unthinkable for those blinded by narrow minds and racist attitudes. It's enough to give a skinny young kid with hopeless hair some hope. And I can't begin to say how much I appreciate all of the help and support I've received...from the Prince to the Grangers to all of you. It's been...well, it's been brilliant."

"There's lots more we could talk about, but that's what IM'ing is for, isn't it? (laughs)...I just want to end by saying one thing more...Hermione, will you come up here?"

The crowd cheered and whistled while Harry held his hand out to a very embarrassed-looking witch. He pulled her up on stage and spun around to face the crowd, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

"You know," Harry said, "there's a prediction out there that Lord Voldemort will be defeated by a power he knows not. Headmaster Dumbledore thought it was love, but it's also entirely possible that it is the power of Muggles. That was a bit of a riddle for me...as I look for all of the advantages I can get to defeat Old Tom; what should I look for...love, or a Muggle?"

Harry looked at Hermione, who was giving him a very high eyebrow. "Well," he continued, "I'd like to announce tonight that I've found an answer to that riddle. Killing two birds with one stone, I've fallen in love with the smartest and prettiest Muggleborn witch that I know – Hermione Jane Granger."

At that very moment, while the crowd went wild with applause and wolf whistles and cries ("About time, Potter" being quite popular) Harry pulled Hermione towards him and planted a long, full kiss on her lips. That only incited the crowd to louder cheering. When they broke the lip lock, Hermione, her cheeks bright red, leaned over and whispered into his ear.

"You are going to get so lucky tonight, Potter."

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Saturday, June 16
Little Whinging, Surrey

"Ouch!...erm, morning Luna," Harry stammered, as he blotted spilt coffee. "Did we miss giving you the belt?"

The blonde-haired teen entered Number Four's kitchen wearing the same red "Clan Potter" dressing gown that Harry was wearing. Except that hers was hanging open over a skimpy mid-drift baring camisole and bright-red knickers.

She reached into the robe's pockets and pulled out the ends of its sash. "No...is that a problem?" she asked with a bit of concern. "I like to air out my navel in the morning...keeps the nargle larvae from nesting, you know."

"Erm, no...that's fine," Harry said. "I'm glad to see that you feel comfortable here...it's just that in the Muggle world, erm, well...we usually wear something over our knickers when we're in mixed company...unless we're more than just good friends."

"Oh...sorry," Luna replied as she quickly tied her robe closed. "I thought that it wasn't any different than Muggle swimming costumes."

"You're right," Harry replied, trying not to make his house guest feel bad. "Guess that it's one of those Muggle customs...location is everything, I guess...Say, our morning run is at seven...maybe you brought some shorts and you could join us?"

Luna's eyes brightened back up. "I didn't, but I can transfigure some...be right back." Harry poured a cup of coffee for Luna while she ran back upstairs to change. She returned with a skin-tight t-shirt and a bra-less bounce in her step, forcing Harry to very carefully place his coffee mug on the counter top. Choosing to say nothing, he wondered just how many other surprises were in store for Luna's visits to Little Wizarding.

"You're up early...weren't able to sleep?" he asked.

"Ronnie sure snores a lot, doesn't he?" Luna replied. "I could hear them clear across the hall...how do you get any sleep at all in the same room?"

"Six years of practice," Harry replied with a grin. "It's actually gotten better, if you can believe that. Hermione convinced him to start wearing a Muggle breathing strip across his nose at night."

"Maybe it will get better once we start sleeping together," Luna said.

“Erm, yes...well, perhaps it will,” Harry said, forcing something out of his mouth besides sprayed liquids.

Luna plopped down on a kitchen table chair. “Unless, of course, you and Ron prefer sleeping together.”

Harry’s head snapped back a bit in shock. “Luna, Ron and I sleep in the same room, but we’re not sleeping together.”

“Oh...what’s the difference?”

“Well...wait, you really don’t know, do you?” he asked.

“Don’t know what?” Luna replied, confusion clearly displayed on her face.

“When Muggles talk about two people sleeping together, they really mean that they are shagging.”

“Oh...well if that’s the case why don’t they just say shag instead of sleep?”

“Erm...good question...usually if two people share a bed they’re also shagging...unless you listen to Uncle Vernon, of course,” Harry replied with a grin.

“So Muggles only shag when they’re asleep? Where’s the fun in that?”

“Erm, well... I guess it’s just the most private place to, erm...” Harry caught sight of somebody walking down the hall. “Good morning, Hermione.”

“Most private place to do what?” Hermione asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“Oh, Harry and I were just talking about sleeping together,” Luna said matter-of-factly.

“Excuse me?”

“We were talking about the phrase ‘sleeping together’ and how it means more than just sharing a kip,” Harry replied quickly.

“Oh,” Hermione said, as she looked at Luna and Harry with furrowed brow. “And exactly how did this topic of conversation take place?”

“I told Harry that Ron’s snoring might get better if he slept with me.”

Wondering whether it really was that innocent, Hermione decided to change topics. “So what got you out of bed so early, Harry?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said wearily. “A bit excited after all of last night’s fun, and I knew I had a stack of papers to go through.” He had in fact been reviewing an emancipation document that legally severed his Aunt and Uncle’s custodial rights over him.

The teen-aged wizard’s mobile chirped. He fished it out of his pocket, pushed the correct button, and said, “Hullo?”

“Good morning, Sir Harry, sorry that it’s so early.”

“That’s fine, Wally, we were already up,” Harry replied. “What’s going on?”

“There was an accident in London last night that might be of interest to you. A man was struck by a lorry and taken to hospital. The report caught the eye of one of my colleagues when it was noted that the victim was wearing some sort of purse tied to his belt.”

“A wizard, eh?” Harry asked.

“Well, I wasn’t sure until they e-mailed me some pictures of the crime scene. After all, I’ve been known to carry a purse around myself now and then. But the style it was so...erm, medieval...it just simply screamed wizard...no offense,” Wally added quickly.

“None taken,” Harry replied with a smile. “How is this bloke doing?”

“Just came out of surgery about two hours ago...still in a bad way, though,” Wally said. “It happens now and again that a John Doe is really a Merlin Doe, and there are protocols in place for notifying your wizard hospital, but...I thought I’d forward a head shot to you first, since the man is the same height and weight as that Mundungus chap you asked us to be on the look-out for.”

Harry’s heart jumped a beat. “Sure...send me the photo and I’ll take a look.”

“It’s already been sent...remember how to check your e-mail using the mobile?”

“Yeah, hang on.” Harry pushed a button to place Wally’s call on “hold,” then changed screens and punched a few more buttons to get to his in-box, where the message was waiting. He opened the attached jpeg, and squinted when the upper torso of the accident victim filled the mobile’s display screen.

“What do you think, Hermione?” Harry asked, handing her the device.

“Hard to tell with all that blood splatter,” she replied, “but it could be him.”

“Let’s check it out then,” Harry replied.

Hermione nodded and toggled back to the call, letting Wally know that Harry and she wanted to make an identification in person.

"He's bringing the car around," she said, after ending the call and returning Harry's mobile.

He nodded and turned towards Luna, "Would it be alright if we left you here with Ron for a few hours?" he asked.

"Fine with me," the blonde witch replied with a dreamy looking look. "Gives me the chance to work on his snoring problem."

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Hermione leaned forward over the rear-facing bench. "Wally, I'm sorry but would you mind terribly if we rolled the divider up?"

"That's why it's there, Dame Hermione" Wally replied with a smile. "We'll be at hospital in about thirty minutes." He then saved her the trouble and raised the opaque divider between front and rear seats. Hermione leaned back, then stretched out on the bench facing Harry.

She turned a wide yawn into a smile. "Merlin, I'm still sleepy...I could use a kip."

Harry chuckled. "Gee, I wonder why," he replied with a bit of cheek. He then surprised Hermione by pouncing on top of her. "Need a blanket?"

"Got your hopes up after Luna's comments, Harry?"

Harry reached down and pulled an errant strand of her hair back from her face.

"No," he replied, "I've had those hopes for a little while now."

"Since when?" Hermione asked.

"Since the last time I was stretched out in this motorcar."

Hermione paused for a second to process, then squinted a bit when she arrived at an answer. After squinting she gave Harry a good sock in the arm.

"I thought you were sleeping when I was dressing down your Aunt!"

Harry grinned. "Kind of hard to sleep through the thunderstorm that you were brewing."

"Oh," she said quietly. "Guess I did get a little worked up."

"So do you think we could do it?" Harry asked.

"Do what?"

"Watch each other's backs through the night."

"Depends on whether you sleep on your side," Hermione replied.

"What about your parents?"

"I'm more worried about Ron," she said.

"Looks like Luna might be a help there," Harry said. "So when do you want to try?"

"Think you can behave yourself until third date?"

"Does last night count?"

"Erm...yes, I think so," Hermione said with a smile. "But that's only one, and next time I'm expecting you to do the planning, not Mum."

"Fair enough, I guess," Harry said, mustering all of the sincerity he could gather at that moment, "I think that I can...that is, if you think you can keep your hands off of me."

"My hands?" Hermione asked, with a sparkle in her eye. She shoved her two hands down the rear pockets of Harry's trousers and gave a firm squeeze. "After last night...you're the one worrying about my hands?"

"You didn't seem to mind."

Hermione raised her head up and gave Harry's nose a quick peck. "No, I didn't, did I?"

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Mundungus Fletcher had never smelled a room as sterile as the one within which he regained consciousness. It was quite unnerving...almost as unnerving as the fact that his eyes were almost completely wrapped in white gauze and that he was breathing through a tube that was shoved down his throat.

“Why Dung, you are alive...so nice to see you again, though I dare say I've never seen you quite so....clean.”

The injured wizard tried, but failed, to turn his head towards the voice.

“Whoa, watch it there, Dung...the doctors have your neck braced for a reason...what... what's that? Oh yes, and the tube is there because you weren't breathing too well without it. You see, for some reason, these Muggle doctors actually think your sorry excuse for a life is worth saving.”

Dung's eyes were able to move, and once they regained their ability to resolve the image that was presently hovering above his face the result wasn't very encouraging.

“Yes, Dung, it's me, Harry...you know, the kid you left to Dementors while you were off pawning stolen goods...the kid whose mansion you stole from...and before you try to apparate, don't bother...you've been ankled with an anti-app bracelet.”

Dung could barely feel something around one of his legs, but was in no position to see what it was.

“So here's the situation. The Muggles found you left for dead after being struck by a lorry outside of a pawn shop. Your head's a right mess, and your brain is still so swollen that the doctors think they'll have to operate again...yes, Dung...again. They've already drilled a few holes into your skull to reduce the swelling.”

The scruffy thief didn't think that doctor's trying to save his life could have anything to do with drills and his skull.

“Nurse tells me that if they have to go back in it won't be drills, this time but a saw.”

Dung's eyes narrowed in fright.

“Oh, now Dung, I knew you'd be worrying about that, so I thought I help ease your concerns. Nurse let me borrow one of the tools they'd be using.” Harry held a small battery-operated rotary saw over the patient's head that was about the size of an electric toothbrush, with a 5cm diameter circular saw blade held perpendicular to the grip.

“See these Muggles, they use technology to make things so much smaller, and quieter,” Harry explained. “Would you like a demonstration?” Harry pressed a button on the handle and the circular blade began to twirl with a soft, but high-pitched whine that had Dung's full attention.

“Of course, you wouldn't need all of the knives and drills and saws cutting into your body if you were at St. Mungo's, now would you? So I have a simple proposition...I'm going have the doctors take that tube out of your mouth, and you're going to tell me where I can find a locket that you took from the Black mansion. Then we're going to get it, and when we do, I'll see to it that the healers at St. Mungo's fix you up.”

“Deal...or no deal?”

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Three hours later, Harry returned to Dung's hospital room with Hermione and Wally by his side and the real Slytherin's locket in the front pants pocket opposite the one which contained the fake.

“Well, wonders never cease, it was right where you told me it was...and I only had to pay two hundred quid to get it back.”

“I may be a thief,” Mundungus said weakly, “but I'm no liar.”

Harry walked over to the bed and pulled the tape off of the magazine that had been wrapped around Dung's leg. Dung's eyes went wide as Harry showed it to him and Wally began to wheel the hospital bed out to a waiting ambulance for the ride to St. Mungo's.

“Well I'm no thief,” Harry said, “but I have been known to stretch the truth some times myself. Guess we'll have to call it even.”

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Harry and Hermione had hoped to test their badge's ability to transport them across Little Wiz's goblin wards, but Ron wasn't answering their call. Sir Evan, of course, had his badge available for what turned out to be a successful test.

The return trip to Number Four wasn't quite as successful, from a time efficiency standpoint. First was the fifteen minute chat with Sir Evan, who was thrilled with his new accommodations now that his things had been packed up and delivered from the nursing home in Eastleigh. Then there was the meeting with Nurse Miller and her entire family, who had returned to Little Whiz that morning to look at the possibility of moving into Number Twelve, at least for the summer. Once they got out to the street, they were met by Hermione's parents, who wanted to talk about how well the party had gone, and give word that three additional muggle-born families had already expressed interest in moving to Little Wiz.

It was some sixty minutes after their “instantaneous” arrival on Privet Drive that Harry and Hermione entered the front door of Number Four. They found the house empty, save for Ron and the Xbox. He informed them that Luna had floo'd back to her house to pack her things, having secured her father's permission to accept Harry's offer for her to stay with them in Little Wiz. Brian had driven out to the Lovegood residence to help with the transport, having decided that it be safer if the Luna's move was “muggled.” This rather conveniently allowed the Trio to talk about horcrux disposal.

Harry was inclined to immediately make the trip to Hogwarts and the Chamber of Secrets to find a loose basilisk fang lying about to smash upon the horcrux. Hermione, after scolding Harry a bit for his typical impetuosity, suggested that it would be prudent to wait until the Twins were able to furnish them with the protective dragon hide body suits that they'd ordered. She also pointed out that Harry still couldn't legally use magic (at least where it could be detected), and that there wasn't much downside if they waited until things were properly prepared...except, of course, for the fact that waiting would mean that they'd have a little piece of Lord Voldemort's soul to constantly safeguard.

The three spent some time balancing the pros and cons of waiting to attempt to destroy the horcrux before Harry struck upon the idea of asking M-5 ¾ to hide the locket until they were ready to dispose of it. Ron initially scoffed at the idea of Muggles having a place secure enough, but Hermione came to Harry's aid, pointing out that it would be hard to find a place less secure than when the locket was in Mundungus's possession.

And so, after transfiguring a breakfast cereal box into a wooden chest and securing the locket with Hermione's most intricate charm work, Harry tucked the horcrux under his arm and they walked across the street to Number Five, where Wally promised to "Indiana Jones" the container (until such time as Harry wanted it back). The secret agent subsequently promised to deliver a DVD of "Raiders of the Lost Ark" so that Ron would understand the movie reference.

Harry told Ron and Hermione that he had some business stuff that he needed to discuss with her Dad, and suggested that he'd catch up with them in a bit. He then walked up to Number Five's operations center, where Mr. Granger was taking his turn monitoring the neighborhood's surveillance system.

The black-haired wizard knocked on the open door. "Mr. Granger, do you have a few minutes?" he asked.

Roger Granger swiveled around on his chair and gave Harry a smile. "Of course, Son, have a seat."

"Thanks," Harry replied, as he sat down and focused on the questions and statements that he'd been rehearsing in his mind for most of the day. "Erm, wanted to say thanks again for the party last night...it was brilliant."

"It was nothing, Harry...and everything that you deserved to celebrate."

Harry took a breath. "Mr. Granger, I'd like to...erm...wanted you to know...well, I'm hoping that you aren't too concerned about the feelings I expressed last night about your daughter."

The dentist-turned-secret agent smiled. "Why would Emily and I be concerned? We already knew how you two felt about each other, and what you said was...well Emily for one thought it was sweet."

"Erm, thanks," Harry replied. "I guess I just wanted to reassure you that, even with the Dursleys gone that you can trust me with your daughter and her, erm...virtue."

Roger squinted just a bit and nodded almost imperceptibly, finally understanding the reason for Harry's visit.

"Worrying what we might think now that you two have an unchaperoned run of Number Four?" he asked.

The teen-ager nodded.

"Harry," Mr. Granger replied, "what I said two weeks ago still holds true. We trust you with Hermione's life, and everything that goes with it. We've trusted Hermione to make wise decisions for longer than that. Nothing you two have done since that time has shaken that trust."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Granger, it's just that you might think that...especially now with Ron and Luna there, well..."

Roger chuckled. "Harry, I appreciate the fact that you were concerned enough to come talk to me. Not too many teenaged boys would do that. But we trust you two to do what you think is right for the both of you. Fact is that both of you are full of virtue, and that's not going to change regardless of whatever happens in your relationship."

The teen-aged wizard couldn't believe what he was hearing and his faced showed as much.

"Harry," Roger continued, "you and Hermione live in a dangerous world at a particularly dangerous time. Emily and I have already talked about this, and given a choice, we'd frankly feel better knowing you two were watching each other's back night and day...and I do mean *night* and day. Am I making myself clear?"

The Boy-Who-Lived stood, and nodded as he reached out his hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Granger, I promise not to let you down."

Roger shook Harry's hand, placing his other on the boy's shoulder. "I know, Son...I know."

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Hours later, a waning moon cast light onto four intertwined feet at the base of a four poster bed.

"Harry," Hermione said, while looking back over her shoulder, "don't you want to snuggle some more?"

"I promised your dad I'd watch your back," her boyfriend replied, as he traced his fingertips over her gown-covered shoulder blade.

Hermione turned so quickly that Harry didn't have time to move his hand away as it was dragged onto her chest. "Harry Potter, you didn't tell my father that we were thinking about this, did you?"

"Of course not...he was too busy talking about something called 'plausible deniability.'"

Hermione slapped at Harry's chest. "Merlin, he did what? And you really were talking about this weren't you?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but I just had to," Harry replied.

His girlfriend smiled, then pulled Harry's head in for a languid kiss. "Well whatever you said must have been reassuring, else we'd have seen Dad camped outside our door."

"Of course it was," Harry replied, "it wasn't like I was asking for permission to ask you to marry me."

Hermione giggled. "Well that's good to know."

Harry gave her an evil grin. "Saving that question for next week."

Chapter 13 – Field Appointment

Sunday, June 17, 7:02pm

Little Wizinging, Surrey

Nymphadora Tonks took delight in showing her boss how to use a doorbell.

"Head Auror Robards, thank you for coming on such short notice," Harry said, after he opened the front door. He shook the man's hand, and led the two into the living room. "Let's see...you know the Headmistress, of course, and you have met Hermione. This is my good friend Ron Weasley and this is..."

"Remus, good to see you again," the Head Auror interrupted, as he nodded towards Lupin.

"Would you like something to drink, Head Auror?" Hermione asked. "We have pumpkin juice, butterbeer, some muggle iced tea..."

"No thank you, Miss Granger," the wizard replied.

"Sorry about that bounce and subsequent walk that you just took," Harry said. "We didn't know that our new security wards would keep you from using your personal portkey until you just tried."

The Head Auror nodded curtly. "I have to admit that I was rather surprised...the only other place that I'm aware of with that kind of warding is Gringott's."

"Yes, well...we just consulted with the...erm, security advisors...who helped install the wards. Apparently I can authorize portkey use by members of the Clan and Clan Friends. We can put you on this list...assuming, of course, that you would want to be one or the other."

The Head Auror gave Harry a confused stare, then turned to Headmistress McGonagall.

"Minerva, what's going on?"

The Headmistress smiled, "Gawain, while I am his wizard guardian for a few more weeks, we are on Muggle territory, and it is my understanding that under Muggle laws Clan Chief Potter is an emancipated minor. In any event he can speak for himself."

"Clan Chief?" the Head Auror asked.

"My barrister filed the papers at the Ministry last week," Harry replied nonchalantly. "Guess with all of the bureaucracy word hadn't gotten around yet...but if it's alright with you, Head Auror, I'd like to defer further talk on this issue and get to the matter that led to our request for this meeting?"

The Auror nodded, as Harry got down to business.

"This afternoon, at approximately 4:15pm, we caught Peter Pettigrew scouting around the backyard of this house in his animagus form. Twenty minutes later we obliviated and released him."

"You did what?" the Head Auror asked. "You do realize that it was at your insistence that Pettigrew had been placed on the 'Most Wanted Wizards' list, don't you?"

"Mr. Potter likely had very good reasons for doing what he did," Headmistress McGonagall interjected. "And I'm sure that he will be happy to share them with us."

"In a manner, yes," Harry replied. "But if it's all the same I'd rather show you what happened, so that you can offer your own opinions on what was said and done." He drew his wand from his back pocket as Ron brought the pensieve out from behind a chair.

"Mr. Potter, I assume you've placed the Muggles in this house out of earshot?" the Head Auror asked.

Harry smirked at the Head Auror as he placed his wand tip on his temple. "Rest assured, they are well out of earshot...now close your eyes for a second will you? I wouldn't want to get into trouble for underage wand use."

Robards responded with a gruff "Just get on with it," as Harry pulled a silver wisp of a memory from his head and placed it into the pensieve.

"Is it safe to jump in," McGonagall asked, "or should we just look?"

"You'll see more if you jump," Ron replied. "I'll hang back to keep a watch while Harry and Hermione join you to answer your questions."

Twenty minutes later six witches and wizards returned from their journey into the recent past. Ron greeted them with butterbeers. "So what did you think?" he asked.

The Head Auror took a healthy swig from his bottle. "I think that we have a lot to think about."

"Were we wrong to assume that in exchange for canceling the life debt that Wormtail's word was good?" Hermione asked.

"No, I think that you worded the agreement quite carefully," Remus replied. "I might have held on to that debt for a better deal, but..."

"It was worth it if what he told us was true," Harry replied. "Besides, he merely exchanged one debt for another owed to Hermione...without her intervention I would have killed him on the spot."

"Pettigrew might have thought he was telling the truth about this plan..." Remus mused.

"We've considered the possibility that he'd been intentionally fed misinformation," Hermione replied. "And we've sketched out a plan that we think will keep us and the Ministry safe, even if it is a ruse."

Head Auror Robards stepped into the discussion. "I find it difficult to believe that the Death Eaters have cells within any Ministry department, much less the Auror corps. I devised the constant vigilance program myself."

"Gawain," McGonagall replied gently, "nobody in this room questions your skills, but remember whom we are dealing with. After all, they were able to hide a polyjuiced Death Eater under Dumbledore's nose for almost a year."

The Auror paused in thought for a minute. "So, Mr. Potter, what are your plans?"

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione before giving the Head Auror a grim looking smile. "Well for starters, I plan on accepting an invitation from the Queen..."

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Monday, June 18, 4:00pm
Little Whinging, Surrey

"Mum, I have absolutely nothing to wear for tomorrow!"

Emily Granger couldn't choke off a laugh as Luna Lovegood helped her daughter rummage furiously through her bedroom closet. "Hermione, I never thought I'd ever hear you say something so charmingly teenagerish, particularly given circumstances."

Hermione talked over her shoulder. "Well it's not everyday that you're invited to dine with the Queen and sit in the Royal Enclosure on the opening day at Ascot, is it?"

Emily nodded sympathetically as Luna pulled the blue evening gown out that Hermione had worn at her knighting ceremony. "Maybe you could transfigure this one?"

"Thought of that," Hermione said, "but I'm pants at altering, and even if I weren't, I don't have a clue what I should be wearing...besides a hat, of course. At least you've got that one covered, Luna."

"Oh, I'm not sure about that," Luna said. "Ron made me promise to keep it quiet amongst the Muggles, and it does have a mind of its own."

Hermione berated herself for not knowing exactly what to wear to the event. There had to be a book on the subject, but she'd been too busy worrying about defeating Voldemort to read *Vogue*. With all of the humility she could muster, she finally decided to take her mother's suggestion and ask for some outside help.

Exactly seventy-two minutes later, Wally whisked Luna and Hermione into a small dress shop on a fashionable street in London's West End. He introduced them to the shop's owner, an old friend he had worked with at the Royal Household. "Do their beauty justice, Helen," Wally instructed, "they'll be in the Royal Box, so they'll have to look good on camera."

"Cameras?" Hermione asked.

"Of course," the seamstress replied. "The Royal Ascot's always televised, and there's a lot of interest this year with the new grandstand opening up. It'll be something like 60 different countries, 25 million viewers, if you can believe the newspapers."

Hermione looked nervously over at Luna.

"If anybody asks," she warned, "your lion hat runs on batteries."

Tuesday, June 19, 10:30am
Little Whinging, Surrey

Roger Granger adjusted the knot in Ron's tie as they waited for the girls to emerge from Hermione's bedroom. "Funny you don't know how to tie one of these," he told Ron. "It is part of your school uniform, isn't it?"

Harry laughed as he stood before a mirror and tucked some unruly strands of hair under his black top hat. "Little Muggle boys have clip-ons, little wizards have self-knotting ties."

"Sod off," Ron said, just as Emily and Wally walked down the stairs.

"Oh don't you two look handsome," said Wally, who, as part of their security detail, was also dressed in a morning suit. "They're coming right down, and Hermione's a little self-conscious, so help out, will you?" Harry didn't have time to reassure Wally on that point, as Luna had just turned the corner of the stairs. She wore a tan short-sleeved silk jacket over a tea length strapless blue silk dress, accessorized by her cork-bottle necklace and lion hat.

Ron exclaimed, "Luna...you look erm...really, really nice."

"Thank you, Ronald," Luna replied breezily as she twirled around once before him and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "And you look rather handsome, in a Muggle sort of way, yourself."

It was Harry's turn to gaze with amazement as Hermione somewhat nervously walked down the stairs. She wore a sea foam tea length sleeveless dress that sported a pleasing (at least to Harry) display of décolletage. Her cleavage was partially concealed by her Order of Arthur badge, which hung loosely the end of a thick platinum link chain. Covering the dress was a sheer long-sleeved overlay that buttoned closed at the neck and flared out towards the floor, floating out behind her like a gossamer cape. In deference to her profession, she wore a pointed witch hat that had been transfigured to match her dress color. The brim had been enlarged a bit, so that it flopped down rather stylishly in the front. Large flowers were arranged about her hat, held in place by a familiar looking green vine.

"Devil's Snare?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled as she ran her hands down Harry's lapels and rubbed Harry's badge, which (like Ron's) was pinned to his suit jacket. "Thank you, Sir Harry, you look handsome too." She then waved off Harry's apology with the comment that his eyes had, once again, betrayed his thoughts. As it was raining lightly outside, Emily Granger shooed the four teenagers into the living room for pictures using both Muggle and magical cameras.

"So are we all armed and dangerous?" asked Ron afterwards, as he pulled his wand and a shrunken down broom out of his suit jacket. Harry tilted his head back until he felt the tip of the sword hilt that was strapped to his back, then reached under his shirt collar and carefully pulled his sword out and over his head. "I'm so glad Fred and George found this magical scabbard for me," he said, as he used his other hand to open his jacket and reveal both his wand and shrunken-down Firebolt. He then tipped his head forward and caught the brim of his top hat as it flipped off of his head. He looked down at all of the objects stored within it. "Same with McGonagall's work on this hat...can't imagine my rucksack being considered an appropriate accessory for the day."

"At least you three have solid concealment," said Hermione, as Luna pulled her wand out from a sheath concealed by one of her sleeves. Lacking similar opacity about her upper torso, Hermione tucked two fingers into a hidden seam on the side of her dress and pulled down. The sound of ripping Velcro was heard as she exposed her right thigh and a garter belt that secured her wand.

"Say," said Harry with a grin, as he reached towards the opened seam. "What else do you have hidden in there?"

"Never you mind," Hermione said as she slapped his hand away. "C'mon, we don't want to be late for the Queen."

A cheer rang out as the four stepped out onto the front porch. Lining the path to the waiting vehicles were friends, both old and new...Fred and George next to Brian and Sir Evan, who were across from Remus and Tonks. Further down stood some of the latest initiates into the Clan Potter family...Dean Thomas, Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell, Lee Jordan, Seamus Finnegan, and Neville Longbottom.

Hermione walked up to Sir Evan, who was sitting upright in his wheelchair with a Bluetooth-enabled headset in one ear and a handgun holstered on his lap.

"Now you promise to call us the second you realize that you need back-up here?"

"Don't worry about us, Dame Hermione," the knight replied. "Between Wally's men and your young wizard friends we'll be in fine shape."

Harry walked up to Tonks and Remus, who were also dressed for Ascot. Lupin looked rather uncomfortable in his suit coat.

"Remus, you clean up good," Harry said. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were ready to see Tonks walking down the aisle."

The former DADA professor laughed as Tonks's cheeks turned a shade that clashed with her hair.

"You just watch yourselves along the way, and we'll see you there."

Harry then walked over his fellow Gryffindors. "Want to say again how grateful we are that you all have helped keep watch these past few days."

"We'd have been hurt if you hadn't asked us," Lee replied.

"Well, with any luck things will continue to be quiet here, but if it does get hairy...stick with Fred and George, they know the neighborhood, and trust the Muggle support...they're not as helpless as you may have been led to believe."

Neville clicked his heels at attention and gave a smiling salute. "Aye aye, Clan Chief."

"Oh, stop that," Harry scolded.

Wally approached Harry's side. "Neighborhood evac starts in five minutes, Sir Harry, we should go."

"What?" Seamus said with amazement, "First it's Clan Chief, then it's Sir Harry...when do we start saying 'Your Lordship?'"

Harry shook his head and snorted out a rueful grin.

"Oh, about an hour from now."

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They made the trip in two cars; Harry and Hermione rode in the back of her Bentley, driven by Wally, while Ron and Luna rode in the back of the black Bentley with Steve up front. There had been some talk about the four riding together, but their security detail insisted on driving separately, saying that even it were perfectly safe that as guests of the Queen they should arrive in style.

"It's not fair," Harry mock-whined, as he reached an arm around Hermione's shoulder and pulled her close. "Their Bentley has blackened windows and that screen between the seats."

Hermione jabbed an elbow into his side. "Harry, honestly...at a time like this." She paused, then waggled her eyebrows. "Then again, what better time than this?" She then grabbed his chin and kissed him full on the lips.

"A bit of an exhibitionist, are we?" Harry asked, when their tongues finally untangled.

"Nothing wrong with a bit of snogging is there?" Hermione replied. "Besides," she said in a raised voice as she turned towards the front seat, "the Royal Household's staff is famous for its discretion, right?"

"My apologies, Dame Hermione, did you say something?" Wally replied, with a grin that was reflected in the rear view mirror. "My eyes and ears were focused on the road."

"There you go," Harry said with a Cheshire Cat's grin.

"Just keep it PG-13, Potter," Hermione replied, as she leaned forward and wrapped both hands around Harry's neck. "Wouldn't want to corrupt the morals of any kiddies looking in."

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As Little Wizarding was located in the western suburbs of London, very near Windsor, (and Ascot, for that matter), it took less than thirty minutes for the two cars to arrive at the Castle. After passing through the main gates the cars bypassed the front entrance and drove around the perimeter of the grounds, finally stopping outside a large wooden outbuilding. Wally and Steve ducked inside, only to return a few moments later carrying several pairs of Wellington boots.

"You'll be more comfortable wearing these," Wally said, as he opened the rear door. Hermione stepped out of the car whilst making some adjustments to her dress, then slipped out of her fancy new low-heeled shoes. She looked over at the other car and noticed that Luna was pulling up on the front of her outfit.

Hermione decided to tease. "Wardrobe malfunction, Luna?"

Luna looked a little puzzled. "No, I don't think so," she replied. "The fabric went exactly where Ronald's hands wanted it to go."

Harry and Hermione laughed as Ron tried to stammer out an explanation. With raised dress hems the four were led through puddles of water and mud and into the Mewes, where they came upon the Queen nuzzling a thoroughbred's nose with her own.

Wally cleared his throat and introduced the four to the monarch, whose own pair of Wellies contrasted with her blue hat and dress just as sharply as Hermione and Luna's.

"We are pleased to see you again, Sir Harry and Dame Hermione," she said, with both hands still grasping the horse's bridle, "and delighted to meet you, Mr. Weasley and Ms. Lovegood."

"Is that really a horse?" Luna asked incredulously. "I've never seen one before."

The Queen laughed. "Yes my dear, this is a real live horse. Perhaps not as colorful as some of your more magical creatures, but the way she runs is magical in and of itself." She patted the side of the horse's head and turned back towards the four. "One of mine," she said proudly, "and odds-on favorite for tomorrow's last race." Raising her hand towards the far side of the stable she said, "You should meet my grandson...he is around here someplace with his young lady friend."

The four followed her as she walked down the stable pathway. "We do hope that Brian has made your summer a little more comfortable than in

years past, Sir Harry?"

"He's been absolutely brilliant," Harry replied, "I can't thank you enough for what you did, Your Majesty."

"We have no doubt that we will be the one thanking you for what you've done in far too soon a time," the Queen replied. "By the way, we will be spending all of August at Balmoral, and would be pleased if you and your friends could visit for at least a portion of that time."

Harry and Hermione exchanged quick looks of concern and calculation. "We are honored by your invitation, Your Majesty," Hermione replied, "and would very much enjoy just such a visit."

"Excellent," the Queen replied. She stopped in front of a seemingly empty stall and, in a voice eerily similar to Dolores Umbridge's, cleared her throat.

"Hem, hem."

After a moment, the stall door opened and a handsome young man in his early twenties appeared. He wore a top hat, tails, and a guilty-looking grin as he led a demure young lady dressed in pink out of the stall.

The Queen said, "May I present my grandson, Prince Harold, and his friend, Lady Penelope."

"Good morning, Grandmum," the young prince replied. "I was just showing Penny around the stables."

"Yes, that is quite evident," the Queen replied, as she pulled a piece of straw away from the back of the young woman's dress.

The young prince smirked as he looked towards the four. "Ah, you must be the bright young students from up North that father's been talking about."

"I imagine so, Prince Harold," Hermione replied with the kind of saucer eyes she last wore at Buckingham Palace. "It's an honor to meet you."

"Please, call me Harry," the young prince said, "although that might get confusing, right Sir Harry?"

Harry frowned a bit at the star-struck attention Hermione was paying to the most eligible bachelor in Britain (well, Muggle Britain, at least).

"Yes, well that little problem will be resolvable soon enough, won't it?" suggested the Queen.

"Erm, yes, Your Majesty," Harry replied modestly.

The Queen looked out the stable's doorway. "It is nearly time for lunch. Would you go find your father, Dear...tell him that we need him to attend to us?"

"Sure, Grandmum," Prince Harry replied. He led his girlfriend out of the stable.

The Queen sighed. "So spirited...just like his mother. Has us wrapped around his little finger, he does."

A few minutes later a Rolls Royce pulled up outside the stable and discharged the Prince of Wales. "Hullo, Sir Harry, so good to see you again," he said. "And so too, Dame Hermione, Mr. Weasley and Ms. Lovegood."

"Your hats are quite amazing," the Prince continued, "and a most fashionable placement of your badge, Dame Hermione. I understand you had the opportunity to test drive them over the weekend."

"We did indeed," Hermione replied.

"Did you bring the necessary instruments?" the Queen asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the Prince replied. He then opened his coat jacket and pulled out a piece of parchment and a large round object hidden under red silk.

"Sir Harry," the Queen said, "in the interest of time and secrecy we thought it best to take care of this here. However, we must insist that this be considered a field appointment, and that there will be a time to do this properly at Westminster."

"Understood, Your Majesty," Harry said, as he pulled Gryffindor's sword from its hidden scabbard and placed it in the Queen's gloved hand. He then took a knee in front of her.

"Oh, Sir Harry that really wasn't necessary," the Queen said, "now you've gone and got some mud on your trouser leg. Remind us to have that cleaned up at the Castle...can't have the Royal Wizard looking off when he's presented to the Commonwealth, can we?"

Harry smiled. "No, Your Majesty, certainly not."

The Queen nodded. "Dame Hermione, I believe that there was need of an official witness?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Hermione replied. She slipped behind a stall door and disappeared with a small "pop." Fifteen seconds later, she returned in a bright display of light accompanied by the Head Auror.

"Your Majesty," Hermione said, "may I present to you Gawain Robards, Head of Magical Law Enforcement's Auror Department, and a member of the Minister of Magic's cabinet."

"It is our understanding that you are aware of these proceedings and have the authority to act as official witness for the wizarding world?"

The Head Auror bowed stiffly. "I do indeed, Your Majesty."

The Queen then began to read from the parchment, with the Prince and Head Auror by her sides, and Hermione, Ron and Luna standing behind Harry.

"Sir Harry Potter, do you swear fealty to the Crown and promise to use all of your powers, be they physical, mental or magical, to defend it and its citizenry, both Muggle and wizard, against all enemies?"

"I do."

"Then let it be known that under terms agreed upon in the Treaty of Carlisle that we, as Queen by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of our other Realms and Territories, do hereby claim the right to appoint a Royal Wizard, and do bestow that title upon Sir Harry Potter, along with all associated rights and responsibilities."

She nodded towards the Prince, who unwrapped the silk-covered object, revealing a heavy gold-chained necklace that he hung on Harry's bowed head. Hanging at the end of this chain was a fist-sized pearl, guarded on each side of its mount by golden upright lions. When the Queen placed the tip of Harry's sword against the pearl it lit up with an amber glow that filled the entire stable with warm light. As she drew the sword tip away, arcs of fairy lightning briefly held the connection between sword and emblem.

The Queen seemed nonplussed as she continued. "At this time we also proclaim restoration of the honor and position of the House of Gryffindor within our Royal Court, and do confer upon he who leads that house by birthright the honor and title of Lord."

The Queen then touched Harry's shoulders three times with the sword's blade.

"Rise, Lord Gryffindor."

Harry looked rather embarrassed by all of the pomp as he stood and sheathed his sword. That didn't keep him from smiling widely as he accepted the handshakes, hugs and backslaps from those few witnesses to the event. He was rather pleasantly surprised by the vigor of the Head Auror's handshake.

"Is everything set on your end?" Harry asked quietly.

"It is indeed, Milord," the Auror replied with a smile.

"Please, you don't need to use that title."

"So how should I address you...Clan Chief?" Robards asked with a wink.

Harry shook his head with resignation. "Harry...just Harry is fine."

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"Just Harry" made the short walk from Mewes to Castle flanked by Queen and Consort, while the Prince and Ron lagged behind to allow Luna a few more minutes with the horses.

"We will honor your request to not be addressed as Lord Gryffindor," the Queen said, "unless, of course, it is necessary...we are curious, though, about the reason behind the reticence."

"Well, Your Majesty, I can't pretend that I'm just a normal bloke, as much as I want to be," Harry replied. "Fate marked me different at an early age... and it's not that that I'm not honored by your recognition, because I am. I'll even admit that I've gotten used to having Brian and Wally call me Sir Harry, and it does allow me to address a certain someone as `Dame.'"

Harry earned a poke in the ribs for that comment.

"But I'm no use without my friends, and I'm not going to succeed without them, and it's hard for me to accept a title that makes it sound like I am better than them."

The Queen thought for a moment. "As we have said, we are prepared to confer knightship upon Mr. Weasley...anyone who wears the badge of the Order of Arthur deserves that recognition...and if he had difficulty with the oath of fealty we could make the title ceremonial...would that be of some help?"

"Thank you, your Highness," Harry replied, "We'll ask him, though I have to say that he's accepted our titles with good humor." He then stole a glance at Hermione. "But I guess I was thinking about being addressed as Lord while Hermione is still a Dame."

The Queen smiled. "Well, Sir Harry, we are afraid that the solution to that problem is out of our hands."

Harry gave the Queen a confused look, while Hermione inspected the cobblestone path with a hint of smile and a blush in her cheeks.

"Why is that, Your Majesty?"

"Because, Harry," Hermione said softly, "You are the only one that can give me the title of Lady Gryffindor."

"And how would I do that?"

Hermione's blush grew a bit deeper. "By having another chat with my father."

"Oh," Harry said, without really understanding what she meant.

"Ohhhhhh" he added (a few moments later), when he finally did.

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When the three reached one of the rear entrances to the Castle grounds they turned back to see that Ron, Luna and the Prince had just starting up the path.

Suggesting that they wait for them, the Queen led Hermione and Harry to a bench that provided a stunning view of Windsor Great Park.

"First visit to Windsor, Sir Harry?" the Queen asked. Harry nodded as he looked around at the wide expanses of green land, dotted with copses of ancient hardwoods and manicured gardens. "I think that it's lovely, Your Majesty."

"We're not surprised," the Queen replied with a smile. "After all, it has changed little over the years, and some of those trees are almost old enough to have been planted by Godric's gardeners."

Harry chuckled softly, having reached the point where these revelations could be taken in stride. He nodded his head towards the building behind them. "So I imagine that means this was originally Gryffindor's castle?"

"No, Sir Harry," the Queen replied, "Windsor Castle was built by William the Conqueror...after he seized the land from Godric and knocked down the keep that was already standing here."

"Please excuse me, Your Majesty," Hermione interjected, "but we had been led to believe that Gryffindor's lands were up in the Midlands, where Harry was born."

"They were indeed, Dame Hermione," the Queen replied. "or perhaps more correctly, now that we once again enjoy Lord Gryffindor's presence, they *are* indeed. These five thousand or so acres of land, however, were presented to Godric when he became King's Wizard...and became part of the seized lands when he subsequently refused to serve the conquering Norman king."

"I'm a bit afraid to ask," Harry said, "but when you said that Gryffindor's lands *are* located in the Midlands..."

"You do realize, Sir Harry, that Godric's seized properties were only conditionally incorporated into the Royal land holdings?" the Queen asked. "William decreed that should Lord Gryffindor ever return to England and swear fealty to the Crown, that he'd regain his honorific, his lands...even his seat in the House of Lords...and now that Lord Gryffindor is once again the Royal Wizard..."

"House of Lords?" Harry asked weakly.

"Yes, *Lord* Gryffindor," the Queen replied, "though we regret to inform you that as a result of recent government reforms that your hereditary seat is no longer automatically available to be taken up."

Harry's face gained back a bit of the color that had been lost at the thought of having to sit as a Member of Parliament. "That's quite all right, Your Majesty," he said.

The Queen nodded, having expected that reply. She chose not to tell the young wizard that there was nothing keeping her from issuing Letters Patent and giving him that seat in the House of Lords.

"We will insist that there be some accommodation reached regarding your land holdings, though," she noted, waving her arm towards the Castle. "Over the years, a portion of your real estate portfolio has been developed to the point of making the return of title rather...impractical."

"No need to do that, Your Majesty," Harry quickly replied.

The Queen smiled and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "No, Sir Harry," she said, "we will be quite insistent on this point. Which is why we are pleased that you will be joining us in Balmoral...there is some land near there that you might consider suitable as exchange." The Queen allowed Harry and Hermione to silently ponder that statement as the Prince, Ron and Luna finally joined them.

The small party entered the Castle's State Apartments where members of the Royal staff were waiting to lead them into a large room with luncheon seating for a hundred. Harry quickly scanned the tables and determined that they were the youngest there, by far; even the wait staff looked like they had at least thirty years of experience under their belts. The only people close to their age were Prince Harry and Lady Penelope, who were seated at the end of the head table with her parents. Perhaps realizing their potential discomfort, the young prince excused himself with a few words to his girlfriend and strode over towards them.

"Grandmum, perhaps you'll allow me to make introductions about the room?" he asked. To Harry's great concern the young prince took Hermione's hand and proceeded to introduce the four teens to the other tables of guests.

Hermione had never had the back of her hand kissed so many times. It seemed that every elderly Duke, Lord, and Viscount considered it obligatory to take her hand upon introductions. Some eyebrows were raised as the young prince introduced Harry and Hermione as Sir Harry and Dame Hermione, given that their knighthoods were not only recent but secret, but nothing was said.

When introductions were completed Harry politely but resolutely took Hermione's hand from Prince Harry's and made his way to an empty table, where they were confronted with plates of bright red whole lobster. While Hermione was no stranger to seafood, and Harry had boiled a few lobsters for his Aunt and Uncle over the years, Ron and Luna needed to be told that they hadn't just been presented with play toys.

"Well what are they suppose to do, then?" Ron asked, while putting back onto his plate the lobster that had just finished boxing with Luna's.

Hermione gave a small sigh of exasperation as she picked up a small fork, pulled some flesh out from the split tail of her crustacean, and dipped it into drawn butter. "They're supposed to sit there while we eat them."

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1:00pm, Windsor Castle

"That's a lovely motorcar," the Queen said, looking fondly over at Hermione's Bentley. They had finished lunch and gathered at the front entrance of the Castle, where a small fleet of black limousines was waiting to ferry them to Ascot. The Queen, however, was looking past these motorcars to the Little Wiz Bentleys parked on one side. She turned towards Hermione and asked, "It's an S3, isn't it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Much more dashing than the stuffy motorcars decorum dictates we ride in," the Queen said. "Would you mind terribly if we used it to get down to the course?"

"Certainly not, Your Majesty," Hermione said, with a small amount of fluster.

The Queen directed her staff to have Hermione's vehicle added to the queue of motorcars, and, once Wally had it in place, shooed Harry and Hermione into the back seat with her. Ron gave Harry a questioning look (to which Harry replied with shrugged shoulders), then joined Luna and Steve in a car farther down the queue.

Once the motorcade started along its way, the Queen stated, "Sir Harry, Dame Hermione, we have just a few minutes's drive, far too little time to spend worrying about proper titles and royal `we's.' In present company, a simple ma'am will do, understood?"

"Yes Your...erm, yes ma'am," Harry replied.

"I just wanted to let you know that Wally has provided me a thorough overview of your rat catching efforts over the weekend, and subsequent plans for the day...a most ingenious scheme, by the way..."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Hermione replied. "Given the probable risks, though, are you certain that you should be there today?"

"Of course I am," the Queen replied. "I've attended every opening day at Ascot since 1945, and have no intention of stopping now."

"But we're not certain that we'll be able to protect you if they throw everything that they've got at us," Harry worried.

"Comes with the job, my boy...it's expected that I be there, and it's my duty to be there. It won't be the first time that there have been terrorist threats made against us...you are aware of the Troubles we've had over the years, aren't you?"

"Yes Ma'am," Harry replied, thinking not only of the recent subway bombings but of attacks by militant separatists.

"We can not let the terrorists change the way we go about our business...can't allow them to keep us from living and loving, or they will have already won."

Harry looked past the Queen, caught Hermione's eyes and shared with her a small smile, in recognition of the fact that they were living in agreement with the monarch's words.

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1:25pm, Ascot Racecourse, Windsor Great Park

The Royal motorcade pulled up just outside of the Ascot grounds, where five horse-drawn open carriages were waiting to transfer the Queen and Royal Family to the Royal Box. The motorcars of those not fortunate to enter Ascot in such style went on to the grandstand, leaving the four teens, the Queen, and fifteen members of the Royal Family behind.

"Hermione, are you certain that this kind of entrance is necessary?" the newly named Queen's Wizard asked, with no small amount of resignation.

"Harry, we've been through this before," she replied. "It's essential that everyone in the stands and in front of their tellies gets a good look at the Royal Wizard before anything else happens, and now that you are the Royal Wizard you need to be close enough to protect her." She then followed the Queen and gave her hand to a groomsman who helped her step up into the first landau. The Prince of Wales smiled as he held an arm out for Harry to follow behind.

"I've learned over the years that on occasions such as these the correct response is, `Yes, dear,'" he said.

Harry muttered something to himself and took a seat next to Hermione on the rear-facing bench, as the Prince took his place next to the Queen. From his vantage point he could see Ron and Luna as they joined Prince Harry and Lady Penelope in the next carriage. When all of the carriages were full, members of the Queen's guard wearing smart dress uniforms galloped up the line while holding drawn sabers. Harry was wondering just how useful these swords would be in a fight until he caught a glimpse of automatic weaponry partially hidden within the tacking.

The carriages began their short trip at a saunter. "If it weren't for the fact that everyone expects me to face forward we would have offered you my spot," the Queen said to Harry. "Better view of potential threats."

"No worries, Your Majesty," Harry responded. "If our intelligence is correct, Hermione and I will feel the danger before anyone else sees it."

The carriages traveled a fairly short path in between two stables before reaching their entry point out onto the grass-covered track. Upon sight of the lead carriage thousands of spectators stood and cheered. Harry spotted many hats within the crowd that were just as elaborate as Hermione's.

The Queen smiled and waved to the crowd as their entrance (and the occupants of each successive carriage) was announced on the racecourse's public address system. Harry winced as he was presented to the crowd as "***The Queen's Wizard, Gryffindor - Lord of the Illusion!***" The crowd took pause as well, having never heard his name and title before, but acting on the assumption that anyone important enough to bump young Prince Harry down the line and into the second carriage had to rank favor, gave him polite applause.

Harry was grateful to see the attention of the crowd and the cameras quickly shift from him to Luna, who was laughing and waving wildly to the crowd from the next carriage. The roar of the crowd was matched by the roar of her lion hat, which had suddenly decided to spring to life.

"Batteries," Luna explained brightly after every roar of her hat and every flash of a camera.

The single lap around the course gave Harry the opportunity to examine the infield and note that the props that they had designed for this event were all in place. Five large wooden boxes, each six feet square, were spaced evenly in a single line that bisected the oval infield. Each was propped up on a set of legs, some twenty-feet high, which made peering into each box next to impossible, even from the highest part of the stands. Banners were draped down the sides of each box, with decorative designs that matched similar banners placed elsewhere within the park.

Harry checked that a small earpiece was firmly in place and reached into a coat pocket, pushing the button on a small transceiver that activated his wireless communications device. He had meant to do a radio check, only to discover that it would have interrupted a rather colorful running commentary being transmitted over the airwaves.

"Merlin's Beard, the boy fancies himself Lord of the Illusion?...all dressed up, he must think that these Muggle electronics interfere with my eye enough that I can't see through these wooden walls...Just wait until I get down out of this box and I'll show him a magic trick or two..."

"Pipe down, Mad-Eye," said another, in a matronly Scottish brogue, "I didn't hear you come up with any better ideas at the meeting."

"Hear me?...Hear me?" Mad-eye retorted, "Surprised we can hear anything with these Muggle contraptions stuck up into our ears..."

Hermione's chuckles and the smirk that Ron was sporting from the next carriage down led Harry to believe that they had their communicators working as well.

"Hey Mad-Eye, when this is all over I'll be happy to replace that earpiece with a wet sloppy kiss," Harry said quietly into his hidden microphone.

"Oh, nice that you could join us, *Lord of the Illusion*," Mad-eye responded. "Save your kisses for the lovely lass next to you."

Ron cut into the conversation, "Excuse me, but can we do the radio check? Just like we practiced last night, okay Professors?"

"Box 1, Moody, check."

"Box 2, McGonagall, check."

"Box 3, Vector, check."

"Box 4, Flitwick, check."

"Box 5, Sprout, check."

"Lupin, check."

"Tonks, check."

"Why aren't you two holed up in boxes?" asked Mad-Eye.

"Helping the kids guard the point of attack, remember?"

"Well if anyone cared a lick about me they'd have remembered that I'd spent enough time being boxed up at Hogwarts..."

The four teens, Wally and Steve ignored Mad-Eye's complaints as they added their radio checks and Ron, who was taking his role as Clan Champion quite seriously, proceeded to remind everyone that their Muggle transmitters would die the first time they used magic, and that nobody should do any magic until Harry did. The four teens were pleasantly surprised by how well these directions were taken; it was truly an upside down world in which Ron was doling out commands to his Hogwarts professors.

Once the carriage reached the Royal Box the Queen's guard escorted all of the ladies to their seats, with the men following close behind. Harry gave a slight nod to Tonks and Lupin, who were positioned a few rows back within the crowd.

The first race was announced after a rousing chorus of "God Save Our Queen," and Harry was finally starting to believe things had settled down a bit when the Prince turned and announced that the Prime Minister would soon join them. Not a minute later the head of the Muggle British government entered the box, accompanied by a rather large and rather cross-looking appointments secretary.

The Prince introduced the four to the Prime Minister, taking care to identify Harry as "the Queen's Wizard, Gryffindor." The Prime Minister in turn introduced them to Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"It's a very unexpected pleasure to see you again," Kingsley said to Harry and Hermione.

"Oh, you know each other then?" the Prime Minister asked.

"Our paths have crossed now and then," Hermione said, "though Mr. Shacklebolt has never been so handsomely dressed on those occasions."

"Nor has your attire come so close to matching your beauty, *Dame* Hermione," the Auror replied. He turned towards Harry. "Staying out of trouble this summer, *Gryffindor*?"

Harry laughed. "Oh, you know me Kingsley, trouble has a way of finding me even when I'm not looking."

The Auror nodded, then took a step back as the others in the box took note of their conversation. "I do hope you have a pleasant afternoon," he said, with a look on his face that suggested he was expecting otherwise, "and I can't wait to see what sort of show you are planning, *Gryffindor*."

"And I'm looking forward to your support, during the show, Mr. Kingsley," Harry replied.

"I will try, though we all do have our priorities, don't we?" Kingsley asked. He nodded towards the Prime Minister, who'd just completed a perfunctory conversation with the queen.

After the excitement of the royal procession and meeting with the Muggle Prime Minister, the races themselves seemed rather anticlimactic. When the third of seven races was complete a late luncheon break was announced, to Ron's great pleasure. Wally led them out of the box and into the sod-covered area where umbrella-wielding spectators from the Royal Enclosure were queuing before tables piled high with smoked salmon and strawberries in cream.

They had just managed to fill their plates with food and grab flutes of champagne when a chill filled the air, and the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood straight out. The four teens quietly put their plates down on a table, then quickly made their way towards the front of the stands, as murmurs of ill-ease and discomfort spread amongst the muggle crowd.

"Feels like company has arrived," Harry said over the transmitter.

"You think so?" Mad-Eye replied sarcastically, as his magical eye whirled around in its socket. "They're gathering out above those woods to the North."

The four teens, whose wands had been out and down at their sides from the first indication, examined the swirling cloud of evil that was coming their way.

"Looks like Wormtail got this part right, at least," Harry said. He nodded to Hermione, who discretely placed her wand tip to a newly minted medallion and sent out the alarm. At the same time Ron activated his badge and sent word to Sir Evan and Little Wizarding.

"Okay, Wally, everyone...looks like it's showtime."

Ron and Luna nodded to Harry and Hermione as they left to take their positions with Wally up in the grandstand's control center. Harry walked Hermione back to the Royal Box, where Tonks and Lupin had their wands drawn out and eyes drawn to the gathering storm.

Harry squeezed Hermione's hand. "You take care of yourself first, promise?"

"We should be fine Harry...it's Shacklebolt that they're expecting a response from, remember?"

"Yeah, well, best laid plans of mice and men..." Harry replied nervously, as he glanced over towards the Auror, who nodded in acknowledgement.

Hermione turned to face Harry, and to his chagrin used her cleavage to hold her wand while her hands straightened out his tie.

"Wish I was that wand right now."

"Hush, Harry," Hermione sweetly admonished, "and take care to remember you still have a live microphone."

"Give her a kiss and get on with it," they heard Moody growl into his microphone.

"Yes, Dear," Harry replied cheekily, as he gave Hermione a quick kiss.

"Knock `em dead, Harry," Hermione said.

"I certainly intend to try," he replied, as he ducked under the track railing and strode toward his place on the infield's center stage.

2:45pm, Little Wizarding, Surrey

The rotten-egg smell of mercaptan lingered in the air as the ersatz Little Wiz Defense Force mustered in front of Number Four. Brian Willox, Fred Weasley and Sir Evan reviewed the fourteen wizards, witches and muggles in front of them.

They'd been paired off into "Phoenix Teams," each consisting of a wizard or witch matched with a Muggle member of MI 5 $\frac{3}{4}$. Brian and Fred were "Phoenix One," while Roger Granger was paired with George, Emily with Dean Thomas, and five Muggle secret agents paired with the remaining Gryffindors. Everyone wore boots, black pants, and jumpers that bore the newly fashioned crest of Clan Potter: the shield of St. George behind a phoenix with outstretched wings, flanked by two upright Gryffindor lions. The wizards carried wands and brooms; the Muggles, automatic weapons. All wore belts bearing pockets filled with goodies from Fred and George's shop and MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$'s research laboratories.

"Alright," Brian said, "we've got warm medallions and verbal confirmation from Ascot that they've got nasties about. If our intelligence is right, we'll have company here soon enough. You all know the plan...just remember that no house, no street...nothing is more important than everyone getting home safe tonight."

"Excepting the bad guys, of course," Fred added, which earned a laugh from the ranks.

"Weapons checks, then move out," Brian commanded, dismissing his troops. While the witches and wizards retightened their wand holsters and fine-tuned their brooms, Fred renewed the area silencing charm that had been placed around a wall of sand bags propped up against a side fence. The MI 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ agents proceeded to silently test fire their Sterling automatic rifles and sub-machine guns, until each was convinced that their weapons would work within a magical field of at least modest strength. The agents then holstered their weapons and mounted brooms behind their respective magical partners (each much more at ease with the idea of flying on broomsticks than when they'd begun practicing two nights before). The teams then flew out to their assigned posts along streets evacuated some two hours earlier by a false threat of a broken gas main.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Queen's Wizard, Part 1 (part 2)

While Fred cleaned up the shooting range, Brian shared a few words with Sir Evan.

"Are you certain that you don't want some on-the-ground backup, Sir Evan?"

"Heavens, no, Brian," replied the elderly knight, who was wearing a World War II RAF uniform that still fit. He touched the sunburst badge pinned to his olive drab jumper. "I've got all the backup I need right here...and if that's not enough..." He reached to the side of his wheelchair and pulled his old service revolver out of its holster.

"Even broke out the silver bullets from my old kit," he said with a smile. "Never know if one of them's going to be a werewolf."

Brian laughed as he handed Sir Evan a bullhorn. "Good luck, then, and good hunting, Sir Evan," he said. He then turned and hopped onto Fred's broom. And with a wave, the last of the eight Phoenix Teams flew off to its appointed post.

2:50pm, Ascot Racecourse, Great Windsor Park

"Ladies and Gentleman, as part of the Grand Reopening festivities, the Royal Ascot is pleased to present the public debut of the Queen's Wizard, Gryffindor, in 'Lord of the Illusion'."

Harry nervously waved to the crowd from the infield stage as Wally and Ron tried to reassure him through his earpiece.

"Blimey, Harry," Ron said, "you've got Dementors gathering behind you and you're nervous about facing a crowd of Muggles?"

"Dementors, I've faced before," Harry quipped back.

"Well, you needn't worry about the television cameras, at least," Wally added, "They've all gone to news updates during the break."

"Right, so I've only got a few thousand to convince that I'm not using real magic, then. Brilliant."

"Quit whining and get on with it," chirped in Mad-Eye.

Responding to that cue, Harry tipped his hat to the crowd as the music that Wally had loaded into the Racecourse's sound system began to play. Wally then started in on their script.

"Don't let his youth mislead you folks," Wally announced, *"Gryffindor was born with magic in his blood, and has made magic the center of his life ever since he received his first wand at age eleven."*

Harry withdrew his wand from an inside coat pocket and sent a shower of red sparks out its end.

"Status, report, Ron," Harry said into his microphone. Upon realizing that his wand sparks had fried his transmitter, he activated his Order of Arthur badge and restated his request.

"The black cloud's right behind you," Ron replied from this grandstand vantage point. "It's stopped growing, but I can't make out individuals yet... look like they're holding back."

"Great," Harry replied, "They're going to make me go through my entire bag of tricks."

"It took no time for Gryffindor to master the spellwork of ordinary magicians," Wally continued to read.

Down on the stage, Harry took a white feather out of his pocket, pointed his wand at it, and caused it to float six inches up into the air. There was the smallest smattering of applause from the crowd. Harry then moved on, casting *Orchideous* to produce bouquets of flowers from the end of his wand. He then set his top hat upside down on a table, reached into it, and pulled out a wine glass. Putting his hat back onto his head, he cast a fountain of wine spell to fill this glass with merlot, which he then drank.

"Careful there Gryffindor," Wally announced, *"We might have to check your ID if you want to drink your magic."*

There was some nervous laughter from the crowd as Harry put his hands on his hip in an exaggerated pout.

"Merlin, I'm bombing," Harry muttered into his badge.

"You're doing fine," Hermione said in reassurance, as she shared some dark chocolate with the Queen. "It's the Dementors - they're making everyone ill and ill at ease...keep going."

Harry plowed on, reaching into his hat and pulling out twenty more wine glasses, which he placed side-by-side on the square table. When he ran out of room he cast an enlargement spell that lengthened the table, and recast the wine-making spell which sent spurts of fluid into the glasses. Harry then looked up towards the announcer and stuck out his tongue.

Despite its discomfort, the Muggle crowd applauded a trick that they'd never seen before.

"Status, Ron?"

"Keep going, Harry," the teen replied, "I'll let you know when to duck."

"*Moving right along,*" Wally continued, "*Gryffindor then began working more complex magic, to the point where he's capable of conjuring a menagerie of magical beasts.*"

On that cue, the music grew much louder, and fog machines began billowing smoke along the track. Harry doffed his hat and touched the brim with his wand, firing off Weasley fireworks from inside. At first, brightly-colored Muggle-style salvos were shot off, but that quickly changed as one of their more elaborate firework creations took form....a large silvery pegasus that launched out of his hat and began to fly around the track. The audience oohed and aaahed.

Harry then turned and pointed his wand towards each of the professor-filled boxes. Fog began billowing out of each box, and on Ron's cue, each of the Hogwarts professors lit off more of Fred and George's magic. The pegasus was soon joined by firework versions of a tiger, unicorn, gazelle, elephant and flying pig, all in a romp around the smoke-filled infield.

The distraction provided by these fireworks allowed Harry to turn towards the Dementor cloud. As if recognizing an old friend, a few individual Dementors immediately took form and began flying straight towards him.

"Dementors on the attack!" Ron bellowed into his microphone.

Harry smiled to himself as he stretched out his arm and thought about how happy his life had been the past two weeks.

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

Ron cried out, "*Patronuses away!*"

The stag that sprung forth from Harry's wand was at least three times the size of any he'd produced before.

It leapt up and over the five boxes, as if to assist in Ron's appeal, then flew straight towards the leading Dementors with head down. The corporeal Patronus of each professor sprang from each of the boxes and followed hotly in pursuit. Ron and Luna joined Remus and Tonks on the Grandstand's rooftop, and four more Patronuses came down onto the field from above. One animal not joining in attack was an otter; Hermione stood alone guarding the Queen, and was too close to the Muggle crowd to spell cast, unless it was an emergency.

Many within the grandstands never had the chance to try to make sense of the display, their ill ease morphing into acute nausea once the Dementors dropped down fully within the grounds. Those lucky Muggles with sunny dispositions and a slight resistance to the malaise thought they were seeing the best magic show of their lives, with the Patronuses blending in almost perfectly with the firework animals and Harry's presentation.

The first two Dementors took it on the chin (or whatever they had that passed for a chin); Harry's Patronus flat-out destroyed them, sending the black corpses down to the ground. The second wave was beaten back by the other Patronuses, with the silvery pack breaking off in pursuit of those Dementors who chose to scatter. The collective mass of evil that hadn't rushed down to attack Harry took note and fled.

Not in fear, but in satisfaction, knowing that after achieving their primary objective the Dark Lord would see them well-fed that night.

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2:56pm, Ministry of Magic

Percy Weasley blew by the Head Auror's administrative assistant with all of the bluster and authority that he carried within his own mind. The Head Auror, whose medallion was still lukewarm in his pocket, was ready and waiting for the Special Assistant to the Minister of Magic.

"We've just been informed that somebody cast a *Patronus* spell in full view of thousands of Muggles," he exclaimed breathlessly.

"I know," the Head Auror replied, "Whose department do you think it was that issued the alert?"

Percy huffed. "Obviously, this is a huge concern for the Minister...what are you doing about it?"

Head Auror Robards sat calmly and slowly counted to three before responding.

"Actually, there have been several different *Patronus* spells cast. We're fabricating portkeys right now that will send *Patronus*-qualified emergency response teams to the site."

"Whatever for?" Percy demanded. "Any wizard brazen enough to defy International Laws on Magical Secrecy doesn't deserve the Ministry's aid."

"Shouldn't we be more worried about the reason why a *Patronus* spell was cast?"

Percy looked at the Head Auror with unqualified contempt. "By order of the Minister of Magic, you will immediately initiate 'Operation Wipe-out'."

The Head Auror shook his head. "And send everyone and their secretary into harm's way, just so long as they can oblivate a Muggle?"

"You will follow the Minister's order, Head Auror Robards, or we will find someone else who will."

The Auror bit the inside of his cheeks to stave off a smirk. "As you wish, Special Assistant to the Minister," he replied. He fished a finger-sized

crystal out from a hidden pocket inside his robes and set it into one of a series of keyed holes that were inset on the top of his desk. He then touched his wand tip to the crystal key and uttered an authorization incantation. Loud klaxons immediately began to shout out across every floor of the Ministry of Magic.

"You'll be joining us, then, Special Assistant to the Minister?" the Head Auror asked with a smile.

"Certainly...I can obliviate as well as anyone," Percy spit back in reply. "And I'll be using the Minister's portkey, of course." And with that the young wizard turned on his heel and stormed out of the office.

Once Percy turned the corner the Head Auror retrieved a silver mirror from his desk drawer and tapped it with his wand. He smiled grimly when the face of his closest friend and classmate appeared.

"And so it begins, David," Robards told the Head of the Portkey Control Office. "Break out the special shoes."

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Magical Secrets Emergency...Magical Secrets Emergency...This is not a drill!...All Obliviate-Qualified Ministry staff and visitors report to the Atrium!

Magical Secrets Emergency...Magical Secrets Emergency...This is not a drill!...All Obliviate-Qualified Ministry staff and visitors report to the Atrium!

Magical Secrets Emergency...Magical Secrets Emergency...This is not a drill!...All Obliviate-Qualified Ministry staff and visitors report to the Atrium!

On every floor and in every Department of the Ministry, wizards and witches dropped what they were doing and obeyed the klaxon's commands. Their movements were calm and well rehearsed. Some would say (in trusted company) that they were *too* well rehearsed, and indicative of the misguided priorities of a Ministry more worried about keeping their world secret from Muggles than keeping their world safe from Lord Voldemort.

A few witches and wizards who'd be happy to tell just about anyone that the Ministry's priorities were off were presently ignoring the klaxon's commands and gathering in Arthur Weasley's office. Many were, like Arthur, Ministry employees; the others had all found reason (or excuse) to visit the Ministry of Magic that afternoon. When the office became quite crowded and the stream of visitors trickled out, Arthur stood on his desk, cast a *Silencio* spell on his door, and counted heads. Accounting for those deployed elsewhere, Arthur concluded that the trustworthy balance of the membership of the disbanded Order of the Phoenix was present. He tried to give a reassuring smile to his wife, who was looking very nervous, and addressed the group.

"Well," he began, "it's good to see that I'm not the only one risking a hundred galleon fine by ignoring the alarm." That got the smattering of chuckles that he'd been looking for. "Look, if a much lighter purse is all we have to worry about today then I'll be a happy wizard indeed...but as you know, those alarm bells wouldn't be ringing if the first attacks hadn't already occurred."

"We should be out there protecting our children," Molly lamented. "Heaven knows what Ron's *Patronus* spell is capable of producing these days."

"Molly, the kids have half of Hogwarts's staff out there helping them," Arthur replied. "And we've got a job to do ourselves here at the Ministry." He looked back at the rest of the group, "And to that end...good luck, and let's go."

Arthur stepped down from his desk, while his son countered a Gringott's-quality locking charm that had been placed on an office closet. The uniforms, weapons and special equipment that had been stored within this cache were quickly and efficiently distributed.

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The Order members were not amongst the crowd of hundreds of witches and wizards that were crammed into the central atrium of the Ministry of Magic when the Head Auror appeared with the Portkey Control Office Head and three of his lieutenants. Each of these men carried a box of Muggle trainers, which they began to distribute amongst the crowd.

Failing to spot a suitable vantage point from which everyone could see him (and the fine set of robes he was now wearing), Percy Weasley used a hovering charm to lift himself up to the top of the fountain statue, where he found stable footing atop the goblin's head.

"Attention," he called out, in a magically-aided voice, "Your attention please...I am Percy Weasley, Special Assistant to Minister Scrimgeour, I am Percy Weasley, Special Assistant to Minister Scrimgeour..."

The fact that a fair portion of the crowd was ignoring him led Percy to the false conclusion that his *Sonorus* spell wasn't working, so he zapped his throat again. "YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE!" he boomed out, at a volume that cause the Minister of Magic below to duck and wince at the same time. Satisfied, Percy continued.

"We have learned that magical spells have been cast within the presence of thousands of Muggles at a place called...(he looked down at a handwritten note) *Ascot*. Scouting parties from Magical Law Enforcement have identified a large enclosed area near this site to which we can safely and surreptitiously travel, and the Portkey Control Office is presently distributing portkeys for that location's coordinates. Once the portkeys have been activated and we have arrived at our location the plan is simple.... the Auror Department will establish a perimeter, and everyone else is to spread out and obliviate anyone not carrying a wand. Do whatever you must to keep any Muggle from leaving the area before their memory can be erased....up to and including the use of stunning and binding hexes. Now then, grab onto a portkey...you all should know your shoe buddies by

now...should be room enough for everyone...right, then...listen for the count.”

Percy quickly dropped back down to the ground lest somebody shoulder him out from using the same portkey as Minister Scrimgeour.

Head Auror Robards levitated himself up a few feet off the ground, checking to see that everyone had gathered around a shoe (excepting, of course, those that he spotted partially hidden along the perimeter). With an almost imperceptible nod to the latter, he then dropped back down and gave a much more deliberate nod to his friend, whose wand was ready to activate the countdown on his mark. Robards then annoyed Percy by commanding the full attention of the crowd without magical aid.

“Here we go everyone,” he resolutely stated to the hushed and attentive crowd. “Portkey activation in five, four, three, two, one!”

Two things happened as the portkeys were activated:

- 1) Dozens of witches and wizards purposely removed their hands from their portkeys just before they were spirited away from the Ministry; and,
- 2) These witches and wizards were immediately shrouded both in darkness and mire, as Peruvian Instant Darkness balls, Portable Swamp disks and bags of belching powder were thrown from the Atrium's perimeter.

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The witches and wizards who did hold onto their shoes were transported to a large empty warehouse on the outskirts of Norwich, some two hundred and fifty kilometers northeast of Ascot Racecourse. Each portkey dropped its riders onto a square within a pitch-sized checkerboard pattern that someone had thoughtfully painted onto the concrete floor.

The Head Auror immediately amplified his voice.

“Hold your positions, everyone...this is Head Auror Robards, nobody move from your landing points.”

A buzz of confusion traveled across the room as the Head Auror, his friend and three lieutenants strode over to a table, where five brooms and a mobile phone were waiting for them. Robards grabbed the mobile and one of the brooms, then zoomed up above the crowd with the others. As the other four were quickly making head counts, the Head Auror addressed the crowd.

“I need everyone's full and complete attention,” he loudly commanded. “At this very moment the Ministry of Magic is under attack. I repeat, the Ministry is under attack by Death Eaters, aided from within by their undercover operatives.”

After a moment of stunned silence, a voice cried out.

“Well, what are we doing here, then?”

“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named sent Dementors to attack and harass Muggles gathered at Ascot,” Robards quickly explained, “knowing full well that there'd be at least one wizard there who would respond by casting a *Patronus* spell. That, then, would cause the Ministry to overreact by activating *Operation Wipe-Out*, causing those who should be guarding the Ministry to leave it in the hands of those who just took their hands off of the same portkeys that sent the rest of us here.”

As the crowd tried to process that backstory, and look around to see if anyone they knew had gone missing, the same person who had yelled out the previous question asked a logical follow-up.

“Well, what are we doing here, then?”

“We, Sir, are quickly taking stock of how deeply our ranks have been compromised, and preparing ourselves for a fight. Having been tipped off on the Death Eater's scheme, I made arrangements for a small but capable force to stay behind and deal with the traitors...specially authorized portkeys will be activated in ninety seconds to send anyone who cares to join that fight back to the Ministry.”

As the Head Auror finished issuing instructions, one his lieutenants flew over to him and passed along a piece of parchment with a hand-written head count. He blanched at the numbers...three-hundred seventy present, sixty-seven missing. They'd also compiled a list of Ministry staff who should have answered the klaxon's call but didn't; Robards counted nine on this list (including four from his own department) that he didn't recognize as members of the Order.

He took a second look, hoping to see one specific name. Not finding it, he asked, “Umbridge?”

His lieutenant pointed towards a corner of the room, where the toadish (but apparently loyal) witch was trying to stay as far away from the return trip portkeys as possible.

“Pity,” he thought to himself, as he circled down to where his lieutenants were distributing supplies from cached boxes. Minister Scrimgeour and an animated Special Assistant to the Minister were waiting for him.

“Robards, on whose authority did you develop and authorize this plan?” Percy demanded.

“My own,” the Head Auror replied.

“Didn't see fit to trust the Minister?” Percy bellowed with indignation.

“No offense, Special Assistant to the Minister,” the Head Auror replied, “but we had to act fast on our information, and given how sensitive it was,

there were obvious concerns over how just how far it should be spread.”

“And you thought the Minister of Magic couldn't be trusted?”

“Obviously not,” Robards replied, “but I apparently had good reason to worry about his staff.” He handed the parchment to Scrimgeour, who quickly confirmed his own head count; almost a third of his people had failed to travel with him. He silently passed the list over to Percy.

“What will we find upon our return to the Atrium?” Scrimgeour asked the Head Auror.

“With luck, something similar to what Umbridge and her Aurors encountered during their visit to Surrey two weeks past,” Robards replied.

“And what else don't I know about this attack?”

Before the Head Auror could reply, the mobile phone that he'd pocketed upon his arrival rang. Looking down at the Caller ID, he smiled.

“Excuse me, Minister,” he said, “But this is an important call.”

“Robards here...situation?...good....sixty-seven, at least...yes, I know...no, the toad came with us...no, should be fine, need you in reserve in case he improvises... what?...oh, well that makes sense...thanks, Clan Chief, you too...right.”

Percy and Scrimgeour looked at the Head Auror with shock and confusion as he closed the flip-top on his mobile and returned it to a pocket.

“That was Potter, if you didn't guess,” Robards said. “He has Ascot secure, and his cover for their magic use is holding. They're working with the Muggle authorities to segregate a handful of folks that have caught on to us...he's lending us Mad-Eye Moody and Professor Flitwick...says that they aren't blending in as well as the others.” His eyes sparkled with bemusement. “Imagine that...well, we've got twenty seconds before return... any questions?”

The Special Assistant to the Minister of Magic was about to say something before seeing his boss shake his head with resignation and silently turn towards one of the waiting portkeys. Biting his tongue (hard), Percy turned his tail and followed the Minister of Magic.

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3:05pm, Little Wizinging, Surrey

“Break your wands in half and throw the pieces onto the ground!”

A group of thirty Death Eaters broke out into raucous laughter. It was good to see that they would have at least one Muggle to play with.

After mass apparating into the park just outside of Little Wiz's protective wards, the Death Eater party had strolled down to Arabella Figg's house. They were disappointed to find nobody home within the empty house, as her possessions (and the contents of several other houses in the neighborhood) had been shrunken down and transported out of harm's way the night previous. Frustrated, the Death Eaters followed through on orders to destroy the only floo connection within the area, and torched the house with a round of incendiary spells.

They had then made their way towards Number Four, with strict orders to rape, pillage and destroy only *after* they'd taken Harry Potter prisoner. The Death Eaters therefore took pause when they came upon the Muggle who dared address them from a wheelchair parked in the middle of the street.

The masked leader cast a *Sonorous* spell on himself and fired back, “Aren't you Muggles taught to say please?”

Sir Evan raised his bullhorn back to his face. “Doesn't apply to Lord Moldyshorts and Death Idiots like yourselves,” he replied. “This is your last warning...snap your wands, remove your masks, and put your hands on top of your head.”

Ever mindful of what happens to those who go against the Dark Lord's orders, the lead Death Eater nevertheless decided that anyone brazen enough to make fun of their leader's name had to be dealt with immediately. He snarled and raised his wand towards Sir Evan's head.

“*Avada Kedavra* !”

But given that the killing curse requires a two word incantation, and that transport via Sir Evan's Order of Arthur badge required only one (which was uttered just as soon as he saw the wand pointed towards him), the lethal green beam found as its mark the back of an empty wheelchair.

“Where'd he go?” asked one Death Eater. “Sure you didn't *Reducto* him?” asked another. “Sure he was a Muggle?” asked a third.

“Doesn't matter,” replied the frustrated leader, as he pointed his wand up towards the sky. “Finally got enough of a reason to conjure the Dark Mark.” The group then continued the short walk towards the Dursley's.

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Having witnessed the exchange from a rooftop perch a block away, Brian Willox decided it was time to break radio silence.

“Sir Harry, have you got Sir Evan?” Brian asked.

“I've got him,” replied Ron, speaking on his mobile from an empty box near the top of the Royal Enclosure. “He nearly plopped down right onto my lap.”

How are things at Ascot?" Brian asked.

Having retrieved a fresh earpiece and microphone Harry broke into the conversation. "We just finished out here. All safe and accounted for, unless you're counting Dementors...what's your situation now, Brian?"

"We've got thirty-three, I repeat thirty-three Death Eaters about to turn the corner onto Privet Drive. They've set fire to Mrs. Figg's house, ignored our commands, tried the killing curse on Sir Evan, and just cast the Dark Mark," he replied, as he peered into his binoculars. "It's floating up over the corner of Privet Lane and Persimmon Path...Phoenix Four, looks like you've got the safest approach to fuel that fire."

"Copy that, Phoenix One," came the reply, "we see it, and we're on it."

"Good," replied Brian. "Sir Harry, when might we expect the cavalry?"

"From what we've heard," Harry replied, "there won't be any help from the Ministry any time soon...they've got a fight on their hands...but we'll be there, just as soon as we can."

"Hold your position, Sir Harry...you do still have the Queen there don't you?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"But there's a backup plan in place that doesn't require your presence here, Sir Harry. Stay put and let us do our part."

"He's right Harry," Ron interjected. "Still don't know if they were planning a second wave here at the racecourse."

It took nearly all of Harry's powers to overcome his "saving people thing" and listen to logic.

"Fine," he finally said. "Just keep yourself and my future in-laws safe, would you Brian?"

Several different voices talked over each other on the radio, each trying to ask, "What was that, Harry?"

But Emily Granger, as the Muggle member of Phoenix Team Four, was too busy to hear Harry's reply. She was presently undoing the covers on two leather pouches strapped to her belt while her wizard partner, Dean Thomas, got his broom up to a hover. After checking that the safety was turned off on her holstered Sterling, she gingerly swung a leg over the broom behind Dean and wrapped one arm securely around his waist. They then swooped down off of their rooftop perch and started to slowly and carefully make their way towards Mrs. Figg's.

Mrs. Granger and Dean Thomas had been assigned to monitor/guard the northeast street access to the warded zone. Like the other seven wizard-Muggle pairs, they hadn't been tasked with trying to keep the Death Eaters from getting inside the neighborhood. Instead, their mission was to keep the Death Eaters within the wards, blocking their escape until help arrived. Their secondary mission was to clamp down on any evidence of magic use observable from beyond the evacuation zone.

Dean carefully inched the broom forward between houses, dropping down into successive backyards after clearing each fence. When they reached Mrs. Figg's backyard, they activated the timers on three smoke bombs that Mrs. Granger had been carrying and quietly tossed them towards the rear of the house.

By the time each exploded with a small "pop" Phoenix Four was safely perched on a new rooftop with a good view of the fire. Dean then cast a blowing breeze charm towards the plumes, which pushed the columns of thick black smoke towards (and around) the Dark Mark, effectively screening it from distant Muggle eyes. Their secondary mission completed, they flew back to their original position.

"Phoenix Four returned to roost," Mrs. Granger called out.

"Roger that," said Brian, as he reached into a sleeve pocket and withdrew an eight-inch long laser device. "Phoenix teams, bug out...I repeat, all phoenix teams, bug out...phoenix fire's on the way."

"Roger," came the reply, as seven pairs of wizards and muggles prepared their brooms for flight.

Brian looked over at Fred (his "Phoenix One" wizard buddy), who already had one hand on his broom.

"Coming?" Fred asked.

Brian shook his head as he turned the laser pointer on. "With all the smoke...now shoo...you'll be in charge at the rendezvous point."

Fred nodded and patted Brian's shoulder. "Keep your head low," he said, before jumping onto his broom. He then swooped down to the South, away from the Death Eaters and over the backyards of Little Wiz towards the prearranged meeting point.

Meanwhile, Brian looked down the street towards the pack of Death Eaters that was too arrogant (or too stupid) to spread out. He aimed his laser beam at a pointy hat within the crowd and voiced an authorization code into his transmitter.

One-hundred and thirty kilometers away, within an unmarked warehouse on an abandoned airbase, an RAF pilot on loan to MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ toggled cross-hairs over a bright red spot and pushed a button on his computer joystick. He watched his LCD display with satisfaction as a five-hundred pound laser-guided bomb cleared the struts of a remote-controlled drone aircraft that had been circling Little Whinging and started its fifty-thousand foot descent.

Following a long-standing tradition of aircraft bombers and artillery men, the bomb casing exterior had short, hand-written messages for the

intended targets.

One side said *"Don't Mess with Muggles,"* while the other side was a tad blunter:

"Hocus Poke This Up Your Arse!"

"Target acquired, feather's away," the remote pilot called out. "Smoke's pretty thick, Phoenix One...we'll need constant sparkle."

"Roger that."

Predictions by MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ weapons laboratory engineers that strong magical fields would wreak havoc on the internal guidance systems of so-called "smart" munitions had been confirmed by Wally the week previous, when he had driven across Little Wiz's ward boundaries with a dud bomb in the boot of his Bentley. But as the hemispherical wards that protected Number Four extended up no more than 400 feet above the ground, 99% of the pathway of a bomb dropped from 50,000 feet was free of magical interference, and the ability to self-correct course was magically lost for only the last few seconds of descent.

Much more worrisome were the mundane factors that had, for the most part, always limited the idea of "window-point" accuracy for laser-guided weapons to the minds (and presentations) of defense company marketing departments. "Smart weapons" rely upon clear and constant "sight" of a laser beam's reflection to adjust tail rudder angles and make in-flight course corrections. Smoke commonly interferes with this sight, even when the forward observer who has identified the target maintains a continuous laser beam spot. And the ability of the forward observer to maintain a constant "sparkle" of laser light on a target is always far from certain; even at a terminal velocity of more than six hundred miles per hour, a bomb dropped from 50,000 feet takes almost a minute to reach ground. And a lot can happen during that minute.

The clear view that Brian initially enjoyed allowed him to target his laser beam device from a well-hidden vantage point. Fifteen seconds after the bomb was released, however, the group of Death Eaters turned the corner onto Privet Drive, where a tall tree blocked Brian's view. Brian scrambled along the rooftop hoping for a better angle, and discovered that the only clear sight line required him to stand straight up on the roof crest. Which is what he did, without thought of personal safety.

The Death Eaters had just gathered in front of Number Four when one of them spotted someone standing on a rooftop pointing a wand down towards them.

"Expelliarmus!"

The force of the spell blew Brian backwards, while his "wand" was flung violently out of his hand. Both were thrown to the ground.

The Death Eater who had cast the disarming spell used an *"Accio"* to take a closer look at the wand that had been raised against them. He then pushed the button located on one end of the metallic rod, thereby proving two separate facts:

Battery-powered laser pointers aren't damaged by *Accio* spells; and, Curiosity can kill more than just cats.

The ten seconds of time during which the Death Eater played with his new toy was just enough for the bomb's sensors to reacquire its target and trim its tail in course correction. The bomb hit the ward boundary only twenty feet off course, and hit the ground a second later, thirty feet off-target into Number Five's front yard.

Given the specified accuracy and precision of the weapon, it was a direct hit.

Fred Weasley had ignored Brian's direct orders and, rather than land at the prearranged meeting point, had ducked behind a tree to a spot where he could keep an eye on his partner. Having witnessed Brian being thrown from the roof, Fred was flying at top speed towards him when the smart bomb detonated. The blast knocked Fred off his broom, with his body landing fifteen feet away from Brian's.

George Weasley, who had seen Fred fly back to rescue Brian, was on route to rescue his brother when the bomb went off. Having been partially shielded from the bomb blast by a house, he managed to stay on his broom (later claiming that the force was no greater than a typical bludger). After using words Mrs. Weasley would have conjured soap over, he quickly landed his broom in between Brian and his brother.

"Two down," he cried into his microphone, "Brian Willox and my fool brother down...I need medics now!"

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Wednesday, June 20, 4:00am
10 Downing Street, London

The Muggle Prime Minister had learned the hard way to treat the assurances of newspaper publishers with a large dose of skepticism. He also considered the British public's faith in the electronic news media to be quite secondary to the trust that they put into their morning newspapers... which is why he had waited until the wee hours of the morning before addressing the small painting in the corner of his office.

"You there," he said to the small portraiture, "I want a meeting with the Ministry of Magic immediately."

The rather ugly looking man within the frame, whose eyes were closed tightly, ignored him.

"Wake up you little gnome," the Prime Minister said in raised voice. "Fetch me Scrimgeour or I'll bring the Queen's Royal Wizard around and have him give you a good hexing."

The portraiture opened one eye and grimaced.

"The Muggle Prime Minister's `request' has been conveyed to the Office of the Minister of Magic," the painting replied tersely.

"Good," the Prime Minister said with no small amount of authority. He then returned to his desk and waited, while reading the front page of the last of the major dailies to have been rushed to his office.

The Scot's Daily Journal

Wednesday, June 20, 2006

Salmon Spoils Royal Ascot Reopening

Windsor Great Park (RPI) - Thousands of spectators took ill during the opening day of racing at the Royal Ascot, forcing authorities to cancel the last four races of the day. Ministry health officials later attributed the mass outbreak of upset stomachs, ill ease and general despondency to a massive case of food poisoning.

"It was the salmon mousse," said Ministry Health Department spokesperson T. Gilliam.

More than six hundred individuals were taken to area hospitals, with one hundred thirty admitted for overnight observation. The Queen and members of the Royal Family in attendance were reportedly not among the victims. The symptoms surfaced immediately after the third race, and put a damper on a spectacular display of magic performed during the debut of "Gryffindor," a highly talented teen-aged illusionist who, according to Palace insiders, recently received a royal appointment as the "Queen's Wizard."

see "Queen's Wizard," page 11

Explosion Rocks North Surrey Neighborhood

Little Whinging, Surrey (RPI) - Two men were seriously injured and several homes destroyed when a ruptured gas main exploded Tuesday in the suburban London community of Little Whinging. Local officials, noting that the neighborhood had been evacuated some two hours previous when the leak was first detected, expressed relief that the injury toll wasn't higher. More than two hundred residents spent the night in shelters while gas company workers and emergency responders worked to determine the extent of the pipeline breach and evaluate the structural safety of lesser-damaged residences. The underlying cause of the rupture is still under investigation.

Before the he had time to turn the page to learn more about Sir Harry the small portrait raised its tinny voice.

"The Office of the Minister of Magic regrets that its representative is not able to consult with you at this time," it said.

The Prime Minister looked up at the portrait. He'd been informed that the Ministry of Magic had been secured hours ago, so they couldn't blame this avoidance on the fighting.

"Minister Scrimgeour sends his regrets?" he asked in clarification.

After a few seconds silence, the painting responded. "The Office of the Minister of Magic regrets that its representative is not able to consult with you at this time."

"Wonder if he's been sacked," the Prime Minister thought to himself. He stood and headed over to his leather-bound office couch, where he sat and addressed the portrait a final time. "Well, whoever the Ministry's representative turns out to be knows where to find me."

Looking down at his watch, the Muggle leader decided it was time to end a very long day by stretching out for a very short kip. What magic lay beyond the sun's rise was something he could certainly wait to see.

Chapter 15 – The Round Tower

Wednesday, June 20, 11:00am
Round Tower, Windsor Castle

The Queen's Wizard and Queen's grandson climbed the last few stone steps to reach the highest point within Windsor Castle. The journey had taken them to the rooftop of the Round Tower, where cannons still guarded the Royal Standard that flew whenever the British Monarch was in residence.

"Well, Prince Harry," Harry concluded as he looked out past the battlements, "this must rank as the nicest and most elaborate play fort in the world."

The Young Prince chuckled. "Only second best, I'm afraid...there's a Sultan down in the Emirates that had a half-scale replica of the Fortress of Fao built for his boys."

"Still..."

"Yes, you're right," the young prince agreed. "When we were younger, my brother and I spent as much time as we could up here, playing knights and

artillerymen...had these cannons carried live powder we would have flattened most of Berkshire several times over.”

The panoramic view was spectacular, and the Young Prince was all too happy to point out various landmarks and the vestiges of English countryside. To the South, within the Windsor Great Park, were hunting lodges turned Royal residences and the stables where he'd been presented the Royal Wizard's orb. Just west of the Park, the oval track of Ascot Racecourse could be spied.

“Surprised that they're racing today?” Harry asked.

“No,” replied the Young Prince. “The show must go on, stiff upper lip, and all that...sure that you don't want to give a repeat performance?”

Harry shook his head. “I think they've seen enough Dementors over there for now, and I seem to attract them like flies.”

The Young Prince nodded as he grappled with his latest c-mug lesson on magical beasts and beings. “It was quite strange watching you and your comrades fight something that I couldn't see...whatever happened to the two Dementors you downed?”

“Don't know,” Harry replied. “The corpses dissolved away before we could poke at them.”

“How does that work...killing something that wasn't alive in the first place?”

“I'm not quite sure...they don't teach necromancy at school.”

“Necromancy?” the Young Prince asked, as he began to walk stiffly with his arms out. “You mean like zombies?”

“Yes,” Harry replied quietly. “Except that in our world they're called *Inferi*, not zombies.”

The Young Prince took notice of the slight change in Harry's complexion, and hollow look in his eyes.

“Don't tell me that you've run up against those things as well?” he asked.

When Harry nodded, Prince Harry shook his head and whistled a low note as they continued their walk along the parapet.

“When I was your age, the scariest thing I had to face was my chemistry professor.” He stopped Harry and pointed north towards a campus of buildings and playing fields. “Speaking of which, there's my old school.”

Harry looked out over the tower's edge.

“Eton?”

The Young Prince nodded, as he patted the barrel butt of one of the eighteenth-century cannons. “Father says that it's no coincidence that this one's aimed straight at the faculty's residence.”

“He went there too?” Harry asked.

“No,” the Young Prince replied, “he boarded up in Scotland, but the Royal Family has been sending its boys there for centuries.”

“Would of thought the instructors too afraid to treat you with anything less than respect,” Harry replied.

“Oh, no,” the Young Prince replied with a rueful grin. “The staff takes great pride on living up to the House of Windsor's insistence that its young men not be treated differently.”

“So let me guess,” said Harry. “The chemistry professor assumed you were full of yourself based on who you were, instead of how you acted, and took every opportunity to knock you down to what he thought should be your proper size.”

“Yeah,” the Young Prince said with surprise. “How'd you know?”

“Been there, been subjected to that.”

They continued their clockwise stroll, stopping to look east down the length of Heathrow's two main runways as a passenger jet completed its landing. Twenty miles beyond the airport were the skyscrapers of Central London. Using the airport and various motorways as guide points, the two were able to distinguish Little Whinging from the similarly nondescript communities that surrounded it.

“Stopped by the hospital on the way out this morning and visited Brian,” the Young Prince said.

“That was nice,” Harry replied. “Hermione and I plan on returning there this afternoon...still unconscious?”

“Yes,” the Young Prince said. “His sister arrived this morning, you know.”

“No, I didn't” replied Harry, already feeling guilty at the thought of meeting Brian's family.

“I was quite close to him growing up,” sad Prince Harry softly, “used to sneak into the palace kitchens at night and he'd cook all my favorite greasy foods.”

“He told us that...he's done so much for me as well,” Harry replied glumly.

Chin up, Sir Harry," the Young Prince said, as he straightened his own back. "He's not dead."

"Close to it," Harry replied, "and I wasn't there to help him."

"Even wizards can't be in two places at the same time...or can they?"

That comment brought a tight grin to Harry's face as he thought about Hermione's time turner. "Erm, no...at least not anymore."

"So how's your mate's brother doing?"

"Fred?" Harry asked. "Broken arm, three cracked ribs, ruptured spleen, nasty concussion...he'll be fine."

"They must work wonders at your wizard hospital."

"Yeah," replied Harry. "They can."

The Young Prince paused for a moment, then tried to change topics. "So have they let your neighbors back into their homes yet?"

"Should have by now," Harry replied. "When I talked to Wally this morning they were close to being done."

"Wow," replied the Young Prince. "Heard about the damage...suppose you had some magic brooms and dustpans for the clean-up?"

Harry chuckled. "No, we fly on our brooms, and the neighborhood's still a mess. Most of the houses still have broken glass, and there's rubble and debris everywhere...guess I was talking more about cover-up than clean-up; we spent most of the night moving dirt and dressing up the impact crater just enough to make it look like a gas line explosion."

"Imagine then that they've finished the body count?"

"Mostly," Harry replied grimly. "Twenty-two dead, four wounded, and a lot of unidentified bits of bodies ...took muggle search dogs and lots of 'Accio body parts' spells to find it all."

"Harsh," was the Young Prince's assessment.

"You could say that," Harry agreed.

"So how long before you can move back?"

"Dunno," Harry replied. "Wouldn't do to use magic for the home repair, and my Aunt and Uncle's house was flattened. I could move into one of the other houses I now own, but the magical protections that were in place are in poor shape. But even if they weren't, I'm not sure I could return."

"Why's that?"

"Because despite our success yesterday," Harry explained, "there's still Death Eaters out there looking to get to me. I'm certain we'll have to defend ourselves again, and, well...how many gas main explosions can you have in one neighborhood before somebody gets suspicious?"

The Young Prince laughed. "Yes, well, I can see your predicament...which is why I'm pleased grandmum's given you some options."

Harry nodded. "You certain you wouldn't mind lending me your play fort for a little while?"

The Young prince smiled. "No worries, Sir Harry. It was indeed a fabulous play fort, and this rooftop was a brilliant place to bring my teen-aged dates, but...well, we all move on, don't we? Besides, it's the Queen's decision, and the offer's already been made."

The flag turret's door swung out as the Prince of Wales led Hermione to the rooftop for her first views from the top of the Tower.

"So what do you think, Hermione?" the Queen's Wizard asked.

"Harry, can you feel it?" she replied excitedly. "I think I've already found a couple of dormant protection wards but there's older magic than that at work here, I just know it. Pretty sure I can work out the equations needed to attenuate anti-app wards into something more elliptical...we should be able to cover the Upper Ward, at a minimum...maybe the entire castle with a little help from our security consultants."

Harry smiled. "That's great, Hermione, but what do you think of the inside?"

"Oh, well, there is a lot of space to work with, don't you think?" she quickly replied. "Hedwig would love the huge area just below, and with the stone walls and fireplaces, and the apartment's main room's almost like Gryffindor Tower's, isn't it? And that one room that used to be a library, and the..."

"And the one bedroom?" Harry asked, with one eyebrow raised.

Hermione blushed just a bit. "Oh, well, there is that second apartment...Ron and Luna would have room when they visit, and the Prince was saying that the ground floor apartment used to house guards...it'd be perfect for mum and dad..." Realizing that she was babbling a bit and making more than a few assumptions, she tried to self-correct. "or any other MI-5 ¾ staff, of course." She caught her breath, then asked, "So...what do you think, Harry?"

Harry smiled. "Well..."

The Prince of Wales, sensing that he was witnessing something akin to a young couple buying their first house, took on the role of real estate agent and tried to close the deal.

"I will admit, it is a bit...rustic," he said. "But your quarters in Buckingham might compensate, and we aren't without the means to make it at least a little more comfortable for you here." He paused, then added, "It wouldn't be the first time a Royal Wizard took up residence within the Round Tower...and I'd wager those stone steps would create a healthy sense of space, should Hermione's parents be assigned to work or live down at the base."

It was Harry's turn to blush, with the realization that there were lots of things he'd like to do with Hermione that he wouldn't want her parents to walk in on.

Seeing an anticipatory look in her eyes, he turned back towards the Prince.

"But what would happen if the Death Eaters track me down again?" Harry asked. "Wouldn't do to repeat yesterday's tactics, would it? Hermione and I could get away easy enough, but how would the Queen or anyone else escape if need be?"

The Prince glanced over to his son who was smiling broadly. "Sir Harry," the Prince said in reply, "the Queen usually only spends weekends here at the Castle; it's Ascot that has her here for the week. And if she were to be in residence...well, this castle is nearly a thousand years old, and contains more than a few secret tunnels and passageways...isn't that right, Prince Harry?"

"Erm, quite right, father," the Young Prince said, with an unapologetic smirk still on his face.

Harry smiled at the give and take between father and son. He turned to Hermione, who said, "It's up to you."

Harry turned back to the Prince. "We would be honored, then, to accept the Queen's generous offer of shelter."

Hermione let out a little squeal ("squee" was what it actually sounded like), and hugged Harry tightly.

The Prince of Wales turned towards his son with and offered some fatherly advice. "You should take notice," he gently chided his son, "of the benefits of cluing into your girlfriend's opinions."

When the two broke apart the Prince asked, "Will you two be joining us for lunch?"

Harry shook his head. "Thank you for offering, Your Highness, but we're meeting Ron at noon down in London."

The Prince nodded as looked at his watch. "Well then," he said, "You should get going. Even with the morning rush over the roads will be busy."

Hermione and Harry looked at each other and smiled.

"Oh, that's right," the Prince said, "you two don't have to worry about paying road congestion fees, do you?"

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Harry and Hermione used the thirty minutes not spent on the expressway to meet with the Castle's superintendent, who promised to have the Tower cleared and cleaned by the end of the day. They then called Wally to get a Little Wiz update, and to let him know that the lorry holding their personal possessions could be dispatched to Windsor.

At five before noon, Hermione apparated to a secured travel point in London's West End, then walked two blocks to the trendy muggle restaurant that Wally had recommended. It took her a few minutes to find a suitably secluded site within the busy bistro.

"Hermione!" Ron whined, as she pulled down the "closed for cleaning" sign that she'd been forced to conjur. "Why'd it have to be the women's loo?"

The teen-aged witch frowned as she shooed her two boys out into the main eating area. "Don't like it, pass your apparition test and you can pop up wherever you want."

Head Auror Robard's greetings and the prompt attention of the wait staff forced Ron to put his rant on hold. After ordering their food they took turn providing updates on their latest activities.

Ron began with word from St. Mungo's. He had been one of the many relatives of injured patients who had stood overnight guard at the wizard hospital (with so many of the injured being Aurors, those normally on guard had been redeployed to the Ministry). Ron said that a rumor was spreading that the Ministry was going to draft all seventeen and eighteen year old witches and wizards into Ministry service. A second fast-spreading rumor clarified the first, stating that the draft would be restricted to pure-blooded witches and wizards. He then reported the senior healer's latest estimate, that half of those injured during the battle would be released within forty-eight hours, and that half of those remaining would be cured within a week's time. He ended on a personal note, conveying word that Fred was healing nicely, and that the lingering effects of the *Cruciatus* spell that had struck his mum were fading. Her healers were now predicting a slow, painful, but ultimately complete recovery.

Harry and Hermione followed with news on Little Wiz and the Muggle world. Three of the four Death Eaters that had survived the blast still lay unconscious within a military hospital. The fourth had been brought back within Little Wiz's weak, but operant anti-apparition wards and was under heavy sedation. The Phoenix Teams were still on site, guarding the prisoner and working hard to maintain the official story on what had happened the previous day. As far as Harry and Hermione knew, the cover stories for both Little Wiz and Ascot were holding in the Muggle press.

They asked Ron and Robards whether word of the attack on Little Wiz had spread within the wizarding world, and were told that secret was holding

as well.

They agreed that this was a good thing, once the Head Auror passed along news from the Ministry of Magic.

Rufus Scrimgeour had avoided an immediate sacking through the skillful deployment of deceit and misdirection. The subterfuge had been straightforward and effective. Head Auror Robards had advance knowledge of the attack plans and coordinated the successful response. Head Auror Robards was a member of the Minister's cabinet. Therefore, using the transitive power of mathematics and sleazy politicians, it was the Minister's Office that had valiantly saved the wizarding world from You-Know-Who. It had become the big victory that had proven so elusive for Scrimgeour's office. Any questions on why there were so many Death Eaters working for the Ministry had been explained away with the simple observation that Scrimgeour had only been in power for a year, and that the vast majority of insurgents had been hired by previous administrations.

In other words, "Blame Fudge."

The misdirection was far more insidious. Plans to arrest Harry for underage magic use had been reluctantly cancelled after Robards reported that he'd witnessed the sixteen year old's investiture as Queen's Wizard. A quick trip to the Book of Wizarding Records confirmed this event, as well as its legality. The furor that the Minister and his staff hurled upon the Head Auror for witnessing and giving legitimacy to Harry's position was intense, but quiet. After all, Scrimgeour had just identified the Head Auror as a hero, and announced his intention to award him the Order of Merlin, Second Class.

There weren't, unfortunately, as many constraints when it came to attacking Harry.

The wireless was already reporting that Harry Potter had betrayed the wizarding world by accepting the position of Queen's Wizard, and that he'd shamelessly used his magical powers before thousands of Muggles in a self-aggrandizing attempt to gain fame and celebrity. A "senior Ministry official" had told the WWN that Harry was now a graver threat than Voldemort, stating that his actions threatened the shroud of secrecy that protected the entire wizarding world from Muggle interference. Word was also going around that Rita Skeeter would be reporting on this story in the next day's *Prophet*.

The Head Auror apologized to Harry for the Ministry's actions, and asked if he should go public with the truth. Harry and Hermione convinced him to stay quiet and keep his head low, arguing that the Ministry's lies might lead Voldemort away from how his battle plans had actually been betrayed. They also argued that the battle against Voldemort needed the Head Auror to keep his job, and to stay on top of the Ministry's machinations. And since it wouldn't do for a Ministry war hero to be seen in public with a pariah, they suggested that the Head Auror return to his office, and limit communications until the dust settled and a proper response had been formulated.

Before leaving, Robards jotted down a spell equation and wand movement diagram on the back of a serviette. As he handed it to Hermione, he suggested that it might come in hand in the days ahead.

"What is it?" Ron asked, as Hermione worked through the arithmancy.

After miming the wand directions with an index finger, Hermione shook her head and sighed.

"It's the counterjinx for howlers."

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8:00pm, The Round Tower, Windsor Castle

Hermione Granger had severely underestimated the amount of time and physical exertion Harry would need to process the Head Auror's news. She'd called their personal trainer and Harry's longsword instructor from the restaurant to set up late-afternoon training sessions at Windsor Castle. While waiting for the instructors to arrive, they had helped Palace staff empty out the Round Tower's storage area, not bothering with shrinking and lightening spells. They then used that empty space for an exhausting series of practice duels. The physical trainer had taken them on an hour-long run within the Park and followed that with an hour of calisthenics. Harry then returned to the Tower with his instructor for an hour of sword training.

It had been two hours since that lesson ended, and Hermione could still hear Harry hacking away at conjured wooden posts. She decided that it was time to take action. Putting her unpacking on hold, she grabbed Harry's backpack and climbed the stairs that led from their new mid-tower apartment to where Harry was slicing and dicing.

The Round Tower's dimensions and layout had changed many times over the centuries. The last major modifications had been in the 1820's, when Windsor Castle's transformation from fortress to palace was completed under George IV. In order to maintain its position as the highest and most visible structure within the Castle, the Round Tower's height was increased some thirty-three feet. Despite the inclusion of window wells in the new stone walls, the new interior space within the addition was left unfinished, creating a huge enclosed area within this false upper story.

It was within this space that Hermione found a sweaty and slightly-bloodied Harry. Three calls were needed before she caught his attention.

"Enough, Harry."

It was enough to make him stop.

She approached and took his hand, using the other to pull at a wooden splinter that had found its mark on Harry's neck. A kiss staunched the wound and slowed down his heart rate.

"Come," she commanded quietly. "You stink."

He looked at her oddly as he leaned down to his sword. "Come where?" he asked. "I didn't see any indoor plumbing within the Tower...did you?"

As Hermione shook her head she reached into Harry's backpack and pulled out the magical tent. With a few quick wand strokes she raised it and staked it down.

"Come," she commanded, as she pulled him towards the tent's entrance. "You stink."

Harry obeyed, and soon found the peace he'd been seeking at the end of Hermione's scrub brush.

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Thursday, June 21, 7:35am

It took Harry Potter a few seconds to realize that it was his badge that had woken him, and not his alarm clock. A charitable observer might forgive this disorientation, noting that he was in a darkened room, on a new bed, and wearing a short robe instead of pajamas. And a discreet observer might overlook the sweet confusion that came with him waking up tightly spooned against Hermione. But Harry was too frightened at that moment to think about either charity or discretion. He groped for his glasses, and with newly focused vision made a snitch-worthy lunge towards the Order of Arthur badge that was flashing on the floor.

"Sir Evan," he exclaimed, "what's wrong?"

"Erm, nothing, Sir Harry," the elderly night replied via badge phone. "I was checking to see if you and Dame Hermione were available...her parents are having trouble finding you."

Harry's movement had woken Hermione, who had found the magical light switch. "What?" she asked, as she turned towards her boyfriend. "Where are they now?"

"Erm, one second," was the reply, "got them on my mobile...ah, they are the base of the Round Tower, and they say that they couldn't find you in your new quarters. Your mobile wasn't working either."

Hermione grabbed her mobile from her nightstand and double-checked the charge. When she looked back up Harry guessed that she had made a realization similar to his.

"Erm, Sir Evan," Harry asked (rather sheepishly), "will you tell them that we're fine and that we'll meet them at the base of the tower in ten minutes?"

"Consider it done," Sir Evan replied.

"How are things on Privet Drive, by the way?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, bit of a mess still, but Number 12 is in fine shape...your friends are pretty handy with their repairing spells...looking forward to your return, though."

"Oh...well, yes," stammered Harry. "We'll talk about that with you soon. Thanks again for your help, Sir Evan."

"You are very welcome, Sir Harry...Evan out."

"Arrgh," Harry lamented, once he "hung up" his badge, "He thinks we're moving back still...and I can't believe we forgot about the *Confundus* spell on the tent flap...good thing that it wasn't an emergency."

"Yes," agreed Hermione as she wiped sleep from her eyes. "No worries at all, other than what mum and dad will say when we explain why they couldn't find us and give them a tour of the tent."

"What?" Harry asked with alarm, as he looked around at the room. "Oh Merlin, that would look bad...do we have to?" He quickly stood and pulled at the *obi* that was tied around the waist of his short robe.

"Yes, we probably do" Hermione replied with a smile, as she watched Harry retrieve his boxer shorts from his clothes pile. "But don't pull those up into a twist just yet."

"Hermione," Harry said reprovingly, "your parents have been amazingly accepting of our relationship and current living arrangements, but really...do you want to push our luck?"

To emphasize his point, he opened his nightstand drawer, pulled out a pair of velvet-lined handcuffs, and started swinging them around on one finger.

Hermione crawled over to Harry's side of the bed on all fours. Tracking how poorly her garment kept up with her thighs as she moved, Harry failed to notice as Hermione caught the swinging handcuffs with one hand, quickly wrapped her arms around him and used the cuffs to drag him down on top of her.

"If this is all that you worry about today," she told him in an unusually husky voice, "then I'll take my chances."

Harry gulped as Hermione raked the handcuffs up the length of his back and pinned the back of his legs down with the heels of her feet.

"Erm, Hermione?"

“Yes, Harry.”

“Would you like to go out a second date with me tomorrow night?”

“Thought that you’d never ask.”

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It only took Harry and Hermione a few minutes to resist temptation, change into trainers, and run down to meet her parents. After apologizing for the *Confundus* charm (which Hermione claimed she now used almost reflexively after sharing a house with Dudley Dursley), Harry and Hermione led her parents out of the Castle and along the running route that they’d used the night before. From the Castle it was exactly three miles down The Long Walk to The Copper Horse and three miles back, with a four-mile long loop in between that took them past Cranbourne Tower, Cumberland Lodge, and Frogmore. Hermione was amazed at how well her parents kept up, despite knowing that they had started their training at the same time that Harry and she had. She said as much as they cooled down with a walk around the outer perimeter of the castle walls.

“Well somebody has to keep up with you two,” Roger Granger explained with a smile, “or else there’s no telling what sorts of mischief you two could get into.”

Harry and Hermione responded with nervous laughter. “So was everything alright last night downstairs?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Emily said, “it was like we were camping, what with the army cots and kerosene lanterns...though I’ll admit that the chamber pots were a bit off-putting,”

“Which reminds me, young lady,” Roger said, “We didn’t hear you two come down last night to use the facilities across the way. Please tell me you have some sort of magical water-free toothbrush.”

“Erm, something like that, daddy.”

“Well good,” Roger replied with a smile. “Just because your mum and I aren’t practicing dentists anymore doesn’t get you off the hook when it comes to proper oral hygiene.”

“Speaking of your new jobs,” Harry said quickly, trying to change the topic, “I don’t think I ever told you both how amazed I was watching you train this past week.”

“Thank you Harry,” Roger said. “I was a little amazed myself at how easily Emily took to flying...she usually leaves her lunch behind when she hops down off of carnival rides.”

“Well,” Emily replied in mock indignation, “maybe that was only because I had somebody so big and so strong to hold on tight to during that ride.”

“Oh, mum,” Hermione said with a bit of exasperation while Harry laughed.

“Seriously, though,” Roger said, “I’d have to say that even with all of the scary bits that I couldn’t think of a better way to have spent the past few weeks.”

“So even when the bits get scarier?” Harry asked, “because you know that they will.”

“Hermione Jane,” Emily said with a smile, “it sounds as if your boyfriend is trying to get rid of us.”

“Oh, no” Hermione replied, “It’s just his saving-people-thing kicking in.”

“Well that’s good,” Roger replied, as they signed back in at the guardhouse and walked into the Upper Ward’s courtyard. “Because we’ve got business to discuss this morning.”

“Erm, that might have to wait,” Harry said, as he spied a flock of owls perched patiently on the Round Tower’s battlements. “Looks like Hermione and I have some mail to defuse first.”

With promises to meet the Grangers in a half-hour’s time for breakfast, Harry and Hermione climbed up to the tower’s addition to take on the assault of mail.

Having made it a point not to have *The Daily Prophet* delivered to Windsor, they relied upon the breath of commentary to gauge just how caustic Rita Skeeter’s hack-job had been. From the looks of things, it was every bit as bad as what they’d expected, but not more so.

Hermione expressed encouragement at seeing some supportive letters from Ministry workers who had experienced the truth first hand. A few had even chosen to sprinkle their remarks with disparaging comments about the Minister of Magic and his staff (using personal parchment, of course).

“Could have been worse,” Harry opined, “looks like only seventy percent is negative, and only half of that lot are howlers.”

“Well hello, Mister Optimism,” Hermione replied. “Certainly a welcome change from how surly you were last night.”

“Well what can I say,” Harry replied as he gazed fondly towards the Love Shack, “you just washed all of that anger off of me.”

“Right,” Hermione replied, “best you find another way of calming down ...I’m not about to carry that scrub brush around with me.”

"That's too bad," Harry said, "because it was my focus on those bristles on the Love Shack that helped me clear my mind. I was quite serene there, for a moment."

"Only for a moment?"

"Well, the cold bucket of water over my head was rather harsh for my concentration."

Hermione laughed. "If that's the case maybe some scrubbing would help with your occlumancy skills."

Harry thought about that off-hand remark more seriously than Hermione expected.

"Yes, I think you are right... certainly bound to be more effective than anything Snape taught me."

Hermione stared up and off to one side in what Harry recognized as one of her classic thinking poses.

"So a single-point focus...like a labyrinth almost, or a rosary...makes sense, actually...don't know why I didn't think of it sooner."

"Think about what?"

Hermione cast an *Accio* spell, and a few moments later handed Harry the Love Shack's scrub brush.

"Think that it's time for you to take a *Zen* shower," she replied. "By yourself," she added, quickly shooting down Harry's expectant look.

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As the loser of a game of rock-parchment-wand, Harry reluctantly grabbed some fresh clothes and made the short hike to the Castle guard's changing room. Harry was happy to see that Mr. Granger was still there to document his propriety...it was even worth the good-natured ribbing that he took (e.g. "So Harry, I imagine you use magic to keep from having to shave each morning, right?"). Roger waited for his daughter's boyfriend to shower and dress (white oxford shirt, Gryffindor rep tie, mauve linen suit, and loafers). They then made their way to the Royal Mess, where they joined Emily and Hermione for breakfast.

The "Royal Mess" was, for all intents, a company cafeteria – a place where Windsor's employees could grab a free meal without having to navigate through crowds of tourists and security checkpoints. But this was Windsor Castle, and the Queen took care of her staff, so it was as much a company cafeteria as a Rolls Royce was a commuter car. The hall was large and ornate, with hardwood floors, oriental carpeting and walls covered with paintings not of monarchs, but of those who served monarchs over the centuries. The tables were covered in linen, set with real silver, and dressed with fresh flowers.

The Mess manager greeted Roger and Harry at the door as if he were welcoming guests into his own house, and led them to a table where Hermione and Emily were already scanning a menu whose entrees ranged from haute cuisine to comfort foods.

"So, Harry," Emily said after the two men were seated, "It seems that you are already turning heads and making friends within the Castle."

"How's that?"

"The manager mentioned your insistence on taking meals here, rather than one of the private state rooms...said it was 'refreshingly humble for a member of the peerage'."

"Well...it wasn't just my decision," Harry replied, as he took note of Hermione's glowing smile. "And I don't see why anyone should make a big deal...after all, I am a employee too, right?" To emphasize that point, Harry grabbed the Staff ID that hung from his jacket lapel.

"And walking into the kitchens to thank the staff?"

"Seemed the right thing to do...and Hermione's got me well trained not to take Hogwart's house elves for granted." That comment earned a laugh from the table, as a waiter arrived to take their order. "I also wanted to give them an update on Brian's condition...a lot of his old co-workers were there and word had gotten around that he'd been injured."

Emily nodded. "I called the hospital while we were waiting...he's been moved out of the Intensive Care Unit."

"That's great...has he regained consciousness?"

Mrs. Granger shook her head. "They think it still may take a few days...it was a rather nasty concussion that he suffered."

"And they won't know until he wakes just how bad the spinal cord injury was?"

After Emily nodded the conversation dropped for a few seconds as they all thought about (and silently prayed for) Brian's prospects for a full recovery.

Roger broke the silence by providing Harry with an initial cost estimate from Privet Drive. Had there really been a gas main explosion, the utility company would have been liable, but given the circumstances, it was understandably reluctant to accept responsibility. MI-5 ³/₄ did have a secret fund for these sorts of things, but Harry had insisted that he cover the costs, arguing that the attack involved wizard terrorists. As a handshake compromise, the charges were to be split down the middle, with Harry providing payment in kind; rather than directly repay the Crown he would use his funds to support wizard forces fighting against Voldemort. With an estimate now in hand, Harry told Roger that he would create a "war funds" account within his Gringott's portfolio, and transfer a galleon-equivalent amount.

Emily then raised a Clan Potter issue. Plans had been made for a summer solstice party that weekend, with an expanded guest list that included every Muggleborn Hogwarts student and their family. She had made arrangements to cover travel expenses for those students that lived outside of Greater London, but was uncertain what to do now that Privet Drive was a construction zone. Harry replied that bringing all of the Muggleborns together was more important than ever, given the Ministry's actions. Hermione pointed out that there was plenty of room within the Castle, but that it might not be prudent to flaunt his position as Queen's Wizard. Harry agreed, and mentioned sight of some sort of amusement park when he was up on the Round Tower's roof. Emily promised to look into that possibility and to have a list of potential alternatives ready for Harry by dinner.

The Queen's Wizard had just poured a second cup of tea when Wally entered the hall and approached their table. He asked, "Lord Gryffindor, Dame Hermione, would you allow me to interrupt your breakfast?"

Harry smirked at Wally's formality as he nodded in response. The secret agent explained that the Prince had instructed the Household Staff to fast-track the renovation and refurbishment of the Round Tower. To that end, there was a delegation of people that wanted to meet with Harry and Hermione for a tour. They immediately agreed, on condition that the Granger's come along as well (as they might have an interest on the ground floor living quarters). And so it was that fifteen minutes later Harry, Hermione and her parents were introduced to the Castle Superintendent, the Royal Architect, the Castle's Maintenance Chief and the Royal Curator of Art. The Royal Historian, whom they'd already met, was there as well.

It took almost an hour to complete the tour. As they made their way up through the various floors it became clear to Harry that there were competing interests within the group. The Maintenance Chief was almost embarrassed that the Queen had offered such spartan quarters to her guests, and took every opportunity to suggest how the floor plans could be changed, elevators installed, and modern conveniences provided. In contrast, the Royal Architect wanted to leave the tower the way it was, in the name of historic preservation. Whenever his colleague started to discuss knocking down walls, or adding an HVAC system, the Architect would argue (politely, of course) that the Queen's guests would be much more comfortable elsewhere within the castle. The Curator took a middle course, asking that the changes be kept to what was absolutely necessary, and that they be done with an eye towards historic accuracy. And while the other staff members were trying to make their points, the Royal Historian provided more information about the tower's history.

Windsor Castle was one of a series of fortifications built within a day's march of London, and the Round Tower was one of the first structures built within the Castle. Its foundation stones were placed on top of an artificial hill that was constructed using the rubble from a previous structure.

"Who lived in the Tower besides the occasional Royal Wizard?" Harry asked.

The historian replied, "When there wasn't a wizard in residence the tower belonged to the Superintendent's predecessor."

"His title was Castellan," the Superintendent added, "though he was also identified as a governor. He lived in the upper apartment, while his lieutenant-governor had the ground floor quarters."

"So this Castellan...was it a military or a civil post?" Hermione asked.

"Both," the historian replied. "He was the local judge, chief forester and warden of the Windsor forest...at the same time, he was in charge of the castle's defense, and of any prisoners kept within the tower's cells."

The tower's detention area was sandwiched in between the upper and lower living quarters, with confinement space allotted based on the prisoner's rank and gentry status. The first level had twelve small cells; the second level, four. The third level had only a single cell; this "King's Suite," was the historic home of jailed monarchs and regents.

Each of the two separate living areas had three rooms spread over two levels. The first floor of each apartment was a large open common room, with fireplaces spaced evenly along the circular walls. This was the main living area, and was also used as a dining room. The floor above was divided into bed chamber and dressing room. Since the ground level also had a guard house and storage room for weaponry, the lower apartment's rooms were necessarily smaller.

In keeping with its main purpose, the tower's living quarters were all opened to the circular staircase, providing easy access to its narrow windows for the Castle's archers, and (later on), musket men. In fact, the only interior doors within the Tower were attached to the jail cells. This openness became an issue when the group discussion hit upon privacy concerns; anyone climbing the tower's stairs to raise and lower the Royal Standard had to walk through each of the living quarters.

Harry's worry about explaining away the Love Shack once the tour reached the addition proved baseless; Hermione had taken it down after her morning shower. The posts Harry had used for sword practice were still there, though, prompting him to provide cryptic comments about their use in a new illusion that he was developing.

After finishing their tour the group moved to a castle conference room to hammer out a renovation plan. Harry and Hermione scored points with the Architect and Historian by severely limiting the scope of work. Walls would be built to separate stairwells from living quarters, a stone-encased pipe chase would provide water and sewer service throughout the tower and electrical service to the lower apartment. Small W.C.s would also be built within each dressing room. Plans to build modern kitchens and install centralized heating were shelved; they would take their meals in the Royal Mess, and rely upon the fireplaces to provide heat in the winter.

When asked about potential reuse of the detention levels, Harry decided to leave it in its present condition; his only request being that the cell doors have modern locks installed. The Superintendent jokingly asked whether Harry had plans on housing any prisoners. When Harry smiled and replied, "That's exactly what I'm planning to do," Hermione was the only one to realize that he just might be serious.

Once plans were finalized the meeting broke up with the Castle's superintendent and art curator asking for separate meetings with Harry and Hermione. Wally tagged along as the Superintendent gave Harry and Hermione an overview of the Castle's security systems.

The bulk of the Castle's defenses were arrayed against tourists, rather than terrorists. The Castle was one of Britain's most popular tourist attractions, particularly after the devastating fire of 1992, when the Queen opened for public display many of the rooms that had been restored at taxpayer expense. As the Superintendent led them through Castle grounds he pointed out various checkpoints and queues, where Castle visitors were checked to ensure that nothing dangerous was brought in, and nothing valuable taken out. He further noted that, after an embarrassing series of incidents, great care had been taken to keep uninvited guests from gaining access to the private portions of the Castle. Most of that effort was done remotely, as he demonstrated by walking them through a monitor-filled control room similar to what had been housed upstairs at Number Five Privet Drive.

The Superintendent's tour ended just before lunch, leaving time for Harry and Hermione to privately discuss their security concerns with Wally. Hermione stated her intent to develop an anti-apparation field large enough to encompass the Castle, but noted that public access within parts of the Castle would still be an issue. Harry agreed, pointing out that a Death Eater's wand wouldn't trip a metal detector, and that wacky clothing couldn't be trusted as a tell-tale indicator of magical ability. Wally asked if there was some sort of magical equivalent of a metal detector to identify magical devices. Harry mentioned the Sneakoscope, but said that it probably wouldn't be focused enough to pick one wizard out of a crowd. He promised Wally that he'd have Fred and George look into the matter.

Wally then asked about protection wards for the Round Tower itself. He recognized the need to keep the general Muggle population out of the tower, but worried that Muggle repellent charms would be too obvious, and keep c-mugs like him from entering. He suggested that a Muggle electronic entry system might work, but Harry, recalling Slughorn's pre-Hogwarts accommodations, thought that they might be too easy for a wizard to disarm. As usual, it was Hermione that thought of a practical solution...a security ward that was keyed for only certain individuals to pass, combined with a dummy key card device that an authorized visitor would go through the motions of activating.

Harry and Hermione next told Wally about the *Daily Prophet* article that had identified him as Queen's Wizard. Now that this knowledge was out within the wizarding world, Harry was afraid that the Castle would become a Death Eater target. He mentioned that the Prince had described some secret escape routes within the castle, and asked him to find out more about these passageways. They then discussed how the Castle should be defended from physical attack. Wally noted that there was an army barracks a mile away from the castle with troops nominally designated for castle defense, but noted that there weren't any c-mugs within those ranks. While MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ could easily plant a few of its agents within the Castle's security team, they agreed that the Castle defenses should be no less robust than Privet Drive's. Harry and Hermione decided to raise this issue the next time that they met with the Prince or Queen.

After lunch Harry and Hermione met with the Royal Art Curator to discuss Round Tower interior design. The Curator told them that the Castle had a large supply of antique furniture, carpeting and wall hangings that they could pick and choose from, and led them to a basement-level storage area underneath the State Apartments. Along the way, the curator tried to manage expectations, noting that within their inventories "modern" was used to describe anything made after the eighteenth century. Hermione surprised the curator when she replied that Harry and she had lived in a castle that lacked electrical service for most of the past six years, and would therefore be quite comfortable with even the simplest of accommodations. Encouraged by this response, the curator helped Harry and Hermione select several pieces of antique furniture and oriental rugs that would have been right at home within the Gryffindor common room. They also picked out large armoires and cabinets for the dressing room, and a four-poster bed, two desks and matching chairs for their bed chamber. Harry and Hermione then asked that her parents be allowed to similarly furnish the ground level living quarters.

With furniture and floors covered, the Curator took them to a fireproof climate-controlled storage room that housed a small portion of the royal art collection. Hermione was thrilled when told that they could decorate the Round Tower's walls with any of the stored works. Again, the curator tried to manage expectations by noting that all of the Rembrandt's were already hanging on royal walls. With more than a thousand pieces to choose from, Hermione asked to use the Collection's e-gallery to narrow the field, while Harry asked if artwork had historically hung on the Round Tower's walls. While the Curator excused herself to research that question, Harry and Hermione clicked through the e-gallery, cross-referencing possibilities against a list of works currently on display.

"So what are we looking for?" Harry asked.

"Wizards," Hermione replied, "or, at least, something that might have been painted by a wizard."

"Why?"

"Because I'm curious," Hermione replied with a tad of defensiveness. "And because you never know what a magical painting might be able to tell you."

"Oh...erm...Hermione, wouldn't you think one of the Muggles around here would have noticed a magical painting?"

"Not if it was dormant," Hermione replied.

Harry confessed his ignorance on the topic of sleeping magical paintings, which prompted Hermione to dive into a lecture based, of course, on the material that Harry should have known had he ever bothered to read *Hogwarts, A History*. Had he been taking notes, Harry's short version of the presentation would have read: "*Paintings need magic to stay alive. Wizard artists paint magical pictures of food, and the portraits "eat" this magical food. No magical food = no energy = paintings become dormant.*"

"How will we know if a painting is magical if it's dormant?" Harry asked.

"Well, without a magical still life to offer as a meal, we have to make some educated guesses, then zap each potential painting with a magical spell. That would probably provide enough energy for a portrait to at least stretch its legs."

"But why would a wizard artist paint pictures for a muggle king or queen?" Harry asked.

"Because there were the ones with the money," Hermione simply replied. "And it's always possible that the Royal Family purchased a magical painting that had long gone dormant."

It took Hermione just a few minutes to search through the computer database, arriving at a list of twenty different paintings similar in style to those hanging in Hogwarts. With Harry keeping watch for the Curator, Hermione retrieved these works using several variations of "Accio Portrait of Burkhard von Speyer". She was disappointed that after magical transport none of the paintings gave signs of being magical, though they were all marvelous to look at. With the Curator still out of the room, Hermione decided to goose the paintings with some additional magic, and cast levitation spells. Again, none of the portraits moved, though Hermione thought she might have seen an eyelash flutter in Portrait of a Young Man by Giovanni Bellini. She set that work aside, along with a similarly titled work called Portrait of a Man, (not because it appeared magical, but just because she liked it.)

Harry helped Hermione return the other paintings to their cubby holes, finishing just before the curator returned the room. She first complimented Hermione on her selections, and promised to have them brought to the tower along with the furniture. The Curator then told Harry that she had located a journal account that described Round Tower wall hangings during the Eighteenth Century, but that none of these works were within the collection's database. She thought it possible that this artwork had remained in the tower, and had been stored with the other material that Harry and Hermione had helped remove from the Tower's addition. They asked for and received permission to poke through these storage boxes.

Harry and Hermione spent a half-hour opening boxes and banishing dust-bunnies as they rummaged through the Tower's past. They found swords and halberds and battle-axes, copper plates and goblets, moldy bedding and, finally, a box of unframed art. Having been trusted to work alone within the storage room, Harry unrolled each piece and used sticking charms to hang them up against a wall for closer display.

There were eleven different works, covering a variety of styles, media, and (frankly) skill levels. They ranged in size from an eight-by-twelve-inch piece of paper to a wall-sized tapestry eight feet long and ten-feet wide.

"Interesting," Harry said with a wide grin, "Now this...this lot I could see hanging on our walls...what do you think, *dear*?"

It took Hermione all of three seconds to determine the unifying theme that had turned Harry into an art lover. Whether woven or painted, Baroque or Byzantine, intimate in detail or grand in scale, they all had one thing in common:

Naked ladies.

All artfully posed, mind you, but naked nonetheless.

"Oh, honestly, Harry!" Hermione said with a bit of disgust. "I'd have expected that response from any one of the Weasley boys, but from you?"

Harry looked at her with mock indignation. "Ah, the perils of being a patron of the arts."

He laughed as Hermione scowled. "Ah, come on, Hermione, don't you get it? This stuff was hanging in a guard house full of troops...not much different than some modern soldier having a page from a girly magazine hanging in his barracks."

"And your point is?"

"Erm, don't have one, I guess," Harry replied with a grin. "Just thought we ought to check if any of these were magical...since there have been wizards in the tower, you never know..."

"You never know how in touch they were with their inner perv?"

"Now Hermione, you were the one that said a magical painting might tell us something valuable."

"Yes, yes, I get the point," Hermione replied with exasperation. "But your sticking charms were magical and nothing happened."

"Well your painting needed an extra boost before you thought you saw fluttering eyelashes, right?"

Hermione reluctantly agreed and cancelled all of the sticking charms. The artwork fell to the floor in a heap. She then used the same levitation spell that had been placed on the other artwork.

"Hey, I saw that," Harry exclaimed excitedly, "that one there...she wiggled her bum a bit...you saw that, didn't you?"

It took most of Hermione's willpower to reply truthfully.

"Yeah, yeah, I did," she muttered, pointing towards a painting depicting a group frolicking nudes within a mountain spring. "Would have to be the one with the most women in it, wouldn't it?"

Harry grinned. "Why don't we goose them with some more magic...we want to be sure, right?"

His girlfriend shook her head with resignation, and then joined Harry in shooting a variety of harmless magical spells at the painting. After a thirty second barrage the painting's spring began to flow and all nine of the bathers began to move in a series of wiggles, winks and grins. One figure, wearing a crown of roses in her hair, fixed her eyes on Harry and began to bend and stretch in ways that rendered useless the tree branches and leaves that had been strategically placed by the artist for modesty purposes.

Hermione put hands on hips and scowled a bit at the figures within the painting. "You do know that you're all pushing your luck, don't you?" Focusing on the one that had taken interest in Harry she said, "Let me guess, your name is Erato, right?" When the figure nodded her head regally Harry asked how she knew the figure's name. Hermione pointed towards a pile of clothing and objects by the water's edge.

"Those robes are Ancient Greek in design," she replied, "as are the lyre, the flute, and the masks used by actors in Greek tragedies and comedies. Each of those objects are historically associated with one of the Nine Muses, and, well, there's nine women there, isn't there?"

Harry replied, "So how did you guess this muse was named Erato?"

"She's the muse that inspires poets to write erotica."

"Oh...well I certainly see how she could be inspirational."

"Get your mind out of the painting, Potter," Hermione chided.

"Erm, yes...dear?" Harry replied, with a somewhat guilty-looking expression.

Hermione sighed as she stepped towards the canvas and address the figures. "Alright, ladies, bath time is over, if you have any interest in hanging within a magical household again."

Though the muses lacked enough magical energy to verbalize a reply, the fact all stepped out of the water and started to get dressed indicated that Hermione had gotten her point across.

"Right then," Hermione said. "You'll need to strike a pose...we're going to have to show you to Muggles. Behave, and I might just might arrange a magical meal for you...understand?"

The Muses nodded in agreement as they each grabbed their distinctive prop and arranged themselves in the poses and positions originally given by their creator. Just to be safe, Hermione case a *Finite Incantatum* spell on the canvas before rolling it up.

The Curator was understandably excited about Harry and Hermione's discovery. As one of the foremost art experts in Europe, she was able to identify the artists for almost all of the works. That she knew nothing about the bathing muse painting beyond it's Italian Renaissance style didn't dampen her enthusiasm; she labeled it a masterpiece upon inspection. A bit embarrassed that such a magnificent work had been allowed to fester in non-archival quality storage under her watch, she was amazed that her careful inspection found no evidence of damage. Harry and Hermione told her that her secret was safe with them, and that they'd take good care of the painting while she looked into the painting's provenance. With that convenient arrangement reached, the grateful Curator told Harry and Hermione that after obtaining an electronic image of the painting she would frame it herself and deliver it to the Round Tower.

As they walked back towards the Round Tower, Harry apologized for acting his age in front of Erato. Hermione cocked her head slightly, and then took his arm and smiled. "You're forgiven, but only because I've seen that lustful look on your face before."

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. "You mean some time that Fleur was around?"

"No, silly," Hermione replied demurely, "I mean last night."

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Queen's Wizard, Part 2 (part 1)

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

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Chapter 16 - A Quick Visit to the Wizarding World

Friday, June 22, 7:30am

Ottery St. Catchpole

Harry and Hermione had taken advantage of the early solstice sunrise and left Windsor Castle at 5:00am, hoping to catch Mr. Weasley before he floo'd to work. Motoring was a decadent waste of time, but with little traffic on the road and the wind in their hair, they had both relished every moment. Right up to the point where they spotted the road sign for Ottery St. Catchpole.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, noticing Harry's sudden mood change. "Disappointed that we had to postpone our date tonight?"

"No," Harry replied. "I mean...yes, I'm disappointed, of course...but everything is moving so fast, on so many fronts, and now I've got the other badges..."

"And it isn't letting up any, is it?" Hermione added. "You know, Harry, this 'three date' thing was a cute idea, but under the circumstances..."

"Stop right there, Hermione," Harry said. "If you aren't going to hold me to it, then I am. Saving the world is no excuse for not treating you right."

"Oh, Harry..." Hermione sighed. "You treat me right with every breath you take...except, of course, when you're panting over the Muses."

"Hush," Harry chided. "And take care to recall that it was your idea to hang it in the Tower last night..."

The banter lagged as Hermione navigated onto the path that so rarely doubled as The Burrow's driveway. She thanked Merlin that they were driving Ron's motorcar, rather than hers, then noticed another change in Harry's demeanor that mirrored the transition from smooth asphalt to rough dirt.

"So Harry, really, why the sudden sullenness?"

"Erm, guess I was wondering how long it would take for life to imitate art."

"How so?"

Harry turned and gave a rueful smile. "Remember that racy Muggle movie we watched last week?"

Hermione blushed a bit. "You mean *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*?"

"Yeah, that one...guess I was thinking about the ending."

Hermione nodded. Though she had fallen asleep before the movie's end, she had read the novel.

"Harry, it has been magical morning...a magical month for that matter. But that doesn't mean that there's a lorry just around the bend that going's to end it all with a fatal head-on collision." As she drove through the Burrow's protective wards she added, "Particularly on this path."

The Queen's Wizard shook his head and smiled a bit as he looked down towards his feet. "Ginny's reaction to our news might have the same force as a head-on collision."

Hermione nodded as she matched Harry's smile. "Which is why," she replied, "I owled Luna yesterday asking her to invite Ginny to spend the night at her house...we've got enough to do here before tackling that distraction."

Harry jerked his head around towards Hermione and let out a quiet snort of bemusement. "Anyone tell you that you are one smart witch?"

"Oh, once or twice."

By that point Hermione had pulled up in front of Mr. Weasley, who had heard the motorcar's engines and was anxiously waiting to greet them. She allowed Arthur the opportunity to work the car door's handle.

"Hermione, Harry, what a pleasant surprise," he said as he opened her car door. "It's so good to see you again!"

That Mr. Weasley took the time for hugs and handshakes before touching more than the Morris's car door was clear indication that this greeting was genuine (though his patience seemed a bit tested as Fleur and Bill came out to add their welcomes).

"Hermione, you have a lovely motorcar," he exclaimed.

"Oh, it's not my car, Mr. Weasley, it's Ron's."

"Ron's?" Bill asked, "You mean my little brother actually knows how to work one of those things?"

Hermione nodded. "Didn't even have to obliviate the muggle examiner for him to get his license," she noted, which caused Arthur to puff out a bit in pride.

"Chip off the old block," he said, as Hermione offered him the car keys and a chance behind the wheel. Once seated, he looked at the front dash, then down at the floor boards. "So where is the drain?"

"What drain?"

"The drain to take away the rain water."

It took Harry only a few seconds to understand Arthur's bewilderment. He then made Mr. Weasley's day by showing him how the convertible's cloth-topped roof could be extended up and over the interior. Hermione made Mr. Weasley's week by asking if they could leave the motorcar there at the Burrow. That gave Fleur the chance to tactfully suggest there would be time for Arthur to spend with the vehicle later in the day. Mr. Weasley agreed with a hint of chagrin, and invited Harry and Hermione into the Burrow's kitchen for some tea.

"You should have told us you were going to visit," he chided. "We'd have had a big breakfast waiting."

"Erm, that's exactly why we didn't call ahead," Hermione said. "Didn't want anyone to make a fuss, particularly Molly."

Arthur nodded, "Well, if you come around to see Ron and Ginny, I'm afraid, there not here."

Harry replied, "We know, we talked with Ron on the way out this morning...he's off the graveyard shift in a few minutes, though, right?"

"Yes, off of work and ready for bed, just as soon as he tumbles through the floo. But Ginny should be up over at Luna's, so it'd be easy to visit her."

"We're planning on visiting Luna's later," Hermione replied, "but we really hoped to have a chance to visit with you and Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh," Mr. Weasley said with a bit of surprise, "Well Molly's still resting...hasn't done much else since she came home yesterday...I'll go and wake her."

"Please don't do that," Harry quickly said, "I know all too well what she's going through. Maybe you could just tell her we stopped by, and we'll try again later?"

"Certainment," Fleur interjected, as she levitated the kettle over to fill their mugs. Her comment brought Harry's focus out of the conversation and onto his surroundings for a moment. It had been a year since he'd last visited the Weasley's, but something had still seemed a bit off when he had first entered the kitchen. It took Fleur's hospitality, her French, and the kitchen apron that she was wearing, for him to figure it all out.

For the moment, at least, they were in Fleur's kitchen, not Molly's.

The differences were minor, but all added up...a vase of fresh flowers on the table, a bowl of fresh fruit on the counter, and (most tellingly) a kitchen wall clock that now sported two additional hands: one labeled "Fleur" that hovered over "Home," and a second marked "Molly" that pointed towards "Mortal Peril."

Hermione's voice brought Harry back from his quiet thoughts of guilt. "Ron said that the Ministry won't let you take time off of work to be with Molly," she said. "That's terrible."

"Yes, well, we are very short-handed now, aren't we?" Mr. Weasley replied. "And with Fleur here...she's been a godsend, she has...Thank Merlin the Ministry's wizard draft won't affect her."

"So they're really going to go forward with that?" Harry asked.

"I'm afraid so," Arthur replied. "Of course, they're not calling it a draft...instead, it's a Ministry intern program."

"On a massive and involuntary scale, of course," Bill added.

Arthur shook his head. "And since the Minister put Umbridge in charge, needless to say it only applies to purebloods."

"That stupid cow wants another crack at what she failed to do at Hogwarts," Harry stated.

"I'm afraid you are right," Arthur said sadly. "That Hogwarts might not open this Fall is going to be presented as their rationale for including Ginny and all of the other sixth years in the program."

"What? That's outrageous," Hermione said. "They're not old enough to do magic on they're own, but they're old enough to be drummed into Ministry service?"

Arthur nodded. "Minister's office thought of that, sad to say...since Hogwarts is officially closed they're transferring the 'instructional exception' authority to the Ministry."

"So instead of Headmistress McGonagall and our professors teaching students how to responsibly use magic it will be Umbridge and her stooges?" Harry scowled. "It's disgusting...you'd think they might be humbled by the level of treason we found within their ranks, but they're turning around and using this treason as an excuse to grab even more power!"

"A very cogent analysis, Harry," Bill said. "Question is, what are we going to do about it?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know...I really don't know. Bad enough we have to fight off Voldemort...but the Ministry as well?"

"You've got the ear of Head Auror Robards, Harry," Mr. Weasley. He then gave a weak smile. "As well a few other ministry officials..."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley...you don't know how much that means to me," Harry replied. "When does this 'intern' program start?"

"Owls are being sent out today, with assignments starting a week from Monday."

Harry took note of the time. "We're going to have to spend some time working out a response," he concluded, "but in the meantime you need to get to the Ministry on time...can't give them an excuse to hassle our supporters, can we?"

Arthur smiled and said "I've still got a few minutes...floo traffic to the Ministry has been lighter than normal these past few days... can't imagine why."

Harry reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small electronic device. "We brought something that we thought you might want to see. Mrs. Weasley too, as soon as she's up to it." He opened the top up to reveal the small LCD display of a portable DVD player. "It's not going to work inside the house, but maybe out in the yard?"

He went on to explain that it was a muggle version of omnioculars, with a recording of the Dementor attack on Ascot. Arthur's eyes lit up as he calculated just how late he could be getting to work. With a laugh and wave, Bill and Fleur pushed Arthur out the door and towards the backyard Quidditch pitch with Harry and Hermione.

Once they were far enough away from the concentration of magic that was centered on the house, Harry turned on the player and showed Arthur how to work the controls. He then popped open the drive to reveal the DVD disk on which the recording was housed. Hermione explained that Muggle movies could be played on the machine as well, and handed Arthur a small case filled with some of her favorite films.

When the DVD recording of the Ascot magic show began to play Arthur quickly forgot about the technology and focused in on the Dementor attack. Ron had given him a cursory description of what had transpired, but it was nowhere near as riveting as seeing it replayed for himself. Harry provided a running commentary, and made sure to freeze the frame when Ron's fully formed patronus came into view.

"That's...that's Ron's?" Arthur asked with wonder, as he watched a tenacious terrier nip at a Dementor's heels. "Oh my, Molly is going to be beside herself with pride when she sees this."

"That was our hope," Hermione replied, "because that ties into why we wanted to talk with you before Ron got home." She then handed Arthur an engraved invitation, printed on Royal stationary.

Five minutes later, with DVD player, invitation and explanation in hand, Arthur led Hermione and Harry back inside the house. After checking in on Molly, he floo'ed off to the Ministry. A few minutes later, Ron popped out of the fireplace, tired and a bit worse for wear. He wasn't too tired, though, to proudly take his big brother out for a ride in his convertible, which left Harry and Hermione alone for a few minutes with Fleur.

Hermione wanted an update on the wedding. Fleur, in turn, wanted an update on Hermione's love life. At Harry's embarrassed blush Fleur explained that it was her Veela blood that had betrayed their quasi-secret, rather than any loose words from those Weasley boys that were in the know. She cautioned, though, that Harry's love-smitten face could be read by anyone who had a vested interest in looking, which made him blush even more. Hermione grabbed Harry's hand in reassurance, and told Fleur that they were going to break the news to Ginny that afternoon at Luna's house. Fleur agreed with that plan, noting with a smile that Ginny's shrieking might interfere with Molly's rest.

And on that reassuring note Hermione and Harry walked out beyond the Burrow's protective wards. Along the way they waved goodbye to Ron and Bill as they drove back down the dirt path in the Morris. Once clear of the wards, Hermione gave Harry a quick kiss and disappeared to Diagon Alley.

Given that the ethereal plane was considerably less congested than either Muggle motorways or the floo network, the trip went very fast. The glamour charm that Hermione applied upon arrival facilitated anonymous entry into The Leaky Cauldron, but didn't fool the observant eye of its bartender.

"They're already upstairs, miss," Tom quietly told her as she approached the bar. "Second door on the right."

Hermione nodded her thanks, and was soon in the company of Tonks and Remus.

"Thanks for meeting on such short notice," she said, as she cancelled the glamour and layered her silencing charms on top of those already laid.

"Are my eyes getting to old to spot an invisibility cloak's use, or did you make the trip alone?" Lupin asked.

"I'm sure your eyesight is fine, Professor," said a voice projected from inside Hermione's sweatshirt.

"What did you do, Hermione," Tonks asked with surprise, "shrink Harry down and stuff him in your pocket?"

Hermione smiled and shook her head as she unzipped her hooded sweatshirt to reveal her Order of Arthur badge. "All clear, Harry,"

Two seconds later, Harry Potter followed a flash of light into the room.

Remus raised an eyebrow. "Fashioning illegal portkeys these days, Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard smirked as he pointed towards his badge. "Guess we weren't exhaustive in our descriptions of how these things work."

Tonks and Lupin looked at each other with befuddlement until Hermione explained the transportation charms that Merlin had fashioned into the badges. Tonks wistfully lamented that with a pair of those Remus would have to work much harder to avoid lunch dates with her.

Harry smiled and fished two badges and two invitations out of his rucksack. "Then it looks like you're out of luck, Moony."

After a few minutes of discussion, Tonks and Remus agreed to the terms that came with the badges, and became seven and eight o'clock, respectively. Harry gave brief instructions on how to use the badge while Hermione gave a brief lecture on the Order of Arthur itself. Then, with promises made to meet at the Burrow later that evening, Hermione and Harry made their way towards Fred and George's with two additional badges in hand.

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Two hours later, Harry and Hermione were performing pre-run stretching exercises with her parents back at Windsor. The Grangers initially seemed far more interested in the side-trip Harry and Hermione had made to Gringott's than in any one of the morning meetings.

"So the goblins jumped your seventeenth birthday by a few weeks?" Emily asked Harry.

Harry nodded. "I wouldn't call it goblin logic for fear of a nose chewing, but it seems that way. Griphook told me that wizard world adulthood is defined not by age, but by the ability to legally use magic. Since the legal age to cast spells outside of school is seventeen, that's also the age of adulthood...for most witches and wizards," he added, with a tinge of embarrassment.

Hermione jumped in. "In Harry's case, the legal use of magic is predicated not on age, but on his position as Queen's Wizard. Since under the terms of the governing treaty Harry can legally use magic, the goblins have decided that by treaty Harry is also an adult in the wizarding world."

Roger Granger frowned in thought. "Does this mean that your mother's protections are no longer in place?"

"I really don't know," Harry replied. "Guess the only way to test it would be to allow Voldemort to try and kill me between now and the end of July."

"Let's hold off on that experiment, then," Roger said with a grin. "So I guess this answers my question on why your vault portfolios changed over the past couple of days."

Harry nodded. "It did seem abstract until Hermione and I took a ride down to the Potter family vault."

"Mum you should have seen it," Hermione said with excitement, before realizing that Harry was embarrassed by his wealth. "I mean, well...like Harry said, it's one thing to see a list of magical objects that he owns, but quite another to see them all in one place."

Harry tried to change the topic. "Wish I had a camera to capture the look on Hermione's face when she opened her vault for the first time." Hermione blushed as her parents laughed at Harry's teasing.

"So did you bring anything back with you?" Roger asked.

Harry shook his head. "Just a few things...did make arrangements for a delivery later today, though."

"What kind of things?" Emily asked.

Harry only gave a "wait-and-see" smile in reply as he led the way out of the Castle and into the start of their late-morning run.

As they had made plans to meet Sir Evan for lunch at the Royal Mess, the pace was necessarily quicker than normal. When they'd finished, Harry and Hermione surprised her parents by leading them not to the changing rooms, but back to the Round Tower.

"I don't know about you kids," Emily said, "but Roger definitely needs a shower after that run."

Hermione laughed. "You've got running water in your apartment now."

"What?" Roger asked. "We were told that it'd take at least a week for the plumbing to be done."

Harry lowered the ward that guarded the tower and opened the door. "We were told that too, so we thought we'd take matters into our own magical hands." He led them inside, grabbing an oblong canvas bag on the way up to the second level of the ground level apartment.

Harry stepped into the dressing room and started to gauge ceiling heights and floor space, taking into consideration the antique furniture that had been moved there the night previous. He turned to Hermione, who had stopped at the room entry with her parents and pointed towards one corner of the room.

"Should fit over there, don't you think?"

Hermione nodded and, ignoring her parents questioning looks, helped Harry empty out the canvas bag's contents. It only took a couple of minutes to pitch the tent that they'd removed from the Potter family vault.

Roger's comment upon entering the magical tent's living room was amazingly similar to what Harry had said back at the Quidditch World Cup.

"I love magic."

Hermione used freshening charms to take care of the mustiness as Harry led her parents from room to room. It was larger than the Love Shack, with two bedrooms and a full kitchen. The tent was also built with family more in mind than naughty fun. The furnishings were comfortable, (as much as nineteenth-century style furniture could be comfortable). More importantly, the bathroom was only thirty years out of date, with a bathtub, separate shower, and controls that (thankfully) didn't require use of a wand.

Hermione cut into her parent's sense of awe with a reminder that they had a lunch date with Sir Evan. When Emily asked if Harry or Hermione wanted to use the shower first they were forced to admit that they had their own tent upstairs. With promises to give that tour sometime later, Harry and Hermione left her parent's new tent for their own.

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Sir Evan was thrilled to have been invited to Windsor Castle for lunch; despite his knighthood it was the first time he'd ever been inside. His reaction, then, when Harry and Hermione asked if he wanted to live within the castle, was understandably favorable. There were two issues that needed resolution prior to his move, however: his hip, and the Death Eater prisoners that were still being held underneath Privet Drive's wards.

Sir Evan's envisioned mission as part of the newly reconstituted Order of Arthur was twofold. First, a centralized anchor point was needed for the Order; a safe meeting place within the Muggle world where all of the Order members could meet in an emergency. That anchor required someone to stay at the Castle at all times. Since Sir Evan was already serving as an anchor for Privet Drive, it would be a change in location more than a change in mission. But as the captured Death Eaters were now all under combined muggle/wizard guard on Privet Drive, Sir Evan was still needed there (in case other Order Members were needed there in a hurry). Harry stated his intention to resurrect the Round Tower's role as a jailhouse of sorts, but said that any decision to do so required active Castle wards and permission from both Queen and Prime Minister. Hermione was working on the former, while a meeting on 10 Downing had been arranged for the following week to discuss the latter.

The possibility of Round Tower as jail tied into Sir Evan's second role at Windsor Castle. If there were wizard prisoners to be kept within the tower, there would be need of an on-site jailor. A c-mug was also now needed to raise and lower the Round Tower's flagging whenever the Queen was in residence. Sir Evan could fill both roles, but only if he could get up and down the Tower's stone stairs. The broken hip and wheelchair use were therefore an issue. When this point was brought up over lunch Sir Evan gave a guilty smile, and confessed that over the past week he had been able to sweet talk two very nice young witches (Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet, specifically) into casting some low-powered healing charms on his leg. To prove the point, he rose from his wheel chair and performed a little jig.

Sir Evan had maintained the ruse in order to shield Katie and Alicia from any troubles about spell casting on a Muggle. Harry and Hermione were more amused than alarmed, however. Harry told Sir Evan that a spell cast within Privet Drive's wards couldn't be tracked, and Hermione told him that any residual magic within the restored hip bone would dissipate within a few weeks. With that information in hand, Sir Evan stood and asked to take a walk up the Round Tower's steps.

That Sir Evan had no problem walking up and down the stairs allowed Harry and Hermione to show him where they thought he might take up residence.

"Don't mind the bars, Sir Evan," Harry said as he led them into the jail's "King's Suite." "We've already asked for a replacement door."

The single room that covered this level of the tower was exactly the same as it was during the previous day's tour, with three exceptions: one tent, and two paintings. As the tent appeared on the outside to be perfectly normal, Sir Evan's attention was immediately drawn to the larger of the two paintings. Of course, the fact that there were nine beautiful women moving about within the frame might have had something to do with it as well.

"Sir Harry, how did you know my taste in art?" Sir Evan asked with a roguish grin.

Roger Granger and Harry joined Sir Evan for a closer look at the Muses. "Hey Harry, was there more where this one came from?" he asked with a laugh.

Meanwhile, Hermione and her mom stood with arms crossed, sharing a look of bemusement.

"At least they have clothes on now, mum," Hermione said.

They watched with fascination as the nine figures took turns reaching through the edge of their painting and into the smaller work that hung right next to it. It was a still life of a bowl of fruit, and the Muses were grabbing apples and bunches of grapes. In between bites the figures flirted with the three men and spoke endearments in French.

"They look hungry," Emily said.

"You would be too, if you hadn't eaten in five hundred years," her daughter replied. Hermione then told her mum the fascinating story that the painting's figures had told in between their first bites of magical energy.

The nine women who had posed for the portrait weren't really muses, of course...the witches that had served as inspiration for ancient muggle mythology had lived some two thousand years prior to the painting's execution. A sixteenth-century French wizard artist had created the painting, and the figures were echoes of young French witches that had lived at that time. They had told Hermione that the rich mistress of a French king had commissioned the painting. The King, who had been imprisoned within the Round Tower, had written to this mistress of his loneliness, and she had conspired with the French king's wizard to give him some company.

There was a reason behind the painting's topic. Wanting to give his king something more than just eye candy, the French wizard had scoured the French wizarding world for not just beautiful witches, but smart and artistic ones as well. One was versed in poetry, another in the Classics, a third had a voice of gold, and so on. By choosing to paint them as Muses, the wizard artist was able to give them the instruments and texts that the echoes needed to entertain the French king in private. Apparently, the English king and castellan that held the French king were ignorant of the

wizarding world, and thought nothing of allowing the painting to be hung in the jailed king's cell (his confinement having certain advantages due to his rank). The jailors were similarly ignorant of the reason why several paintings of food accompanied the larger work.

Emily asked why, if the figures were now clothed, they had been found bathing nude, and why they hadn't eaten for five hundred years. Hermione explained the mechanics of magical paintings, stating that the figures eventually ran out of painted food, and had been unable to scavenge for more. The story for their state of dress was a bit darker. After the French king died in captivity his jailor discovered the magic behind the paintings and decided to satiate his more prurient interests. He removed the magical food paintings from the castle, and forced the echoes to shed their clothing and perform for him in exchange for a few pieces of magical food, brought back to the castle one grape at a time.

"So this castellan forced them to become sex slaves of a sort?" Emily asked.

"I'm afraid so," Hermione replied. "They had no rights, of course...magical world has problems granting equal status to sentient magical beings, much less paintings...really horrible, when you think of it..."

"Well at least they're in a better place and better situation now," Emily replied.

Hermione nodded. "They're still a little too flirty for me, but at least it's in French...Harry's not exactly a master of languages."

That earned a laugh from Emily. "Well unfortunately for me, our family vacations across the Channel have given your father more than enough understanding. Speaking of which..." She called out to her husband, "Think we have some duties at the control room, Roger."

"Yes dear," her husband replied with feigned grumpiness.

As the Granger's headed off to their MI-5 ¾ responsibilities, Harry and Hermione showed Sir Evan his future magical home. With need to stay for that night's meeting, Sir Evan suggested that he could use a kip inside the tent before teatime. Looking at their day schedule, Harry and Hermione realized that they themselves had ninety minutes of free time before they were to meet with Ron back at the Burrow. Rationalizing that their day had started early, and promised to end late, Harry and Hermione left Sir Evan for the friendly confines of their own magical tent and an afternoon nap of their own.

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Bliss lost out to worry as Harry rose from the failed kip. Untangling his limbs, he sighed as Hermione reached out in her sleep for the warmth he'd stolen from her, then turned and headed down to their common room.

Harry walked up to the borrowed white board, grabbed a dry erase marker, and checked off the last four names on their list. There'd been little doubt that they'd accept the offer to join the Order of Arthur. Fred and George, who had seen the badges in action, said yes even before Harry could completely verbalize the invitation. Tonks and Remus had been almost as quick; their brief discussion at The Leaky Cauldron involved far more explanation of purpose than arm-twisting.

It was the rest of the list that had caused Harry's stomach to flip in fear - Wally, Steve, and Hermione's parents. The guilt felt over Brian's condition had initially blinded Harry to the notion that the new Order members had to all be witches or wizards, and capable of bouncing back from injury as easily as Fred had. With second thoughts, however, he decided that his responsibility to the Queen could require quick access. Sir Evan, of course, could anchor her location when she was at Windsor, but Ascot Week was an aberration; weekend visits were more often the norm, and even with her advanced age she got around the country quite a bit. With input from Wally and Steve they'd decided that the best approach to this problem would be for Steve to be reassigned to the Queen's personal guard. In that way, all of the Order of Arthur members could rally to his position should the Queen ever again come under attack.

This idea of rally points had also been used to flesh out the roles of Tonks and Lupin. Tonks and all of the other Aurors that had been guarding the grounds of Hogwarts had been recalled to the home office after the attack, so she would be well placed to allow immediate access to the Ministry of Magic. Lupin, on the other hand, had no official ties to the Ministry, making him an ideal candidate for anchoring Hogwarts. Of course the Headmistress would have as well, but after some thought (and a bit of guilt) they'd decided that Remus would be more nimble on a broom and in battle.

Which left five badges, and the realization that the wizard-muggle teams that had been used on Privet Drive had worked for a reason. Wally was a natural selection, but they'd agonized over whether or not to include Mr. and Mrs. Granger. On the one hand it seemed like a selfish move; with the badges her parents would be able to escape any dangerous situation better than any other muggle could. But on the other hand the badges would put them at greater danger than any other muggles, because of the responsibility that came with it. Roger and Emily had proven their mettle at Privet Drive, and were constantly surprising them with new skills and capabilities. They also were c-mugs with motivation to fight and the knowledge to support that fight, but still...they were her parents. In the end, they had decided to lay out their concerns to her parents and ask their opinion. Roger and Emily had said that the choice was Harry's, but they'd be honored to serve if asked. Harry, very reluctantly, gave them that honor.

Harry had plenty of ideas to explore with the assembled Order. He also, however, had plenty of self-doubt. Was he really a leader? It had been one thing to head up the DA, but as Harry looked once more at the list of names he came to the startling realization that he was the youngest person on the list!

And if that wasn't enough to worry about there were all of his other responsibilities. Harry started to draw, following some of the diagram and flow charting tricks Hermione had taught him. A big box labeled "Clan Potter" was drawn on the board's edge, with an arrow connecting it to his name on the Order list. A second box, marked "Fawkes Foundation" was similarly tied to his name. And then the dam burst, and all kinds of worries were linked to his name (e.g. Hogwarts, his finances, MI-5 ¾, member of the Queen's staff). By the time he'd finished the white board resembled a giant web, with Harry the spider in the middle of it all.

He stepped back, then made the startling realization that he'd forgotten something. He reached out and wrote "VOLDEMORT/YOU-KNOW-WHAT

HUNT" within a box that he linked to his name. THINKING that the omission perfectly symbolized his current state, he hurled the dry erase marker towards the white board. It bounced off the surface without satisfaction.

A call on his badge brought him out of his funk.

"Wally, what's up?"

"Nothing bad, Sir Harry...just wanted to let you know that there are some boxes waiting for you down at the loading docks."

Harry assumed that the goblins had made their delivery from his vault and told Wally that he was on his way. He then walked down the stairs and out of the tower. The loading docks were located within the Lower Ward, away from the State Apartments. As Harry's path took him past a perpetual queue of tourists, he steeled himself for some public recognition.

The possibility that he might become just as famous within the muggle world was a frightening prospect. Being "The-Boy-Who-Lived" had forced him to accept the stares, smiles and waves from strangers for years, so he'd reasoned that he'd be able to adjust. He tried to limit his movement around the Castle to times outside of public hours, but there were times (such as this one) where he knew he just had to grin and bear it.

A teenage girl recognized him as he walked down the path and yelped out an autograph request. It'd happened twice the day previous, and he obligingly walked over. This time, however, there was more than a Castle Tour ticket stub to sign; the preteen handed Harry the latest issue of a muggle magazine called *TRW* (short for "*Teen Royal Watch*"). The cover startled him; it was a picture of him in top hat and tails, taken at Ascot. The teaser headline read "***Wizar-Delicious! Palace Serves Up New Magical Hearthrob.***"

As he finished writing the magazine cover, things began to spiral out of control. Another magazine was thrust in front of him, and then another, as the queue developed a bulbous growth of star-struck girls on its side. Hands not holding pens aimed camera phones, and picture flashes began to flare as the autograph requests became much more direct and provocative; one twenty-something blonde asked if he'd sign her knickers (while they were still worn, mind you).

A hand grasped his shoulder and pulled Harry back as the mob tried to crush its way into singularity. "Right then, that's enough, ladies and gents. Please return to your queue, as the Queen's Wizard has some meetings to attend to...back in queue, please...."

Harry turned and gave Roger Granger a slightly embarrassed look as Emily placed herself between Harry and the tourist pack desperate for some body contact. Once Harry cleared the crowd by a few meters those still in pursuit realized its futility, and quickly turned to secure their places in line.

"Thanks for the help," Harry told the Grangers, as they walked away from the crowd. "Almost apparated out that situation."

"Tsk, tsk, Harry," Roger said with a smile. "You'll be needing to be more mindful of visitor's hours, now that Fleet Street's proclaiming you 'Queen's Hottie.'"

"Arrggh," Harry replied, "That's exactly what I didn't want happening...hope you two didn't think I was courting any of that."

"No worries, Harry," Emily replied. "We had video on you from the start...came when we realized you'd be needing some help."

The Grangers walked Harry down to the dock, where two burly Castle staff members were already loading large boxes onto two utility carts. He signed some papers, then took an offered seat next to one of the men as they drove out onto the path back towards the tower. He yelled out more thanks to the Grangers as he passed them on their walk back to their post, then turned and waved again to the crowd as they caught sight of him.

"Become a Castle attraction yourself, Guv," the driver dryly said.

"Yeah, I guess it comes with the job," Harry said with resignation.

When they arrived at the tower Harry got out to open the door, then walked back to help the two men unload. One of the men practically slapped his hand away. "What do you think you're doing, there, guv'nor?"

"Just lending a hand...it's my things, after all."

The man shook his head. "See that the kitchen staff were right about you...Sir Harry, is it? Yes, well, Sir Harry, have you ever heard the ditty about Sir Reggie?"

Harry shook his head.

"Ah, well it goes something like this..."

*Sir Reggie went to change a light,
Fell off the ladder, serves him right!
He should have stayed where he did best,
And paid those skilled to do the rest.*

Harry took a few seconds to work out the poem's purpose. When he failed to wipe the daft look off his face the man continued. "You and I, we both work for the Queen, right? To do what...I'm a mover, and you're a magician. If you spend time doing what I can do to serve the Crown, then who is going to do the wizarding? Not me."

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry, I just didn't want you to think that I think I'm better than..."

Look Sir Harry," the man said, "It touches my heart to see your feet on the ground, and lacking airs...but you need not prove that every day by washing dishes and mowing the lawn. By letting those around you do what they do best...that's what allows you to do your magic...to do what you do best."

Harry broke into a smile, and reached out his hand. "Thank you for the advice...I can't tell you how much your wisdom is going to help me."

The mover shook Harry's hand, and then raised his fingers up in a military salute. "Happy to help, Guv."

Harry asked the two men to wait just a few seconds before bringing the boxes upstairs, which gave him time to shrink down and pocket the white board. He then left instructions to leave the boxes within the common room while he went upstairs to "work on his magic." Once in the dressing room he resized the white board and used a sticking charm to place it on a wall. With the mover's sage advice still ringing in his ears, Harry started to quickly sketch out a revised organizational chart.

Thirty minutes later Hermione found Harry sitting cross-legged on the floor looking up at his work. She smiled as she sat down behind him and scooted up with her legs outside his. With two arms wrapped around his chest she pulled Harry back until his head rested on her shoulder. After a little ear nibbling she asked, "Couldn't sleep?"

Harry smiled as he closed his eyes and shook his head. "Things on my mind."

"So it seems," Hermione replied. "Looks like you've taken my flow charting lessons to heart."

Harry nodded. "Along with the rest of you...and sorry, no give backs."

Hermione responded with a squeeze. "Guess I'll muddle through somehow." She released a hand to wave towards the board. "So what brought this on?"

"I was worrying about things getting lost in all of the shuffle...decided I needed to clarify and quantify my life." He turned his head towards hers. "So what do you think?"

Hermione let out a "Well..." that for all the world sounded like purring.

"I think it's brilliant, and smart, and bound to be wildly effective."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Hermione."

"I certainly hope so, Harry."

"It's only a rough draft, though," he replied. "Any changes before I spring this on Wally and Ron and your parents?"

Hermione stood, grabbed a marker, and began chewing on its end as she examined the board. In the center, Harry had written his name next to Hermione's with Ron's right below to form a triangle. All three names were within a box labeled "Treasure Hunt," representing, (Hermione guessed), the Trio's horcrux search. Outside this box, Harry had drawn more boxes, each representing a group or organization that he was linked to. Within each box was a membership roster of sorts, with the top name in all-caps and underlined. Hermione noted that Harry had, on paper at least, accepted the need to delegate power and authority. The box labeled "Fawkes Foundation" had her mum's name on top, her dad's name was linked to Harry's finances, and her name...well, her name was in quite a few boxes, but it was given top-billing within Clan Potter.

"Harry," she asked, "Don't you think that the Clan Chief should be head of Clan Potter?"

"Only when I have to," Harry replied with a smile, "Thought I'd ask the powers behind the throne to run things otherwise."

Hermione silently nodded, noting that Ron's name was also prominent within the Clan box, as Champion and head of something labeled "CAF."

"Stands for 'Clan Air Force'," Harry replied sheepishly when she asked about it. "Wanted to make sure that Dean, Neville and the rest know how important they are in all this."

"Because you ran out of Order of Arthur badges?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Hermione nodded and moved on to the other side of the board. The names of the twelve Order of Arthur members were boxed, with Harry's name underlined (but not all-capped). MI-5 ¾ had a box with Wally's name on top (and Harry and Hermione's absent). Windsor Castle had a box as well, as did Hogwarts, the muggle government and a small box with the word "Peanut Butter Brigade." When asked, Harry said that it was a place-holder of sorts, representing his relationship to those within the magical world that supported him (with "Peanut Butter" standing for "Pure-Blood")

Hermione took two steps back from the board. "I think that *Harry Potter, Inc.* has become a multi-national corporation," she said.

"Well, not quite," Harry replied. He looked up at the board and realized that something was missing. Standing, he took the pen from Hermione and drew a box around their names, then drew a line connecting the two names. Above the box he wrote "*House of Lord Gryffindor.*" He then walked back behind

Hermione and wrapped his arms around her in embrace.

"Erm...Harry?"

"Yes, Hermione."

"I assume you added the Lord to distinguish that box from the Gryffindor House at Hogwarts?"

"That's right."

"So shouldn't Lord Gryffindor's name be underlined as the head of that little group?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Oh...so Harry?"

"Yes, Hermione."

"We're the only two people in that box?"

"For now, yes."

Hermione turned with a look of scrutiny on her face. "Planning on a harem?"

"No," Harry said with a smile. "Planning on in-laws."

Hermione went wide-eyed. "You know, Harry, that's the second time I've heard you talk about in-laws this week...just how definite are those plans of yours?"

Harry's face dropped into a serious expression. "You're right, Hermione, I shouldn't be joking about something that's so important."

"Erm Harry...that's nice, but it didn't really answer the question?"

"Guess you're right...it's just that...well, I can't imagine living without you in my life. That's nothing new...I would have said the same thing two months ago...but now it's, erm, so much better."

"How?"

"Well...the snogging, of course, is brilliant, and you wield a mean scrub brush, and...and I used to be afraid that if we became more than friends that we'd lose that friendship."

"Imagine your Aunt and Uncle weren't the best role models there."

"For certain," Harry replied. "But it has worked, hasn't it? We've gone beyond just spending all of our waking hours together to adding in the sleep time as well...and we're not at each others throats, or arguing, or thinking less of each other..."

"Oh sure, say that now...but what happens the first time you hear me pass gas?"

"Who says I haven't already?"

"Harry James Potter!"

"Ah, come on, Hermione, with all of the time we've been together...I mean Ron's blasts are legendary, but you can't blame it on him all the time, can you?"

"That's what a polite boyfriend would do."

"Well...I guess I could blame him, even though I'd know better..."

"And how is that?"

"Erm...you have to admit, Hermione, while Ron's display an amazing two octave range, the associated smell is far more consistent. Well, consistent enough to notice a difference...."

Hermione sighed. "Merlin, it's like having Ron around...one minute we're talking about marriage plans and the next thing you know we're comparing farts." She laughed nervously. "I can't believe I just said that."

Harry laughed with her. "You can say anything around me Hermione, and I'm not going to think less of you...you know that."

Hermione's eyes were getting moist as she nodded in agreement. "I know...I've known that for a long time. Brings us back to that backwards approach we're taking to our relationship."

"You mean determine over a number of years that we're compatible and then go out on a second date?"

"Exactly." She placed a tender kiss on his lips then took a step back.

"You know, Harry, if you'd have been sorted Slytherin I might have thought your comments about in-laws were a sneaky way of testing the waters before risking a plunge."

"Really?" Harry smirked. "You do know the Sorting Hat wanted to put me there."

She gave him another kiss. "Yes, I do."

"Sure, you say that now, but will you say 'Yes' or 'I do' when it really matters?"

Hermione smiled, "Guess you'll have to risk jumping off into the deep end to find out."

"You know I'm not a very good swimmer."

Hermione kissed his nose in benediction.

"So bring some gillyweed."

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Friday, June 22, 3:15pm
Ottery St. Catchpole

Harry and Hermione had to take an indirect route from Windsor Castle to Luna Lovegood's house, as Hermione had never been there before. They apparated/ badge-traveled to just outside The Burrow's wards, where Ron was waiting for them in his car. From there it only took a few minutes to drive into town.

The Queen's Wizard had floo-called Luna's father from the Leaky Cauldron earlier that morning with a request to meet with him at his home that afternoon. While Harry didn't want to explain the meeting purpose, it was easy enough for the *Quibbler's* editor to assume that next issue's cover story on the secret influence of vampires ("*Vlad and Rufus: Separated at Birth?*") might be bumped.

Luna had already promised Harry and Hermione to keep Ginny at her house until dinner, allowing plans for Harry to meet with Ginny there as well, effectively killing two birds with one stone. The-Boy-Who-Lived hoped that was all the killing that would occur during those meetings.

They spied Luna and Ginny reading on the front porch steps of the Lovegood residence; Luna was deep into the Sixth-year Ancient Runes text she'd borrowed from Hermione, while Ginny was hunched over the latest "*Teen Witch Weekly*."

The skies were overcast, but not yet wet, so the car's roof was down. This allowed Ginny to practically fall into Harry's lap after she ran to the stopped car in a blur of red hair and wrapped her arms around Harry's neck. She pulled his head towards her in a tight embrace, oblivious to Hermione's scowling in the rear seat and Harry's deft avoidance of her lips.

"Harry," she exclaimed, "it's so wonderful to see you...it seems like ages."

"Nice to see you too, Ginny," Harry replied with a bit of stiffness. With gentle insistence he snaked his upper torso out from her embrace. "Erm. Ginny, we should talk later, but right now we've got to meet with Mr. Lovegood inside."

"Okay, sweetheart," Ginny replied with saccharin-levels of breathiness. Hermione, who was half-way out of the car, turned and stared, but said nothing; it was enough for her to see Harry scoot over the stick shift so that he could exit the car from the side opposite of Ginny.

"I'll be waiting right here," Ginny called out. She didn't see Harry roll his eyes as he strode up the steps with a small stack of portfolios under his arm.

"Father is in his study," Luna said, as she opened the front door for Harry and Hermione. "First door on the right."

"Thanks, Luna," Harry replied, as he grabbed Hermione's hand and led her inside. Ron, now in Clan Champion mode, drew his wand out and turned his back to the front door, on guard against the advances of Death Eaters and ex-girlfriends. Harry heard him say, "No, Ginny, you'll just have to wait," before the door closed behind them.

Harry spared a second to take in his surroundings. It wasn't a fancy house, but it was comfortable and inviting. The furnishings weren't that much different than the Burrow's; a bit less worn, without seven children in the house, but also less tidy (he thought that perhaps Luna's breezy nonchalance ran in the family). Double stacked bookshelves, piles of yellowing newspapers and the bric-a-brac of world travelers also distinguished the decor.

His observations were interrupted by Lawrence Lovegood's hearty greeting.

"Mr. Harry Potter, and Ms. Hermione Granger, it is rather thrilling to finally be able to meet you in the flesh."

Harry turned and gave Luna's father a firm handshake. "Pleased to meet you as well, Mr. Lovegood. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us at your house and on such short notice."

Lovegood nodded as he closed the door behind the two teens and cast a series of silencing and privacy wards about the room.

"Thank you for the privacy," Hermione said. "That was quite an impressive array."

Mr. Lovegood shrugged his shoulders. "I'm the one that should be conveying thanks...I've wanted to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Potter for

some time.”

“Oh, that’s alright,” Harry replied, “We both benefited from those *Quibbler* stories.”

Mr. Lovegood looked at him strangely. “Stories? You misunderstand me, young man. It is my gratitude as a father that I wish to convey. It is as if I could characterize Luna’s happiness and general outlook on life in terms of ‘*Before She Met Harry at the start of Fourth Year*,’ and ‘*After She Met Harry*.’”

The teen-aged wizard’s ears turned a bit red. “Thank you, sir,” he replied, “but I don’t think anything I did could have made that much of a change. If anything, I would say that Ron Weasley would have the lion’s share of any credit to be given.”

Lawrence Lovegood looked at Harry for a moment, then nodded as if he’d reached some internal conclusion. “Well perhaps we can discuss that another day. I imagine that you have other things...?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied. “I imagine that you’ve been following the reporting on my exploits over the past week in *The Daily Prophet*?”

Luna’s father nodded. “Always make it a point to scout out the competition, even when its accuracy and objectivity is worth little more than a slightly used chamber pot...so are you here to discuss opportunities to tell your side of the story?”

“Not right now,” Harry replied. “I mean, it did work rather brilliantly last time we did that, but Hermione and I think that we need a more...well, Slytherin...response to the way the *Prophet* is slandering us, and working as the Ministry’s mouthpiece.”

Hermione said, “Here’s the problem ...the *Daily Prophet* has worked with the Ministry to lay out just enough facts to make it difficult to rebut. I mean, we could...but any accurate description of what’s happened this past week would put certain...intelligence assets...at risk.”

“It also might bring certain events to light that we’d rather stay out of the papers right now,” added Harry.

“I see,” Mr. Lovegood replied. “So you’re thinking of another approach?”

Harry nodded. “I’ve recently gained full control of the Potter Clan’s financial interests, as well as some additional monies from the Black estate. We want to use part of those resources to help you, and *The Quibbler*, get the truth out about the battle against Voldemort.”

Luna’s father looked at the two teens a bit cautiously. “Are you asking to buy the *Quibbler*?”

“Oh, no, sir, not at all,” Harry quickly said in reassurance. “If we were to buy any paper outright it’d be the *Prophet* itself...I apparently already own about 5% of its stock.”

“The problem is that Harry doesn’t want to give even the appearance of using his money to buy power and influence,” said Hermione. “If he did buy that rag, the Ministry would probably just start up its own newspaper, claiming that the wizarding world couldn’t trust what the *Prophet* would print with Harry as publisher.”

“Like it has a reason now,” Harry muttered.

Lovegood nodded, rubbing his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “So a more indirect approach that wouldn’t allow the Ministry to argue that Harry’s controlling either the *Prophet* or the *Quibbler*?”

“Exactly,” Hermione replied with a smile. She then reached into her rucksack and retrieved a portfolio of parchment papers. With Lovegood’s encouragement, she started down her list.

“First, we’ve been asked by an independent foundation to make arrangements with the *Quibbler* to start some new subscriptions.”

“Really?” asked Lovegood, wondering how this piece of information fit in. “How many new subscribers are we talking about?”

“We don’t have the full count right now, but at least six hundred to start.”

Lovegood took a step back in shock.

Harry explained, “The Foundation is looking for a way to get accurate and timely information about the wizarding world into the hands of every single muggle-born Hogwarts student and their families. Giving them a copy of the each issue of the *Quibbler* seemed a logical approach.”

Hermione had to bite her tongue just a bit when Harry said “accuracy” and “*Quibbler*” in the same sentence, but nevertheless continued. “The Foundation also expressed interest in getting this news spread more than once a week...might be a stretch to immediately jump to a daily paper, but maybe three times a week would be possible?”

“Three times a week?” asked Lovegood. “That’s a lot of copy to produce...I’m afraid that our staff would not be up to the task, and I’m very sure our old presses wouldn’t be able to take that kind of production rate for very long.”

Harry smiled. “We brought those potential issues to the Foundation’s attention. Their Board of Directors have authorized me to offer an immediate no-interest loan for you to purchase new printing equipment and hire new staff. They also thought you might want to consider moving to a newer, more secure location.” Harry smiled when he added, “Of course, the Board expects that the per issue purchase price will have to be raised a bit to cover these costs, and is prepared to pre-pay its subscriptions at twice the current rate.”

“Don’t forget the advertising,” Hermione said. “That might take up some space in the new editions as well.”

“Oh yes, thank you, Hermione,” said Harry, as she passed a piece of parchment over to Mr. Lovegood. “It turns out that over the years most of the Potter finances have been invested in wizarding businesses, rather sitting in piles of galleons at Gringott’s. That list you have are the businesses and enterprises that I presently either own outright or own majority interest in. I think that you’ll recognize at least a few of them as *Quibbler* advertisers.

“And a few more that advertise only in the *Prophet*,” Lawrence added as he quickly scanned the list.

“Up until now,” replied Harry with a grin. “I’m afraid that the *Prophet* is about to experience a rather shocking drop in advertising revenue.”

Hermione added her smile and comment. “Much better to be in the *Quibbler*’s position...why with its sudden jump in circulation, I’m sure, Mr. Lovegood, that you’ll be able to increase your advertisement rates quite nicely.”

“And I’m sure that the companies on that list will be willing to pay those new charges,” Harry said with a twinkle in his eye.

Lovegood stood gobsmacked in front of the two teens, then turned to levitate a pile of books off of his desk chair so that he could take a seat.

“This is all so overwhelming,” he finally said. “And what do you, or this foundation expect in return?”

“Nothing,” Harry said in reassurance. “Nothing more than what you are already doing.”

“Well...” said Hermione with a small smile, “It might be nice to know that at least some of those new reporters you hire focus on the Ministry and current events, and that Scrimgeour’s hijinks share the lead with Snorkack sightings now and again.”

Lovegood chuckled at that response. “Fair enough.”

“I couldn’t say for sure,” Harry said with a smile, “but you might find that in the future there will be a few more Ministry insiders willing to speak to *Quibbler* reporters off the record.”

“As well as the occasional anonymous tip from those most definitely outside of the Ministry, Harry?” the editor asked with an upraised eyebrow.

They all laughed at that observation. Hermione then provided Lovegood with some papers to sign from both the Fawkes Foundation and Gringott’s. The *Quibbler*’s editor didn’t fail to notice the unmarked envelope that was also within this pile of parchment. Harry and Hermione were forced to decline Lovegood’s invitation to stay for dinner with assurances to meet again in the near future, Luna’s father then led Harry and Hermione back out to the front steps of his house.

Upon his return to his office Lovegood opened the unmarked envelope. A few pieces of parchment and two wizarding photographs spilled out. Quickly scanning the first document, he found a list naming all of the Death Eater insiders that had tried to take control of Ministry that past week, sorted by department. “Little wonder they didn’t name names and departments in the *Prophet*,” he mused, as he realized just how many spies were within the Minister’s office itself.

He then laid the two photographs side-by-side on his desk. The first photograph was a headshot of Rita Skeeter, winking at the camera while her Quick Quotes Quill scribbled furiously over her shoulder. The second image was a close-up shot of a black beetle that appeared to be trapped in a glass jar. A comparison of these two pictures revealed markings on the beetle that looked amazingly similar to the gaudy glasses that Rita was wearing. Apparently, Lovegood’s anonymous source was thinking along those same lines, for attached to the second photograph was a Ministry list of all registered animagi (Skeeter’s name was absent), a copy of the law requiring animagi to register, and contact information for the Ministry personnel responsible for enforcing that law.

Lovegood shook his head and laughed, thinking, “A most Slytherin response, indeed.”

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When Harry and Hermione returned to the front steps of the house they found Ginny anxiously waiting for them. Bowing to the inevitable, Harry asked Ginny to take a walk with him. The red-haired witch squealed in delight as she grabbed his arm and they began a slow walk around the streets of Ottery St. Catchpole.

“Harry,” said Ginny, once she thought they were out of earshot of the others, “it’s been so awful reading those lies about you in the *Daily Prophet*.”

“Yeah, well what do you expect?”

“I mean, the idea that you’d even think about working for a Muggle instead of for the Ministry. Even if she is some kind of Queen...”

Well, actually,” Harry said somewhat bemusedly, “they got that part right.”

Ginny stopped in her tracks and asked, “What?”

The Queen’s Wizard snorted, then looked around for someplace to sit. He led Ginny to a bench placed within a small municipal park and took a seat, making sure that Hermione, Ron and Luna (who had been trailing the two at a discreet distance) were still within eyesight.

“The part about me working for the Muggle Queen of Great Britain is what the *Prophet* got right.”

“But why?” asked Ginny, shock etched on her face, “What business does this Muggle queen have meddling with the wizarding world?”

Harry looked at the teen-aged witch rather crossly, then said, "Ginny, it's the business of the muggle Queen and the Muggle Ministry to protect its citizens. When our Ministry and the Aurors can't keep Dark Lords and Dementors from killing innocent Muggles, then they do have the right to get involved."

"But wouldn't you be more effective working for the Ministry rather than this queen?"

Harry shook his head and sighed. "Ginny, you read the *Prophet* ...the part about the Minister of Magic believing that I'm a serious threat is for the most part true as well."

"You, Harry...a threat?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "Not to the wizarding world, mind you, but a threat to them...Scrimgeour, Umbridge...even your brother Percy. And the feeling is mutual, frankly."

"How so, Harry?"

Harry snorted. "Hermione and I had to fend off an attack by *Umbitch* and her lackey aurors the first night I was back at my Aunt and Uncle's."

"Oh," said Ginny. She ignored the idea that the Ministry had it in for Harry and then asked what she thought was a much more pertinent question.

"So why was Hermione at your Aunt and Uncle's house?"

Harry looked at Ginny with disbelief. He counted to five, then calmly replied, "Because I needed her there."

"What? You needed Hermione's help?"

Harry sighed. "Yes, Ginny, as much as it pains me to have her in harm's way, I don't think I could live without Hermione by my side."

Ginny's face started to turn beet red. "So you distance yourself from me, saying that I can't be put in harm's way, but it's okay for Hermione to be with you night and day?"

"No, Ginny," Harry replied. "it's not like that...I also told Hermione that I didn't want her near me the same day I told you."

"So what made you change your mind...what did she do to make you change your mind?" Ginny huffed. "Why her and not me?"

Harry took a moment, then replied softly. "Because Hermione refused to allow me to push her away, Ginny...and you didn't."

"Oh," the red-haired replied, looking as if Harry had just punched her in the gut. After a few quiet moments spent staring at the ground she looked at him with steely resolve and said, "Well now I'm refusing too."

Harry shook his head. "That can't happen, Ginny."

"And why not?"

Harry ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Well, for a number of reasons. First, because you're underage."

"But so are you, Harry."

"Yeah, well as Queen's Wizard that underage restriction doesn't apply to me anymore...that was one of the reasons why I agreed to the job."

"Oh, well...when have we worried about those restrictions, Harry?" Ginny asked. "Never been a problem at the Burrow, right?"

"Exactly my point," Harry replied. "Students that grow up in wizarding homes don't have to worry about getting caught doing underage magic when they're home on break, because the Ministry simply assumes the magic is being done by the parents."

"Really? I thought that they had some sort of tracking spell on our wands."

Harry shook his head. "The Ministry has sensors that detect when and where magic is used...they can't tell who is actually doing the spell. That's why they need to do *Priori Incantato* to detect the use of Dark spells using a particular wand. That's the reason why I got in trouble back in Second Year when Dobby did magic at my Aunt and Uncle's house...the Ministry assumed that if magic was done in that Muggle household that I must have been the one to do it."

"Huh...I didn't know that."

Harry nodded. "That was the same excuse Umbitch used to attack us three weeks ago when Hermione cast a cleaning spell on some bed clothes."

Ginny paused, then brightened her expression when an idea came to mind. "Then you can simply move to The Burrow...Ron's back now, after all."

Harry shook his head. "Ginny, being Queen's Wizard makes me responsible for certain things...I need to stay within the Muggle world this summer. Just like you and all of the other pureblood students will be forced to stay in the wizarding world."

"What do you mean?"

Harry looked at her and decided that Ginny really didn't know about the draft. "Talk to your dad, Ginny...the Ministry is going to force all of the Sixth and Seventh Year pureblood students to work at the Ministry as interns."

"Oh," Ginny replied. "So that's the reason for Hermione being with you...because she's muggleborn?"

Harry nodded. "That's just one of the reasons."

Ginny sighed, then tried to pull Harry into an embrace. "Oh, Harry," she said, "I just can't wait until you kill Voldemort so that all of this will be behind us and you can move back to the wizarding world and we can go back to the way things were..."

The-Boy-Who-Lived carefully pulled Ginny's arms away from his neck and shook his head as he held her hands. "That's not going to happen, Ginny."

"Oh, don't say that...of course you're going to defeat Voldemort."

"Well, that part, okay," Harry said with a slight grin. "But if and when that happens, things will never be the same."

"What do you mean? You've still got Seventh Year, and N.E.W.T.'s, and a Quidditch team to captain, and a girlfriend to snuggle up with in front of the Common Room fireplace..."

"No Ginny," Harry said firmly. "We can't go back. I don't think I'm even going back to Hogwarts as a student, and I have more important things than Quidditch to worry about, and...well, there's one more very important reason why things can't go back to the way that they were."

"Why is that?"

Harry let Ginny's hands go, pushed his own into his pockets, and summoned the courage to reply while looking at her eyes.

"Because Hermione and I have fallen in love with each other."

Ginny's eyes went wide, then she began shaking her head almost violently.

"No!"

Harry looked back across the street and saw that Ginny's response had drawn the interest of Hermione and Ron (both had wands drawn discretely to their sides).

"I'm sorry, Ginny, but it's true."

"No, no, no,...that's not possible, Harry, no, it simply can't be."

"Ginny..."

Ginny stood up and started to walk back and forth in front of the bench, with her head down and arms wrapped around herself.

"No...no...no...not possible...not the way it's supposed to be...not the way it's meant to be..."

"Ginny, stop, please, and listen to me."

The despondent witch shook her head and muttered. "Nope, can't listen to what can't be happening...no...Mrs. Ginny Potter...it's the way it's supposed to be..."

Harry stood and grabbed the girl's arms, forcing her to stand still. "Ginny, are you going to stop and listen to me, or am I going to have to petrify you?"

"No, Harry," Ginny replied, "you wouldn't do that to me...we were meant to be together..."

"Oy! Ginny!" Ron shouted from across the way. "If Harry doesn't, then I will."

Ginny turned her head to look at her brother, then shook her head once more. "Nope, can't be happening...must be a dream, or some delusion, or else Ron would be hexing Harry right now...can't be real...Mrs. Potter...meant to be..."

Hermione decided that enough was enough and crossed the street. Ron and Luna were close behind, each worried that hexes would be flying in the very near future.

The bushy-haired witch went to Harry's side, and grabbed hold of his hand in support. She turned to Ron and nodded, in a silent request for help.

"Ginny, this is not a dream," Ron said, as he walked up to his sister. "Harry and Hermione are together, I'm okay with it, and that's as it should be."

Ron's comment broke Ginny out of her quasi-catatonic state. She waved her arm towards Harry and Hermione and asked, "What? You're okay with this?"

Her brother reached out for Luna's hand, which she gave him with a smile. Ron then turned back to his sister and said, "Yes, Ginny...I'm more that okay with it."

Ginny looked at Ron and Luna holding hands and put a rational thought together. "So you..and Luna?" Ginny asked sarcastically. "Oh, now it makes so much sense....Harry and Hermione, Ron and Luna....well where in Merlin's name does that leave me.....with *Draco Malfoy*?"

Ron shuddered. "Don't need to go down that road, Ginny, do you?" he asked.

"We're sorry that your upset about this," Hermione said, "But it is what it is...it is what it has been for some time now. We just didn't realize it, and I think that you know that's the case."

Ginny turned towards Hermione and her eyes narrowed. "You!" she cried. "You knew I've fancied Harry for the longest time...you knew and you betrayed me!"

"No, Ginny," Harry said, his fingers now on his wand, "You didn't fancy me, you fancied The Boy-Who-Lived."

"What?" Ginny asked. "But you are the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Hermione made an attempt to reach out but Ginny turned her back. Harry motioned to the others to take a few steps back.

"Ginny, walk with me some more?" he asked.

The young witch didn't look up at Harry, but did nod her head slightly and reached out her left hand. Harry let out his deep breath, then looked over to Hermione. When she nodded her acceptance, Harry took Ginny's hand, and began to walk with her down a park path.

"You had a crush on me even before you met me, didn't you?" he asked.

Ginny quietly stole a glance at Harry, before softly replying, "Maybe."

"But you didn't know what I was like, really...all you knew of me was that I somehow saved the wizarding world, right?"

"But then I did meet you, Harry," Ginny said, "and I did get the chance to know the real you."

Harry nodded. "Yes, Ginny, you had the chance, but did you really take it?"

"Of course I did," Ginny replied a bit sharply. "Or did I miss something in between all of the snogging last month?"

"I think maybe you did," Harry replied sadly. "If you really did know me then you wouldn't have said what you did on the day of Dumbledore's funeral."

"What?" Ginny asked, in a tone that suggested she really didn't know. "What do you mean?"

Harry sighed. "You said that I wouldn't be happy unless I was fighting Voldemort."

"Um, yeah?" Ginny replied. "You'd rather somebody else was doing it? I mean, really...it's who you are."

Harry stopped and had to count to ten to stave off an outburst. "Ginny...you still don't get it, do you?" He sighed. "If somebody has to face Voldemort, I guess it has to be me if you take stock in the prophecy, but....fighting Dark Lords is not who I am....Your heroic Boy-Who-Lived might get off on being a superhero, but Harry Potter would wish nothing better than to have a quiet life with a wife, family, and bit of garden to tend to."

Ginny shook her head. "Oh, that's just the stress talking, Harry."

"No Ginny," Harry replied sharply. "It's always been that way...you know, Ron used to think the same way, and if he's gotten it through his thick skull then I would hope you could too. I'd trade all of the fame and all of my fortune for a simple life of anonymity."

Ginny shook her head. "No...even when you do kill Voldemort, you'll still want to be the good guy, the hero...it's the "people saving thing," like Hermione says."

Harry stopped and forced the youngest Weasley to look at him. "Yes, Hermione's said that...but she also knows just how reluctant I am when it comes to dealing with all of the publicity and fame and adoration."

Ginny tried to make a joke of that, saying, "Well you will really need to work on that then, because if you think you're popular in the wizarding world now, just wait until Voldemort's gone."

Harry shook his head. "I'm not going to change, Ginny, and I don't think I'll care a rat's arse what the wizarding world thinks of me, because I'm not sure I'm ever coming back."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked. "Of course you'll be part of the wizarding world, how could one of the most powerful wizards in the world not be?"

"You still don't get it, do you?" Harry asked quietly. "I don't want to be part of a wizarding world that doesn't care if a Dark Lord pops up every fifty years...I mean, look at this pure-blood nonsense that is still out and about."

"Well you certainly could change that as Minister of Magic," Ginny replied brightly.

"No, I don't think I could," Harry replied, "even if I were offered the job. Which I won't, because Queen's Wizard is not a job to walk away from....not a job I want to walk away from."

“What do you mean?”

“Ginny, by accepting the job as Queen’s Wizard I’ve given up any chance of working for the Ministry of Magic...at least in its current form. In a way I actually have added fuel to the fire of all of those pureblooded bigots who claim that muggle-borns can’t be trusted in the wizarding world.”

“But you’re not a muggle-born, Harry...your dad was pure-blooded.”

“I was muggle-raised, though....I don’t see the difference, and the bigots don’t either.”

“So that means...”

“So that means that I’ll never be able to live completely within the wizarding world, even if I wanted to.”

“But there’s no reason why I couldn’t chuck it all to be with you, right?”

“Ginny, let’s be honest,” Harry replied. “You’ve been raised in the wizarding world...been a part of it all your life. I can’t imagine you trying to live even partway in the muggle world.”

“But I could try.”

“Yes, Ginny, you could try....but you wouldn’t truly be happy in the muggle world.”

“So you and Hermione...it’s just because she’s muggle-born, then, eh?”

Harry shook his head. “Not at all, Ginny...unless being muggle-born is the only way someone couldn’t be so captivated by the Boy-Who-Lived image that she couldn’t see the real me...see me as I want to be seen.”

The walked silently for a few moments, giving Harry the chance to confirm that the other three were still a respectful pace behind.

“Listen, Ginny, I don’t know if what I’ve said makes any sense, but it is the way it is, and I need you to accept Hermione and me being together.”

Ginny snorted. “Why do you need my acceptance?”

“Because, Ginny, I don’t want to lose you as a friend...just like I didn’t want to lose Ron’s friendship.”

“You still want to be friends?”

Harry pulled Ginny into an awkward hug. “Of course I do.”

“So just friends, then?”

Harry looked at Ginny for a moment, then added, “Well, friends and comrade-in-arms too.”

Ginny looked at Harry quizzically. “But I thought you didn’t want me fighting by your side?”

Harry nodded. “That’s right, Ginny...but with the way things are I still need your help...maybe even in ways more important than being with me.”

“How’s that?”

Harry paused, then looked over his shoulder back at Ron, Luna and Hermione.

“Well, Ginny...I need to form another army, kind of like the DA.”

“Something like the DA but not the DA?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah...right now I’m calling it the Peanut Butter Brigade.”

Ginny looked at Harry strangely. “What’s peanut butter, and how would you use it to fight?”

Harry laughed, and motioned for the others to join in the scheming.

Chapter 17 - Down on the Farm

Friday, June 22, 6:00pm
Ottery St. Catchpole

Ginny Weasley considered it a ridiculously implausible situation.

Four weeks ago she was well on her way to showing Harry Potter the insides of every broom closet in Hogwarts. And today...today, Harry showed her the inside a muggle automobile. Which wouldn’t have been so bad, had it not been for the fact that she was in the front passenger seat next to her brother, while Harry was snuggling up against her former friend in the backseat.

The news that Ron not only could drive the car but owned it would have be shocking in its own right, had it not been revealed on the heels of Harry and Hermione’s little surprise. She snorted as Ron struggled to push pedals and move the metal stick in between them to keep the automobile

moving forward. It seemed that Harry had no trouble with Ron trying to learn to live as a muggle.

Go figure.

They were making the short trip from Luna's back to the Burrow, and the Golden Trio were kind enough to leave her alone with her thoughts. She found herself thinking not so much about what went wrong with her and Harry, as thinking about what went wrong when Harry broke the news.

You see, Ginny was rather disgusted with her own performance. She had a good idea what was going to happen...how could she not have, given the dragon-sized hints that Ron and Luna had been dropping the past week or two? And still, when Harry told her that he was with Hermione she hadn't been strong...she'd *gone mental*. Near-catatonic. In a daze. Mumbling incoherently. All in all far too much like how Michael Corner and Dean Thomas had acted when she had broken up with them. And if that wasn't bad enough, Harry had gone on to explain why he couldn't be with Ginny with arguments that *actually made sense*.

It was a very bitter potion to swallow.

At least she'd recovered some of her dignity in the aftermath. He still wanted to be friends, which meant that she might have the chance to learn about "the real Harry" that she apparently knew nothing about. And it was actually rather exciting to have had Harry ask her to do something that was not just important and potentially dangerous, but something that *Hermione couldn't do*.

A long-term approach to the problem was indicated....this could just be a little detour along their pre-ordained path. Harry would beat Voldemort... how could he not? The idea that he wouldn't be welcomed in the wizarding world after that was silly. And while Hermione certainly would have no problems living in the wizarding world with Harry, there were no guarantees that when that time came Hermione would be living, were there?

You didn't have to get an O on your divination O.W.L to see how the stars were lining up. They were fighting a war. People close to Harry were dying in that war, and the closer Harry got to killing Voldemort, *the closer those dying were to Harry*.

Two years ago it was Cedric Diggory, whom Harry had considered a friend. He'd been killed while Harry looked on helplessly in the Riddle graveyard. Last year it was Sirius Black, Harry's godfather, killed while Harry looked on helplessly at the Department of Mysteries. And last month it was Headmaster Dumbledore, Harry's mentor, who was killed as Harry looked on helplessly at the top of the Astronomy Tower.

Ginny looked over at her brother and worried. Because if the pattern held, the next person in Harry's life to die while he watched helplessly would be either Ron or Hermione. Maybe both.

Not that she'd wish too much harm on her head, but what if it was Hermione...who'd be there to help Harry get through things then? The night Dumbledore was killed Ginny had been the one to comfort Harry, while Hermione was conveniently petrified and out of the picture.

Ginny looked out the rolled-down door window and smiled. She could bide her time, play nice and pretend to be happy for Harry. She could also make sure that the next time he needed that kind of comfort...the next time someone dear to him was killed while he looked on helplessly...that she was in a position to provide it.

And make sure that the boyfriend-stealing bitch was either once again out of the picture, *or the one that was down on the ground*.

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They arrived at the Burrow to find official-looking letters waiting for Ron and Ginny on the kitchen table. Fleur and Bill were explaining that Arthur had brought them home from the Ministry just as their father came down the stairs and joined them.

"Well go on, open them," Arthur said, "Let's see where they the powers that be decided to sort you."

"You mean you don't know?" Hermione asked, as the two tore into the envelopes.

Arthur Weasley replied with a thin smile, "Can't say that I'm currently in the loop when it comes to the Minister's office these days....Ron, care to share with us? Imagine the two letters are practically the same."

"Um, sure, dad," Ron replied:

June 22, 2006

Ronald Weasley
The Burrow

Greetings:

In accord with Emergency Decree Number(EDN) 124, approved by the June 18, 2006 special session of the Wizengamot, you will report to the Goblin Liaison Office, Being Division, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures at 8:00am Monday, July 1, 2006 to begin your internship position within the Ministry of Magic. Specific work hours, duties and expectations are provided on the attached parchment. You might be pleased to note that all required fees associated with your participation in this educational program have been waived by Minister Scrimgour's Office.

As per EDN124, failure to appear at the appointed point in time, or to participate in this program, will result in a fine of 100 galleons per day and/or imprisonment on a two days per day missed basis.

We are certain that you will find this unpaid internship to be an enriching experience.

Sincerely,

Dolores Umbridge, Director
Ministry Internship Program
Office of the Minister of Magic

Cc: Percy Weasley, Assistant Director to the Minister of Magic

"Bloody Hell," swore Ron, "the git fancies himself an Assistant Director."

"Language, Ron," Ginny said in admonishment.

"Goblin Liaison Office, eh?" asked Bill. "Ginny, what's your's say?"

Bill's sister frowned. "Same thing, except I've been assigned to the Werewolf Registry Desk in the Beasts Division."

Ron snorted. "Are any new werewolves bothering to register these days?"

Bill shook his head. "Nope...that position was vacant even before the Ministry purge...had to get somebody from Centaurs to sign off on my discharge papers from St. Mungo's."

"So what's the point of forcing me to work in an office that doesn't have any work to do?" asked Ginny. "Seems like a big waste of time."

"Not much more to learn in the Goblin office," Ron added.

Harry frowned. "That's the point, I imagine."

Hermione nodded. "Rather ingenious, actually."

"How's that?" asked Ginny.

"The Ministry lost a lot a good part of their workforce when they were exposed as spies," Hermione replied. "Some of those people were assigned to key positions that really are important."

Arthur nodded. "So they fill the critical positions by transferring current Ministry personnel, then backfill their less critical posts with unpaid interns."

"But they're calling this an educational internship," Ginny whined. "Without work to do I won't learn a thing."

Arthur sighed. "Maybe Percy and the Minster's office trusts you two about as much as me right now, so they want you out of the way."

Harry nodded. "Look on the bright side, Ginny, at least you'll have time to revise."

Ginny scowled a bit. "Revise for what? Without test results don't know what I'll be taking this fall even if Hogwarts opens."

Arthur shook his head. "Plenty of time to worry about things like that later," he said. "Why don't you two run up and visit your mother...she'll want to hear about your letters."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "She's awake? Might Hermione and I visit as well?"

Arthur looked appraisingly at Harry and shook his head. "She's still rather weak...better to limit the excitement." As if to punctuate that assessment, they heard wailing coming from upstairs about a lost son named Percy.

Mr. Weasley left the kitchen intent on settling his wife's frayed nerves, allowing Fleur to quietly ask if Harry and Hermione had broken the news to Ginny. The reply of "Yes and no" didn't make much sense, until the two swore Bill and Fleur to secrecy and quickly let them in on their plans.

They fended off another dinner invitation from Fleur with the excuse that they'd soon be off to another meeting. When the badges worn under their robes began to vibrate, Ron came down the stairs at a pace just under barreling and gave Harry and Hermione a questioning look. The two looked at each other in silent communication, before Harry smiled and turned to Bill and Fleur.

"Do you two want to add on to that oath of secrecy?"

Bill and Fleur both shrugged shoulders and nodded as the three teens pulled their robes open enough to expose their Order of Arthur badges.

"So Big Brother," Ron said as he winked at Harry and Hermione, "You think the protective wards are strong enough around this house?"

"Of course," said Bill, a bit put off. "Did them myself...just as strong as any guarding any of the Ministry's buildings."

"Oh, okay," Ron said with a sly smile. "Just checking....I'll be back in a couple of hours to ask again." He then touched his badge, said a few quiet words, and disappeared with nary a pop.

Bill and Fleur both looked at where Ron should have been, then turned to face Harry and Hermione with a mixture of wonder and fear in their eyes.

"He doesn't even have an apparition license," Bill said.

Harry smiled. "Didn't need one," he explained. "He didn't apparate."

"Should I worry about the wards?" Bill asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Your wards are fine, Bill...they just don't work for what Ron just did...we'll explain later." And with a touch and spoken word Hermione disappeared too.

Fleur turned to Harry with a look of shock on her face and asked, "How did they do zat?"

Harry smiled and answered (rather cheekily) just before he joined his friends.

"Honorary house-elves."

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The Queen's Wizard had reason to hold that smile when he reappeared, for Ron had already found the drink table.

"Butterbeer?" Ron asked.

"Thanks, mate," Harry said, as he took the offered bottle and took in his immediate surroundings.

They were standing in the middle of good-sized drawing room. The rear-projection television, electric lamps and wall-to-wall carpeting immediately betrayed the area's muggleness. The room was naturally lit from large windows set in three of the four walls, as well as a sliding glass door. A buffet table, set up against the fourth wall, held trays and chafing dishes filled with food. The furniture was informal and comfortable, adding to the rather rustic atmosphere. Hermione was standing to the side with her mum, huddled over a clipboard.

"Nice place they've found for us, ain't it?" Ron asked.

Harry turned to him and nodded. "It certainly is....are the others here yet?"

Ron shrugged his shoulders as he nodded towards the two Granger women. "Haven't had time to ask...barely had time to say hello to Hermione's mum before she arrived and started talking about schedules and meeting stuff."

Harry nodded as the patio door slid open and Mr. Granger, Wally and Steve entered the room with attractive-looking woman that appeared to be in her mid-thirties.

Steve said, "Allow me to introduce you three. Sir Harry, Dame Hermione, Ron, this is my mum, Helen Wall."

Harry and Ron both did doubletakes when Steve made his introduction, as the woman he identified as his mother looked far too young for the job. Hermione, however, had apparently already figured things out.

"Mrs. Wall, it's a pleasure to meet you," she said as she walked up to shake her hand. "We can't thank you enough for volunteering to help our cause."

"I'm the one that should be saying thanks," the woman replied with a smile. "Steve has always been far too tight-lipped about what he's done with his life. It's amazing what I've learned about him, just in the past couple of days."

Ron looked on with a screwed-up expression on his face. "Erm...somebody want to explain why Steve's mum looks more like his sister?"

"Oh Ron," Hermione scowled, "I'd have expected that from Harry, not you...she's a witch, remember?"

Harry snorted. "Of course," he said, "As a witch she ages much more slowly than her, erm...non-magical son."

"Oh, don't be afraid to call me a squib, Sir Harry, it's no skin off my nose."

The Queen's Wizard shook his head. "I'd rather not...it's the pure-bloods that only see shame in normality."

"Who is calling my big oaf of a son normal?" Mrs. Wall asked with a smile. "Why the stories I could tell you about my little Stevie..."

"Yes, well, that won't be necessary right now, mum," Steve said, his ears getting a bit red. "Better to talk about why you're with us, eh?"

Mrs. Granger chimed in. "And it'd be better to tell that story once everyone is here."

Harry nodded. "Anything needing our attention before that happens?"

"No, Clan Chief," Emily replied.

"Please, Mrs. Granger," Harry asked, "this isn't a Clan function...no need for the formality."

"What should we call you then?" Ron asked. "Supreme Mugwump of the Order of Arthur?"

Harry shook his head with small grin. "Just Harry is fine...we could all use last names, but with two Walls, three Grangers and three Weasleys that might get a bit confusing."

Wally nodded. "A pre-meeting tour of the grounds, then Harry?"

"No, we can do that as a group...unless there's a reason not to, let's get the rest here before dinner gets cold."

And with that decision the first meeting of the Order of Arthur in more than sixty years was begun. The Weasley twins, Tonks and Remus were called and arrived by badge (Sir Even remained at Windsor Castle as a rally point should the Queen come under magical attack). The group made its way past the buffet table, and as the clouds had decided to part for a spell they took their plates and drinks outside and dined out on the wood-planked porch.

Harry found the informality comforting. As he'd been rather nervous about his leadership role in the Order of Arthur, he was quite certain that Hermione and her mum had arranged to have this first meeting take place outside of the formality of Windsor Castle. It was almost like a small cocktail party, with clusters of two and three people forming and reforming as they got to know more about each other and their meeting locale.

They were eating on the front porch of a comfortable four-bedroom modern country home set upon thirty acres of land. "The Farm," (as it was soon dubbed by the group), had been available for purchase on the real estate market for some time (as the absentee owner refused to reduce the price beyond what he had overpaid for it). MI-5 3/4 had made arrangements for a holding company to obtain a short term lease, with an eye towards purchase if it ultimately met the needs of the Order of Arthur as a operational base.

The primary advantage of the property could be readily seen from the front porch. The homestead was set on a western hillside of a prominent slope, and enjoyed an expansive view of the countryside. And it wasn't just some random piece of English countryside, mind you...the River Otter meandered through the vista, and the quaint town of Ottery St. Catchpole hugged its banks in the foreground. The Farm was, in fact, a scant four miles away from The Burrow as the crow (or broom) flies. One couldn't quite see the Burrow, of course; it was located within a small wooded vale south of town.

The proximity of the Farm to the Burrow was quite intentional. There was every expectation that the Weasley residence was a Death Eater target, and Ron would be staying there during his "internship" at the Ministry, MI-5 3/4 wanted to watch over the Burrow as well as they could.

While Harry and Hermione made an effort to chat with everyone there, they focused in on the person they knew the least about. Helen Wall was a pureblood that married for love rather than honor an arranged marriage contract. Subsequently disowned and scorned within wizard society, she had nevertheless done quite nicely for herself and her family with a greenhouse business that operated in the grey zone of the mixed muggle/wizard economy. She had successfully raised two children (one magical and one not), and would have been quite happy to continue down the course she had plotted for herself had it not been for two events; the untimely death of her beloved husband, and a call to service from Her Majesty's Government.

When most of the dinner plates were clean (allowances being made for Ron's third helpings), the group returned inside for tea. Hermione levitated the buffet table over to one side of the room while Tonks and Remus conjured the few extra chairs needed for everyone to have a seat. Harry stood in front of the other twelve and rather nervously "called" his meeting to order.

"Erm, guess we'll begin," he said. "I should start by thanking Mrs. Granger and Wally for setting this whole thing up on the fly, and for arranging the location." Emily and Wally waved off the polite round of applause and motioned for Harry to continue.

"Before we get too far along I'd like to introduce Steve's mum...hope you all had the chance to meet during dinner...while Mrs. Wall isn't badged, she will be a very important part of how we go about our business."

The group then spent a few minutes talking about Helen Wall's new mission. Mrs. Wall had been recruited as a MI-5 3/4 agent by her son, soon after he had been himself recruited. Since then, she'd provided the agency a good deal of valuable information from her business dealings with wizard apothecaries. Now she would be more on the operational side of things than intelligence gathering. Agent Wall would be the nominal resident of the "Farm;" under cover as a retiree that had a desire to dabble in her own greenhouse and "reconnect with the wizarding world." To that end, she had made application to have a floo connection established and registered the Farm as a magical household. While the backlog of floo service applications was at least a few months long, this would provide an explanation for any detection of magical use on the property.

Once they talked about what Steve's mum would be doing she excused herself from the meeting. Harry didn't want to ask her to leave, but relented after Steve talked about security clearances and plausible deniability. But before Harry could say too much more, Wally moved to the front of the small gathering and asked to speak a few words. Harry was more than happy to yield the floor.

"Three weeks ago today," Wally began, "Her Royal Majesty the Queen and Her Majesty's government pledged to do whatever it could to help three teen-aged kids vanquish what is currently the greatest threat to British citizenry. And not just the wizarding part of it, either...you are all aware of just how successful this collaborative effort has been, as you have all, in various ways, been in the thick of the fight.

"And then some," Fred Weasley added.

Wally smiled. "This past week, Sir Harry was invested as the Queen's Wizard, and provided the opportunity to select those who would join them in the Most Royal Order of Arthur. Looking around, I'm very happy to see the results of that selection process. Happy because...well, Sir Harry will no doubt emphasize the Order's charge to save the Queen from all magical threats."

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Queen's Wizard, Part 2 (part 2)

"Well," Harry interrupted, "that is why the Order was started, wasn't it?"

"True enough, Sir Harry," Wally replied, "But I have it on good authority that Her Royal Majesty considers her safety to be best ensured when the Order is helping Sir Harry do all that he can do in his battle against Voldemort. In fact, the Queen herself asked that I convey her hope that Sir Harry would consider members of the Order to be his own council, his support network, and the ones to rely upon whenever he is in need."

"She didn't need to do that," Harry said with a bit of embarrassment.

"Perhaps not, but that is exactly what Her Royal Majesty did," Wally noted.

"Don't worry, Wally," Hermione said, "I think you'll find that Harry managed to reach that same conclusion on his own."

"Did he now?" asked Ron.

Hermione nodded and said, "Harry, why don't you show them your white board?"

Harry looked at Hermione a bit sheepishly, but did as he was told and pulled the shrunken board from his pocket. When he attached it to the wall Harry blanched, and quickly banished the diagramming before anyone could ask smart questions about the "House of Lord Gryffindor." He then took a dry-erase marker from his pocket and drew a line down the center of the board. He wrote "Wizarding" at the top of one side and "Muggle" on the other.

"Right then, the Order of Arthur *was* established centuries ago with a single goal in mind...to protect the Crown from magical threats. Today that means keeping Moldishorts away from the Queen." To illustrate this point he drew (on their respective sides) a happy face wearing a crown and a cartoonish skull sporting a forked tongue.

Harry's artwork drew a laugh as he erased the center portion of the dividing line and replaced it with a rectangular box labeled "Order of Arthur" with his name inside and at the top. He then noted, "The Queen and her muggle citizenry are at risk because Tom hasn't limited his terror to the wizarding world, and the Ministry of Magic hasn't been able to prevent him from killing innocent Muggles who are unable to defend themselves from magical attacks. That's where we come in."

"Our little group will straddle the bright line between the Wizarding and Muggle worlds. We have muggles with knowledge of the wizarding world and wizards and witches who are comfortable on the Muggle side. Each brings strengths and areas of expertise, and I'm hoping that we'll be able to use these strengths to help achieve our objectives. And while some of you may be involved in multiple overlapping areas, each will be asked to take a leadership role within the group."

Harry then started adding names to the box, linking each name to a new box located (as appropriate) within the wizarding or muggle world.

"Last week, Clan Potter came into existence in order to forge an alliance with the Goblin Nation. I couldn't get out of being Clan Chief, but for purposes of leading the Clan and managing its alliances I've asked Hermione Granger to take charge."

"And what exactly," George Weasley asked with a smile, "is Hermione's position within the Clan?"

"You would ask, wouldn't you Fool?" Hermione replied with a smile. "If anyone doesn't know, I'm Harry's girlfriend and Clan Chief Consort."

"Erm, moving right along," Harry said quickly, "Besides being Clan Champion, Ron Weasley is going to take the lead in our efforts to organize purebloods at the Ministry into our Peanut Butter Brigade"

"Peanut Butter Brigade? Asked Wally. "Care to say anything more?"

Harry, Hermione and Ron took a few minutes to elaborate. More than half of the members of the DA had been raised in pureblood families, and were therefore subject to the Ministry's forced internship program. The plan was for Ron to establish a network of these students and like-minded others, collecting information and forming a coherent cadre with those Ministry officials already sympathetic to Harry's cause. Ron would be working closely with Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom and his sister Ginny.

"What's little sister going to be doing?" asked Fred.

"Well, we'll have to wait and see," Harry replied cryptically. "She's going to try and get an internship working for her brother in the Minister's office."

"What are the odds they'd let your ex-girlfriend anywhere near Scrimgeour?" asked Tonks.

Harry smiled. "Depends on how convincing an actress she can be."

"No worries there, then," said George. "Ginny's nothing if not the little drama queen."

Hermione nodded. "We let Bill and Fleur in on it, but it wouldn't hurt to have you two reassuring your parents when Ginny appears to abandon the family and pull a Percy."

"Right-o, Clan Chief."

Harry shook his head with a bit of exasperation. "Moving right along, Hermione's parents, Roger and Emily Granger....Roger is managing my business empire and looking for creative ways to wage economic warfare against the enemy."

"Which enemy?"

Harry snorted. "Voldemort, you Fool, although anything that could make Umbitch's life more difficult would be welcomed as well. Roger is also arranging the Muggle-side of our training this summer...physical training, swords and other weapons. Anyone that wants to join us in our early morning runs inside Windsor Park is more than welcome."

"Emily Granger has the lead role in organizing all of the muggle-born students and their families into a support group and making sure that they have all of the information they need as things progress. She's done a fabulous job already, and with the Ministry pulling the bigot card we really need to make sure that the communication lines are kept open."

"And we can't forget," Harry added with a smirk, "that Mrs. Granger has already flown a combat mission on the back of a broomstick."

Hermione sighed at this comment...it was hard for her to imagine anyone describing her parents without using the word "dentist." How quickly things had changed.

"Say Harry," Fred asked, "what's the nickname for the muggleborns that you're organizing?"

"Nicknames?"

"Yeah," replied George. "Like the Peanut Butter Brigade."

"Erm...hadn't thought about that," Harry admitted. "Wally?"

"Yes, Sir Harry?"

"You Muggles are the smart ones when it comes to acronyms...work your magic will you?"

Wally nodded, and began playing with words with pen and paper.

Harry continued on to the other Order members and their roles. The Weasley twins were the suppliers of magical equipment and devices, with a particular emphasis on ways for Muggles to protect themselves from magical attacks. Their shop would also serve as a rally point as the quickest way for anyone in the Order to get to Diagon Alley. Similarly, Tonks would anchor the Ministry of Magic, and Remus Lupin the anchor for Hogwarts. Both would also be contacts for what was left of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Hey Harry," Ron asked, "shouldn't we find a way to distinguish between the other Order and this one?"

"Yeah, might be a good idea," Harry said. "Anyone?"

After a few minutes thought Emily Granger suggested that the Order of Arthur could be informally known as "The Art Club." Everyone liked that idea.

"The Art Club it is, then," Harry proclaimed.

Remus then shook his head and said, "I still don't understand how I'll be an anchor for Hogwarts...it's not like I have a position there."

"Not just yet," Harry replied with a twinkle in his eye, "but I'm working on that."

Steve was then recognized as the rally point for the Queen as a member of her security detail, and Wally was linked on the whiteboard to a box labeled "Muggle Gov't."

"Excuse me, Sir Harry, but I've got something," said Wally.

"What's that?"

"The acronym for muggle-borns...might I suggest 'COMB'? It would be short for 'Coalition of Muggle-Borns'?"

"Hmmm," said Harry, "not quite as cheeky as MI-5 3/4, but..."

"Sorry, but that 'MB' letter combination is tough." Wally explained. "Didn't think you'd want TOMB...Give me some time and I might work out something else out."

"Fair enough," said Harry with a grin. He then drew a cartoon castle on the muggle side of the board similar to the one labeled "Hogwarts" and linked it to Sir Evan's name with the explanation that he would be the anchor for the Round Tower and Windsor Castle.

With the group all finally introduced, Harry opened the floor up for any bits of information that anyone wanted to share. That led to updates on the medical conditions of Brian Willox (still in a coma) and Molly Weasley (recovering, but still in bed). Wally stated that the four Death Eater prisoners were all conscious and still at Privet Drive, thanks to the anti-apparition leg-bands that had been anonymously provided from the Auror Department (thank you, Tonks). There was a brief debate about what to do with the prisoners...they were low-level recruits that wouldn't have much information to provide, and Harry really didn't want to tie up resources guarding them. It was therefore decided to turn the prisoners over to the Aurors (once their memories had been suitably modified). The mark that all four bore on their forearm was evidence enough to have them confined.

With Ron scheduled to work another graveyard shift at Midnight and planning still to be done for the next day's muggle-born get-together the meeting broke up a little after 9:30. Hermione told everyone to plan on meeting at the Farm until wards were up and running at Windsor, and everyone agreed to keep in touch with their badge communicators.

Wally brought a seven-passenger Land Rover around the front of the house to take the three Weasleys, Tonks and Lupin back to the Burrow. While there was nothing physically keeping people from apparating out, it was thought best not to show too much magic flashing about the Farm until some proper warding was established. Steve volunteered to take first watch on the Farm (providing him with some quality time with his mum), leaving Harry, Hermione and her parents to watch the high-summer sun set from side-by-side porch swings.

"Well that could have gone better," the Queen's Wizard said with a sigh.

"What do you mean, Harry," Emily replied, as she passed glasses of wine all around and took a sip. "I thought you did a great job."

"But we barely did more than introduce ourselves....wasn't any planning or collaboration or trap setting..."

"Going to be a bit of a problem if you use the battle planning with Head Auror Robards as your standard for meeting accomplishments," Roger pointed out.

"Yes, but..."

"Harry this was the very first meeting," replied Roger. "Can't expect to do much until everyone gets used to the idea of working together...give it some time."

Harry shook his head. "I just worry over whether we have that time available."

Hermione scooted over closer to her boyfriend and wrapped her arm around his shoulder. "Hey...remember three days ago? All of those Death Eaters that were splattered on Privet Drive or uncovered at the Ministry? Can't see Voldemort recovering too quickly from that kind of pantsing, do you?"

"Dunno," Harry replied.

"Has been quiet since then, hasn't it son?" Roger asked.

"Yes, but..."

Emily walked behind the swing that Harry and Hermione were sitting on and gave his shoulders a good squeeze. "But nothing, Harry. You've done some great things over the past three weeks, and I think you don't just deserve a bit of rest, you absolutely need some rest. So take it, or else."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Or else what, Mrs. Granger?"

"Or else we'll force you to explain a rather curious comment you made over the radio during the heat of battle the other day," threatened Roger with a smile.

Harry looked at Roger with mock shock (as he wasn't all that upset over the possibility of discussing the idea of in-laws right then). "Oh...no, anything but that!" he exclaimed.

"Well then, sit there and watch the sunset, son."

Harry raised his hands in surrender and released some of the tension in his shoulders. As Hermione leaned her head against his, he wondered if he would ever get used to this kind of love and attention.

He fervently hoped not.

Chapter 18 – On Lounging and Lupin

Saturday, June 23

Windsor Castle

The next morning Harry found Hermione still in the top half of his pajamas. Unfortunately, rather than modeling them in bed (where he wanted her), she was wearing them whilst sprawled out on the tatami-matted side of the Love Shack's bathing area. Pieces of equation-covered parchment were stuck on the walls and scattered about the floor, as Hermione scribbled furiously on some parchment next to a detailed half-metre tall scale model of Windsor Castle.

"Thought we had a 'no work' agreement, Miss Granger," Harry deadpanned, as he struggled to hide a grin behind the stern countenance of an authority figure.

Hermione dropped her quill and gave Harry a "hand in the cookie jar" look of guilt. "Oh, that was 'no physical work,' wasn't it?"

"Nice try," Harry replied. "You'd have been better off claiming that the castle was a toy that you were playing with."

"Well I am playing with it, in a way," Hermione replied. "Here...watch."

She then touched her wand to five small stones that lay on a circle around the castle and said an incantation that created a translucent purplish

come that completely enclosed the scale model.

"Brilliant," Harry said. "When I get back from the loo you can explain what you just did."

Hermione nodded in agreement, then returned her gaze to the arithmancy equations she'd been working on. When Harry returned, she told him that an owl from Gringott's had made an overnight delivery.

"Miniaturized rune stones," Hermione explained. "They work exactly the same way as the full-sized ones, only on a much smaller scale."

"And they're good for what..." Harry asked, "creating protective fields around a little witch's doll house?"

Hermione slugged his arm. "No, silly...they're used to help design protective fields using a bench-scale model."

Harry nodded. "So this bit of 'I'm not working' is working on your asymmetrical warding plans for the castle?"

"Exactly," Hermione replied with a smile. "It really is more fun than work, though...hard to believe that ward designers actually get paid for this type of thing."

When Harry looked over at the equations Hermione had scrawled out he shook his head in disagreement. "Well, it looks like work to me."

"But it's rather exciting, Harry," admitted Hermione. "The goblins were rather taken with the idea when I wrote to them...they want to meet with me on Monday to discuss it, and, well...I just wanted to be prepared for that meeting."

Harry reached over and pulled her up to her feet and up against his bare chest. "Well, I'm rather taken with the idea of you following through on plans to lie about on the rooftop in your swimming costume."

Hermione gave Harry a devilish look in response. "Who said anything about wearing costumes while we sun ourselves?"

Harry gave her a gobsmacked look. "You can't be serious...we're directly under Heathrow's flight lanes. Fancy on giving the pilots a show?"

"Oh Harry," she replied with a smile, "am I not a witch?" She then took a step back and cast a disillusionment spell upon herself. A few seconds later, Harry's pajama top appeared out of thin air and landed on his head.

"They won't be able to see me," Hermione explained, "but the sun's rays will."

"Rather ingenious, there, sweetheart...but what if someone were to call out a *Finite Incantatum* spell?"

"Harry Potter, you wouldn't dare!"

"Aaaah, you're probably right," he admitted. "But it would make it rather difficult to tell if you're getting a sun burn, wouldn't it?"

"Hmmm...hadn't thought about that," she admitted.

"Suppose I could always poke about at intervals to see if any parts were hot to the touch?"

"You would be so lucky...I'll just make sure I've got plenty of sunblock applied."

"And you think that the lotion would disappear on skin contact?"

"Don't imagine why not."

"Think we ought to find that out before we hit the roof, don't you?"

"Well, suppose you're right. And I imagine you'll volunteer to be the applicator?"

"No, got a better idea," Harry replied. He then made a sudden lunge towards Hermione. Having gauged her position by the sound of her voice, he quickly scooped her up, carried her over to the hot tub and threw her in (completely ignoring her protests). Harry was rewarded with an anatomically correct depression in the water's surface once Hermione surfaced.

"Always wondered what would happen if you were caught in the rain wearing an invisibility cloak," he replied dryly, as Hermione splashed and sputtered her objections.

"Harry Potter, you are incorrigible!"

"Yeah, well, Hermione Granger, you are very wet," he replied, with a grin and two eyes that were fixated on her aqueous outline.

Hermione was about to issue a retort when she experienced *deja vu*. Laughing, she asked, "Isn't this the point where I banished your trousers?"

Harry paused, then smiled as he caught on to just how much the conversation was mirroring their first visit to the Love Shack. He pulled on the drawstring of his pajama bottoms, and launched himself into the tub almost before those bottoms hit the stone floor. When he resurfaced and pulled Hermione into a wet embrace he simply noted,

"Beat you to it."

After a half-hour or so of what Harry had cheekily described as “snagging” (i.e. intimate acts intermediate between snogging and shagging), they called Hermione’s parents and arranged to meet for a late breakfast. Emily Granger only ordered tea and biscuits, as she had a very busy schedule ahead of her. Almost all of Hogwarts’s muggle-born students and families were converging in London that morning for what would have been a spectacular Summer Solstice Party on Privet Drive. As that location was no longer available to them, Emily had followed through on Harry’s mention that he had seen some kind of amusement park from the Round Tower’s roof. It had turned out to be a theme park named “Legoland,” based around a muggle play toy involving plastic building blocks. And while the theme park was geared towards younger children, there were roller coasters and rides available for the older siblings. The park normally closed at six, but Mrs. Granger had made arrangements to rent out the entire park just for the muggleborns and their families for an additional four hours. The band and caterers that had been contracted for the party would also move to the new venue.

Mr. Granger got some quality time with the kids once his wife left to double check on the day’s transportation. Harry and Hermione filled Roger in on their previous day’s discussion with Luna’s father, and that led to a discussion concerning the wizarding world’s portion of Harry’s investment portfolios. Roger expressed some concern about his ability to manage the wizard business side of Harry’s portfolios. He didn’t have the kind of access to information that existed on the muggle side, and obviously knew very little about the business plans of cauldron makers and broomstick manufacturers. This led Hermione to remind Harry that they had failed to reschedule their appointment with the wizard barrister that Mr. Weasley had recommended, and Harry agreed that it would be worthwhile to see if this person could help not just with legal advice, but business as well.

A light rain was falling from plump low-hanging clouds as they left the Mess, dashing any immediate plans for roof-top lounging. Roger returned to his ground level living quarters to gather a few things before taking over Steve’s watch on The Farm. Harry and Hermione walked up to their quarters and lit a fire in one of their first floor fireplaces to battle the damp chilly air within the stone tower.

“Any ideas on how we can productively rest?” asked Harry, as he joined Hermione on a sofa placed in front of the fire.

Hermione shook her head “no” as she looked around the large open room. Castle staff had moved the furniture they had selected into the Tower, and done some cursory placements and groupings, but not exactly to her liking. Then there was the issue of the boxes delivered by the goblins the day before. Within those boxes were almost all of the shrunken furnishings that had survived Voldemort’s attack on Godric’s Hollow the night Harry’s parents were killed. Someone had made arrangements to move them into the Potter family vault, and they’d been front and center when she and Harry had visited it the day before.

“What’cha thinking about?” Harry asked.

“Oh...nothing much,” Hermione replied. “Just wondering how we’re going to fit all of the new furniture inside the tower walls.”

Harry nodded. “Well, with Sir Evan taking up residence downstairs we could move some of it to his quarters.” He then added with a smile, “Not that I’d consider it a legitimate way of resting.”

“We could always levitate the pieces... wouldn’t even break a sweat.”

Harry shook his head. “Yes, but that’d be quite a bit of expended magical power, wouldn’t it? We need to keep our heads low until the anti-magical detection wards are up.”

Hermione nodded in agreement. “Which is why I really should take another look at my equations and ward model...I’m so glad that you agree.” And before Harry could object she placed a peck on his cheek and bolted upstairs to continue her project work in the tatami room. He snorted, quite certain that Hermione had expertly steered the conversation in that direction from the very start. But he let her go...it ~~was~~ important work, and asking his girlfriend to leave that bench model for a day would be like asking her to forego breathing.

The Queen’s Wizard thought about visiting with Sir Evan, but the old man was busy trying to remember his wartime French in his efforts to interact with the Muses. Ron would still be sleeping after his shift at St. Mungo’s...Harry wondered just how early he could call and see if Ron and Luna wanted to join them at the theme park that evening. And then he remembered that there were others he could call using his badge, and he gave Remus’s badge a tickle.

“Erm...hullo?” Remus answered, after a few moments time.

“Hey, Moony, it’s Harry...hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“No, no...not at all...Tonks is working day shift at the Ministry right now.”

“Oh,” replied Harry with interest. “Does that mean I would have been interrupting something if she were there with you right now?”

Harry heard something close to a growl, before Remus answered. “Are you looking to talk about witches, or something? Because I’ve got a few questions about you and Hermione...”

“No, no, Remus, just joking,” Harry quickly countered. “Actually, I was wondering if you’d like to pop over for a visit. You haven’t had a tour of our tower yet, and I’m looking for some company now that Hermione’s abandoned me for her arithmancy.”

“Sure, cub, just give me a few minutes to clean up.”

And so it was that Harry found the second best way to spend a rainy day of rest within the Round Tower (he thought Remus would have understood coming in second to “Hermione in the hot tub”). After the tour (and raised lupine eyebrows over the Love Shack), the two spent time catching up with each other’s activities. Both felt a bit of remorse for not having kept in better touch. Harry thought running with the werewolf pack as an important enough reason to be away the previous year, but Remus disagreed, and got Harry a bit riled up once he explained why.

It turned out that Remus considered almost all the time he'd spent on his "mission" for the Order of the Phoenix to have been a waste of time. Moony had long known enough about werewolf subculture and wizarding world bigotry to accurately predict how the pack would react to Greyback's alpha leadership and Voldemort's promises. He had told Dumbledore at the outset...and still was ordered to go and "gather intelligence," and disappear from the wizarding world for the better part of a year. Moony initially resisted Harry's questioning about why he thought Dumbledore had done so, but finally gave in and voiced suspicions that the mission was a part of the former Headmaster's efforts to limit his contact with Harry and Hogwarts over the past three years.

When Harry (quite predictably) insisted that the former DADA professor explain, Remus recounted a confrontation with the Headmaster after Snape had outed him as a werewolf. Remus had insisted that Snape was a direct threat to Harry, and that if he had to go that the potions master did as well. Dumbledore, however, claimed that he would not be able to overrule the Board of Governors on Remus's termination, and that Severus Snape had to remain at Hogwarts for security reasons (and this was even after Remus had shown the Headmaster a pensieve memory of Snape's actions within the Shrieking Shack). Ever since that argument, Remus had thought Dumbledore had made it a point to find ways of keeping him away from Hogwarts and Harry, and only asked for Remus's involvement as a last option.

After hearing Remus's explanation, Harry became angry to the point of almost letting off some accidental magic. The way that Dumbledore appeared to have kept Remus out of his life and out of the picture seemed too much like the way he forced Sirius into quasi-house arrest at Grimmauld Place. There were only two possible explanations in Harry's mind, and neither were charitable... the Headmaster had either justified his actions with his (ultimately) deadly zeal to insulate and protect Snape, or worse, had purposely manipulated Harry's childhood to remove anyone who might challenge Dumbledore's self-appointed position as a trustworthy father figure.

They'd been sitting in front of the fire during the discussion. After silently fuming (and running his hands through his unruly hair), Harry stood and pulled his white board out from a pocket. After enlarging it and placing it upon a wall, he took a marker and vented some energy with a few lines:

"I will not speak ill of the dead."

"I will not speak ill of the dead."

"I will not speak ill of the dead."

Remus looked on at this exercise with a bit of wonder at Harry's maturity and control. When he complimented Harry on this, the teen responded with a statement that the white board could have come in handy the night he'd been told the full prophecy. When Remus asked what Harry was talking about, the Queen's Wizard's anger redoubled.

"You mean Dumbledore never told you about the prophecy?" Harry yelled. "It wasn't just me he was keeping it from?"

More lines were written when Remus confirmed that was indeed the case. The former DADA professor asked if Harry wanted to put off continuing the conversation, Harry shook his head, firm with the conviction that Remus deserved to know the full story about Harry's life, from the earliest point that he could remember it.

It only took a few descriptions of the abuse Harry had suffered at the Dursley's for Remus to grab a marker and write a few lines of his own. However, curiosity proved far stronger an emotion than outrage, and the two soon were swapping stories and filling in missing pieces. Harry was amazed at the number of things that Remus didn't know about him...from the little things (e.g. the Sorting Hat had suggested Slytherin), to the big (e.g. everything that had happened within the Chamber of Secrets, and his first year's adventures with Norbert, Fluffy, and the Philosopher's Stone). Remus, in turn, gave Harry full descriptions of what the Order of the Phoenix had (and hadn't) done over the years, and told a few stories about Hogwarts faculty meetings that had ended up with wands drawn. Those stories provided just enough comic relief for the two wizards to begin to look forward at what could be, rather than back at what should have been.

The "So now what?" moment came a bit after two in the afternoon, a fact that Harry only realized once his stomach began grumbling. The two fetched Hermione (who had also been expertly ignoring her own stomach's empty protests) and made their way to the Mess for a late lunch. The late hour at least provided the three an empty room and the ability to continue their Round Tower conversations.

After getting an abridged (and less emotional) description of Harry and Remus's revelations, Hermione noted that the Headmaster, for all of his faults, had at least made the current situation possible by arranging for Harry's introduction to the Prince of Wales. Harry then added that the provisions made in Dumbledore's will could also bring forth a positive legacy, providing a segue way for a discussion on Harry's plans for the defense of Hogwarts.

They spent more than a few minutes brainstorming on ways to defend Hogwarts from what they all saw as an inevitable attack (whether or not students were in residence). Remus was also fascinated by the types of training that Harry and Hermione were undertaking. While impressed with the physical training and sword play, he noted that while the two still needed to keep their magical skills sharp. The two agreed, with Harry noting that it was only with his appointment as Queen's Wizard the week previous that he'd been able to get around the underage magic laws. Remus offered to help them now that the restrictions had been cleared, and the three decided that the Room of Requirement would be the best place to train. Harry was leary of spending more time than was needed within the wizarding world (given the Ministry's and *Prophet's* attacks), but Hermione noted that if Remus was already within the castle that their badges could provide a "quick in/quick out" form of transport.

Remus asked if the badges would work within the grounds of Hogwarts, as it was only the Headmaster (or Headmistress) who had the authority to create portkeys for travel to and from the school. Hermione replied that while badge-travel felt like portkey use that they worked differently enough from portkeys to be potentially excluded from this restriction. They therefore reached a "only one way to find out" conclusion, and Harry and Hermione asked Lupin to set up a meeting with Headmistress McGonagall early in the next week.

The discussion about Hogwarts, and Harry's earlier stories about the Chamber of Secrets led Harry to gently ask Remus about the full moon two weeks past. Lupin's wince made Harry regret that he had done so, but Remus went on to say that the use of Hogwart's dungeons as a secure place to transform had proven effective, and as he'd only had opportunity to use the wolfsbane potion two out of the past twelve months that the change hadn't been that traumatic. This led to Hermione picking up their previous discussion about brewing the wolfsbane potion. She informed Remus

that they had plans to harvest the basilisk's remains for potion ingredients, and that she thought they'd fetch a fair value trade for what they would need. Remus nodded and expressed thanks, but noted that they'd still need the services of a master potions brewer who had the right contacts to make the trade.

When Hermione asked if Slughorn could fill that role Lupin said yes, but added that he was a hard wizard to find when he didn't want to be found. Harry agreed, but thought that even when in hiding that the man would probably still keep in touch with his network of carefully-selected friends and former students. Remus laughed at that comment, and said that the Slug Club was a well-entrenched institution even back in his days as a student. Hermione then suggested that the network might be used to their advantage, and that if word got out that someone had a basilisk corpse on their hands that he'd find them in a heartbeat. Harry agreed, recounting the zeal with which Slughorn had collected arachnid venom and unicorn hairs on the night of Aragog's funeral, and Remus offered to set the wheels in motion by contacting a few members of the Slug Club that he still knew.

Remus parted company with Harry and Hermione after finishing their late lunch, promising to keep the two informed as he worked the various tasks that he had agreed to tackle. The hug that Moony gave Harry before badge-jumping to Diagon Alley via Fred and George's shop was almost as bone-crushing as Hermione's best.

Harry didn't mind one bit.

Chapter 19 - The Rookery

Sunday, June 24, 10:00am
Windsor Castle

The morning sunshine mocked Harry as he gazed over the Tower's parapets and sipped his tea. The sun had stayed hidden behind rain clouds the entire day previous...the petulant and absent guest-of-honor at their Legoland solstice party. "*No problems shining down upon the Ferris wheel and roller coasters today, though*", he noted, as he looked out towards the theme park's grounds and recalled the previous night's activities.

The persistently heavy rain had prevented any of the theme park's rides from operating for the three-hundred or so Muggleborn students and their families. Harry thought the gathering doomed, only to discover support for the Muggle maxim that "Necessity is the mother of invention." Theme park staff boarded the group's tour buses at the front entrance and directed them to a large, non-descript warehouse at the edge of the park grounds. Inside the building, they found half-built large-scale Lego constructions surrounded by workbenches and piles of brightly-colored building blocks. Mrs. Granger then used a loudspeaker to announce that they were in the place where all of the theme park's scale model replicas were designed and built, and that they had been invited to do some creative construction on their own.

Shouts of joy came from different parts of the large open space, as children dived head-long into the opportunity to build without material limits. The activity quickly turned into a competition, with teams of students building plastic magical replicas for their Muggle parents and siblings. "Magical creatures" was decided upon as the main theme, and after a hour's worth of work (and with a seemingly unending supply of building materials), a small menagerie of half-metre tall hippogriffs, centaurs and unicorns were on proud display. Of course, some of the students were more creative than others; Dean Thomas's group built a snarling potion master hovering over a cauldron and identified it a "Hooked-nosed Snape." It won a voice vote as the scariest creature within the wizarding world.

The park staff that was working with Mrs. Granger on party plans was amazed at the breath of creativity on display (nobody chose to tell them that all of the creatures were inspired by real-life beasts). They also were impressed with the speed and efficiency with which the models had been built (not having seen some of the older students use liberal amounts of magic to replicate pieces, change their colors, and securely stick them together). The park workers went so far as to invite the entire group to create a much larger model of one of the figures for permanent display within the park. Strength of applause was used to select the Creevy brother's "*Harry and the Horned-tail*" diorama as the winning model (much to the Queen Wizard's chagrin). Pallets of boxes filled with blue and purple blocks were brought in, and for the balance of the evening food and music were afterthoughts to the construction project. For much of that time, Harry served as a fairly-good humored live model, with a muggle push broom held between his legs.

It had turned out to be an enormously successful event, something that Mrs. Granger had the right to be proud of. Not that her work was done, mind you. Due to the inclement weather, vouchers had been provided to gain following-day readmission to the park, and many of the families had plans to do just that. Emily had been up and out of the castle by seven that morning to coordinate the logistics.

Clan Chief and Consort had other plans for the day. They had risen early and splashed through an early morning run, taken breakfast, then retreated to the Tower before the tourist queues had chance to take form. Hermione had disappeared into the Love Shack for more work with her own scale model constructions, leaving Harry just outside the tent to whack away at a wooden post. That he was drinking his tea alone following that work-out bore witness to Hermione's attention to task. That he couldn't prevent his teacup from trembling in either hand bore witness to his need to increase sword-arm strength.

Wally interrupted the post-workout cool-down with a badge-call request for Harry to meet him in the M-5 3/4 field office. After determining that it wasn't an emergency, Harry promised to meet with him after a shower.. He then walked down to their bed chambers, pulled some fresh clothes from his wardrobe, and ducked into the Love Shack, where a comfortably-dressed Hermione was hovering over her model wards.

"Hey Hermione, will you be a dear and press my suit while I'm in the showers?" asked Harry. "I'm pants at that ironing charm, and Wally needs to meet with me downstairs."

Hermione looked up from her work and snorted. "Getting a bit dressed up for the weekend, aren't you?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders and smiled as he looked at the bespoke suit in one hand and Italian loafers in the other. "Well...as Queen's Wizard

and a Lord...I do have a certain image to maintain, don't I?"

That earned a snicker. "When have you ever worried about your attire, Harry?"

"Erm...not worrying...just working with what you and your mum picked out for me."

"Sure, Harry...that wardrobe did include some jeans and polo shirts, did it not?"

"Well...I guess so."

"Don't suppose it's because it's Wally you're meeting?"

"And just what are you suggesting?"

Hermione stood up and walked over to where Harry was standing. "That you're either a closet clothes-hound," she replied with a smile, "or that all of that witty banter with Wally means you're a closeted something else."

"Hermione!"

"Yes?"

"I'm surprised at your intimations...just because I'm secure enough in my own skin not to wither when he gets a bit catty?"

Hermione grabbed Harry's waist with both hands and pulled him close. "Perhaps I *am* reading to much into this."

With a frown of mock indignation Harry held the suit and shoes out from the embrace. "Mind the clothes!"

"There you go again, Harry...now I think you'll just have to prove yourself."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "What...prove I don't care about clothes by tossing them?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'd rather prove to you that my friendship with Wally is completely platonic."

Hermione smiled. "And just how do you propose to do that?"

The linen suit and loafers fell to the floor as Harry grabbed Hermione and tossed her over his shoulder. She let out a "Squee!" as he carried her into the Love Shack's main room and tossed her down on the bed. Something more like a growl came out of her mouth as Harry stripped off his clothes and pounced on her.

As he began nibbling on her earlobe, Hermione coyly noted, "You do realize that your suit is now completely wrinkled, right?"

Harry stopped nibbling long enough to murmur, "Would you worry if I cared?"

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head as she pulled Harry's sweaty chest down to hers. "As long...*ooh!*... as long as you keep proving things this way.....never!"

Some time later...

Harry arrived at MI-5 3/4's field office a little more rumpled than initially planned. He found Wally was sitting in front of three large computer screens.

"Well don't we look dashing," he said upon Harry's arrival. "The wizard wears Armani...yet again."

Harry laughed. "Is that a complaint?"

"No, it's a critique. Bad form to be caught on a magazine cover twice...or ten times...in the same outfit."

"Perhaps I should let you lay out clothes for me rather than Hermione, then?"

"Erm...no thank you. First c-mug secret agent rule is 'Never get in between a witch and her wand, no matter how gorgeous it is'."

"But Hermione always has her wand with her."

Wally made a show of fluttering his eye-lashes. "I was talking about a different wand, Sir Harry."

Harry winked at Wally. "Flirt"

"Tease."

Harry chuckled. "What have you got for me, Wally?"

The secret agent bit his lip before rifling back a scandalously witty retort, and waved Harry over.

We've been working on improving surveillance capabilities for your Diagon Alley area, and have run something you might want to see."

Harry leaned over Wally's shoulder and took a closer look at the central screen display showing an aerial photograph of an urban area. "That's Charing Cross in London, then?" he asked.

Wally nodded as he pulled up a correlative street map on one of the side displays. While Harry matched up the two images using street patterns, the MI-5 3/4 agent pulled up a picture on the third screen.

"Look familiar, Harry?"

Harry looked across and nodded. "That's the Muggle street side of the Leaky Cauldron." He then looked back at the air photo and pointed. "That's right about there, right?" he asked.

Wally nodded. "Exactly...which would mean that this cluster of small buildings behind it is Diagon Alley, right?"

Harry paused to match the bird's eye view of the area to a mental image of a street level view of the Alley. "Yes, it must be," he concluded. "That big building is Gringott's, and there's Madam Malkin's, and the Weasley Twins's store is right there." He then squinted and frowned.

"Something look a bit off, Sir Harry?"

Harry nodded as he pointed to a spot just one block away from the Cauldron. "That building is casting a rather long shadow...just how tall is it?"

Wally smiled at how quickly Harry was on the uptake. "Tall enough to look down upon you wizarding folk, or so we think, at least."

"So you think?" asked Harry with one eyebrow raised. "Are you not a secret agent?"

After chuckling, Wally noted, "It's listed as a residential building, but we sent three different people there yesterday for a look/see and they all came back a bit dazed and confused."

Harry smiled. "Don't suppose you sent along a wizard, eh?"

Wally let out another small laugh as he brought up an infrared image and pointed out a dark interference zone centered on the building. "We thought we were a step ahead of you, Harry...it's got some sort of magic to it, but Fred and George were just as confused when they tried to scout it out."

Harry mused for a moment, then asked, "But you say it's a residential building?"

Wally nodded and clicked open two new display windows with fuzzy overhead video clips of people walking in and out of the building's front entrance. "We parked a drone on top of it for an hour, and captured these images."

Harry thought, "So maybe it's a wizard residence with ward's tied to ownership..."

"There's an idea," said Wally. He quickly searched for (and found) building ownership records on an internet database. This search revealed that the building was built in the late 1890's, and was owned by a rather nebulous corporate entity with a non-descript name. During this search, Harry focused not so much on what Wally was doing but rather on the street address he typed into the various search engines.

"Eight-seven Shaftesbury Avenue...you know, Wally, I've seen that address somewhere before," he said. After a minute or so of rather intense concentration it came to him. Harry pulled a miniaturized ledger from an inside coat pocket and stepped into an adjacent empty room so that he could enlarge it without frying the electronics. A quick search of holdings provided the information he needed, and he returned to Wally's side with a lopsided grin on his face.

"So why exactly are we interested in this building, Wally?"

"Erm...because we'd like to be able to keep an eye on the Weasley shop," Wally replied. "They are out in a rather exposed location."

Harry nodded. "And we take care of our own," he said, as he reached a conclusion.

Thirty minutes later Harry and Hermione were in downtown London, standing across the street from the building that had piqued Wally's interest. Hermione looked skeptical

"Remind me why this was worth changing into a dress and leaving my ward models?"

Harry smiled as he grabbed her hand. "Potter estate management, my dear."

They noticed small brass plaques on either side of the front entrance as they crossed the street. One gave the street address, while the second identified the building as "The Rookery." A magical tingle set the hair the back of Harry's head on end as the two stepped onto the building's front steps. Hermione felt a strong urge to back away, and this urge to flee remained until Harry literally dragged her by the arm through the front door. Once inside they found an elegantly appointed lobby of what looked to be a small hotel. They walked towards the back of the room, where a smartly dressed house-elf greeted them from behind a mahogany desk. The elf looked up at the two and smiled.

"Good day, Patriarch Potter," he said. "The goblins informed us that we might be see your return sometime soon."

Harry adopted a look of confusion on his face. "Good day, erm...I'm sorry but what's your name?"

"Forgive me, Patriarch. My name is Gilbert, and I am The Rookery's concierge."

The house elf looked surprised when Harry reached out to shake his hand. "Please to meet you, Gilbert. This is Hermione Granger, my, erm..."

Hermione giggled a bit at Harry's hesitance. "Nice to meet you, Gilbert. My name is Hermione Granger, and I am the Patriarch's Consort."

Gilbert gave her a wide-eyed nod. "It is an honor, Consort Hermione."

Harry gave her a fish-eye, then turned to the house-elf. "Gilbert, it is my understanding that I own an apartment in this building."

"Yes indeed, Patriarch...would you allow me to take you there now?"

At Harry's nod, Gilbert led them into a magical lift, and asked him to place his hand and wand tip onto a metal plate where floor buttons might otherwise be. The plate gave off a glow and the lift began to move. After a few moments the lift door opened and Gilbert announced, "Twenty-third floor, Potter residence."

That night "Patriarch" Potter and his Consort invited the Art Club over for a small housewarming party. While everyone thought the apartment (which actually took up the entire 23rd floor) was lovely, the guests were far more interested in the large balcony and the differing views it provided.

Witches and wizards that looked down from the balcony could see the Leaky Cauldron's rooftop, and, beyond that, a breathtaking view down the full length of Diagon Alley. Muggle Art Club members, however, could look in the exact same direction and see only warehouses, similar to the two-story structures that everyone agreed could be found in the adjacent city blocks. Evidently, the same kind of magic that protected Hogwarts from the prying eyes of muggles was at work in Central London.

Conjured telescopes, binoculars and window panes were used to work out just how that magic was working. Hermione had hypothesized that muggles might see through the magic if they weren't seeing it with their bare eyes, based on the fact that Colin Creevy hadn't been killed when he viewed the basilisk through his camera lens. Unfortunately, Muggle eyes were still fooled, even when looking through glass. It was only when Wally set up a digital camera and Harry aimed it towards Diagon Alley that the Grangers, Wally and Sir Evan could see in the camera's image display what the others had seen.

Gilbert had been thrilled when Harry and Hermione asked him to provide food and beverages for the small get-together, and flat-out gobsmacked when they asked him to place an additional setting on the dinner table for himself. He demurred, until Harry pointed out that it would be the most efficient way for everyone to learn more about the building's history. The house-elf told an amazingly interesting story.

Diagon Alley had hidden in plain sight for hundreds of years, with walls and street-level notice-me-not charms all that were needed to remain in the shadows. That changed, however, in the early 1800's, when Muggles invented balloons and ways to build taller buildings. In response, wards were constructed to provide a hemispherical illusion for any Muggle who might spy down upon the magical enclave. This allowed unabated development of the surrounding Muggle neighborhoods, including residential buildings like The Rookery.

The Rookery distinguished itself from these other buildings not just with its wards and magical conveniences, but with its scandalous origins. It took a bit of prodding, but Gilbert finally admitted that the Rookery had been built by a small, elite social club of pure-blooded family patriarchs for pleasures of the flesh. While some wizards kept their mistresses there, others used their apartments to frolic with Muggle prostitutes. The building's location was perfect for these purposes; conveniently close enough to Diagon for them to slip away, but on the Muggle side of the Leaky Cauldron (where no proper pure-blooded witch might care to follow). The club itself held nominal ownership of the building, and arranged for maintenance and upkeep through discrete and automatic withdrawals from Gringott's accounts.

Remus noted that the information Gilbert provided was amazingly candid. The house elf shrugged his shoulders and stated that it didn't really matter how candid he was, since nobody other than Harry would remember what he said once they left the property. Immediately pressed for details, Gilbert explain that the entire building was charmed so that anyone other than the flat owners would magically forget about the building (and everything that occurred within its walls) once they crossed back over the wards. This automatic obliviation process was created and maintained not just for privacy but for discretion; with the charm in place philandering wizards didn't have to worry about the consent of the women they brought there.

The implications of the house elf's information cast a shadow on the evening, particularly when they realized that at least a few of the original patriarchs were probably alive and actively using the rest of the building. The group decided to call it a night and either badge-jumped or apparated back to their homes. Wally held back to talk about setting up long-range cameras on the balcony, until Harry reminded him that he would forget everything they talked about as soon as he left. With that conversation thus deferred, Harry and Hermione were soon the only two remaining.

Harry refilled their wineglasses with the last of the open bottles and joined Hermione on the balcony. It was nearly eleven and just barely twilight, as the summer sun dipped behind the western suburbs. They watched quietly as Diagon Alley's street lamps were lit. Hermione broke the silence, noting, "The more I think about why this building was built and what it's used for the less I appreciate this view."

Harry agreed. "Also a waste of tasteful interior design, if you ask me...I was planning on ravishing you in the boudoir until I realized that you wouldn't remember any of my kisses."

Hermione grinned. "So you think your kisses are worth remembering, Potter?"

"You'd be the one to know, sweetheart."

Hermione's eyes lit up a bit. "Oh there may have been one or two that stood out."

"Only one or two?"

Hermione nodded. "Of course, it wouldn't hurt to reinforce those memories by recreating the scene of the crime."

Harry smiled and began to quietly sing. "*I'm headin' down the Atlanta highway...*"

"I'd rather you be quietly heading to Windsor."

"Hey Hermione, do you think you'd like my singing any better during the trip?"

"Don't think I'd be able to notice, with all of the flashing lights and sounds."

"Guess I'll just have to sing louder, then."

Harry called Sir Even and they said the badge-jumping magic words. Hermione imagined that it was the first time a B-52's song had been sung on the astral plane.

"Love Shack, baby Love Shack!...Love Shack, baby Love Shack!...Love Shack..."

Chapter 20 – Marriage Contracts

Monday, June 25

The Rookery, London

The next morning, Harry Potter apparated to the Rookery with a case of electronics and some unanswered questions. Figuring that he ought to find out if he could trust the building staff before he broke out the cameras, he called out for Gilbert. The house-elf appeared in an instant.

"Good morning, Patriarch Potter," said Gilbert. "How might I be of assistance?"

Harry frowned at his latest honorific. Bad enough being called the "Boy-Who-Lived," or "The Chosen One", but in just the past four weeks he'd been pronounced to be "Sir Harry," "Clan Chief Potter," "Queen's Wizard," "Lord Gryffindor," and now "Patriarch Potter." He counted the titles on his fingers, and snorted when he realized that he only needed one more to match the Prince.

"Wonder how one goes about becoming 'Grand Poobah Potter'?" he thought to himself.

Shaking himself from this thought, he asked the house-elf if what he did or said within the flat would be held in confidence.

The house-elf looked shocked at the question. "Of course, Patriarch. The first rule of the building is, "What happens at the Rookery, stays at the Rookery."

Harry nodded, and then asked, "Does that kind of discretion include the patriarchs themselves?"

Gilbert nodded. "The Rookery's house elves must never speak about the other patriarchs and their activities with anyone...even another patriarch."

"So is there any way any of the other patriarchs would know I was here, either yesterday or today?"

Gilbert paused, then replied. "It is doubtful, Patriarch Potter. No records are kept or notifications made of when or how the patriarchs use their flats. House elves and goblins manage the building and all of its finances for the benefit of the patriarchs. So unless you were seen walking into the building by another patriarch..."

"I see," said Harry. "Well, Gilbert, you have been most helpful. Thank you for your time and assistance."

Gilbert bowed, but before he disappeared Harry asked, "And just to be certain, what we just discussed will not be shared with any of the other patriarchs?"

The house elf nodded, then said with a slight smile, "Death before indiscretion, Patriarch Potter. It will be as if I was never here."

Once the house-elf disappeared Harry unpacked the case and set up the cameras and other sensors that could be controlled with telemetry. He'd been given a crash course on what cords went where and the right buttons to push before the trip, but still found it necessary to call Wally for some troubleshooting tips.

Meanwhile, MI-5 agents were busy setting up cameras and a concealed observation post in front of the building. Agents stationed at the site were to call MI-5 3/4's Windsor field office with physical descriptions of anyone entering or leaving the building. By comparing these "eye-witness" descriptions with live camera images, they hoped to be able to account for the potential use of glamor charms. With luck they would catch the faces of at least a few of the patriarchs that chose to walk into the building rather than directly apparate inside.

There were plans for more comprehensive monitoring of the building, but Harry left the details to Wally and Steve. He admired just how quickly the hastily assembled monitoring plan was being implemented, but wasn't big on the "wait and see" approach.. He was (and figured he always would be) a man of action...someone who wanted to bash doors down rather than watch who used them. But as he already had plenty of other things on his plate he decided to focus on tasks that hadn't been or couldn't be delegated to others. There were, in fact, six different things he had wanted to do that day in Central London, and he was already behind schedule. And so it was with some relief that he finally got confirmation from Wally back

at Windsor that the cameras he set up were working properly. He packed up his things, badge-traveled to the back room of the Weasley's shop, and prepared for his next meeting.

Harry walked confidently down Diagon Alley and into the main lobby of Gringott's wearing a blond curly wig and a black eye-patch. The only thing funnier than his appearance was the fact that nobody blinked an eye (hiding in plain sight was easy when everyone expected a powerful wizard like Harry to use magical disguises). He ignored the disgusted looks and protests of bank patrons who thought he was jumping the queue and strode confidently towards a desk located near the back of the lobby.

"Good day, Griphook," he said to the goblin seated behind the desk.

The goblin looked up and said, "Good day, Clan Chief."

Harry took a seat in front of Griphook and pouted. "Aaah, you saw through my disguise. What was it, you read my magical aura? Maybe I tripped some 'clan-chief detection wards' on the way in?"

Griphook gave Harry a toothy smile as he stood from his desk, pulled two thick ledgers under his arms, and directed Harry towards a private conference room, "Something far more mundane," he explained. "You are the only wizard to have ever recognized me and called me by name."

As soon as the conference room's door closed Harry pulled off the itchy wig and annoying eye-patch. "Much better," he said to himself. He then asked,

"Griphook, what can you tell me about the a flat I now own in a building called 'The Rookery'?"

The goblin hummed quietly as he opened up one of ledgers and began to search. Finding the page he was looking for, he said, "One flat, located at 87 Shaftsbury Avenue, Soho, London. Four bedrooms, 3,900 square feet, occupies entire twenty-third floor of building known as 'The Rookery.' Acquired by the Potter Estate in 1892 at time of construction. Original purchase price 87,000 galleons. Current estimated value 3.3 million galleons, although restrictive magical covenants bar you from placing it on the open market."

Harry nodded, then asked, "I understand that the building is actually owned by some type of club. Are there annual billings or fees to cover my share of the building maintenance costs and other services?"

His account manager nodded hummed some more as he checked a different section of the same ledger. He then replied, "This past year the sum of 13,000 galleons was withdrawn from the Potter vault. Authorization for these automatic withdrawals was made by your grandfather on behalf of himself and his future heirs. As the Potter Patriarch you may stop these withdrawals, but this action would result in forfeiting title to the organization that holds nominal ownership of the entire building." Griphook looked up from the ledger and asked, "Do you wish me to stop these withdrawals?"

"Erm, no...not just yet," Harry replied. He then noted, "When I visited the property yesterday a house-elf informed me that Gringott's gave notice that I was the new Potter Patriarch and might be soon visiting."

Griphook gave Harry a cautious look, and then replied, "Under the terms of your grandfather's authorization, Gringott's was required to notify The Rookery as soon as the Potter family had a Patriarch. You became the Potter Patriarch last week when you became Queen's Wizard ...a letter was sent by secure bank owl and received by a house-elf named Gilbert."

Harry paused, then said, "Please Griphook, don't be nervous...you were only doing your job and fulfilling the bank's obligations, right?"

"Yes, Clan Chief, thank you."

"Please Griphook, it's Harry...especially when it is just the two of us in private, alright?"

Griphook gave Harry a second cautious look, then smiled once more. "As you wish...Harry."

The young wizard then asked, "Did you contact any of the wizards that live there, or belong to the club that runs the place?"

Griphook shook his head. "We deal only with the house-elves. Privacy issues."

Harry smiled when he realized it likely that none of Patriarchs knew he had access to his Rookery flat. Wondering if somebody like the senior Malfoy would know through other means, he asked, "Was anyone else notified when I gained my majority and full control of the Potter estate?"

Griphook sighed, then answered, "A required notification was sent to the Wizengamot."

"Why the Wizengamot?"

The goblin gave Harry a tight-lipped smile. "Most likely because the Potter Patriarch has held a permanent seat on that body for more than 900 years."

Harry accepted this reason, and then sighed. "Any chance that they haven't gotten that message yet, Griphook?"

Griphook paused, then asked, "Would you wish that the Ministry not know?"

When Harry nodded, Griphook's toothy grin returned. "I sent out the required notification to the Wizengamot's office on the day it was attacked. While I have a return receipt that proves the message was delivered, I also know that the magical seal on that envelope was never opened."

Harry cocked his head. "Why do you imagine that is, Griphook?"

The goblin pressed his fingertips together and replied. "I understand that the Wizengamot office was one of more damaged portions of the Ministry. It is possible that the letter was destroyed before anyone could read it."

Harry nodded, and then asked, "Are you going to send another notification?"

Griphook smiled. "Gringott's was obligated to send notification. Gringott's is not obligated to determine whether the notification that was sent was actually read." He then added, "At your instruction we could send a second owl."

Harry thought about the benefits of keeping his voting authority in the Wizengamot a secret and realized he knew little about how that body worked. "*Not that I would sway anybody's vote right now,*" he thought to himself.

"I think one notification was sufficient," he decided out loud. "Any one else, then?"

Griphook looked down at the ledger, and then said, "There are a number of individuals and organizations that might be notified whenever an heir reaches his majority. Members of the family are notified, but we have no records of others in the Potter line. Any wizard family that has entered into a betrothal contract with your parents would be notified..."

Harry interrupted. "*Would be ...not was ...right?*"

Griphook delayed his response just long enough to see Harry squirm (who said goblins can't have a bit of fun?). "No, Harry, your parents did not obligate you to honor a betrothal contract."

After Harry let out a sigh of relief, Griphook added, "That being said, there are presently forty-seven open betrothal offers from other Families or Clans."

"Forty-seven different marriage proposals?"

"Yes, Harry."

"That's simply...hard to believe."

Griphook raised what could pass for eyebrows on a goblin's face. "I have the names of the witches right here if you'd like to take a look."

Harry chuckled, then noted, "Well, I couldn't get into too much trouble if all I did was look, right?"

Griphook thought for a moment, then replied tactfully. "It might be argued that a wise and responsible Patriarch should take at least a cursory glance at the list, if only to consider the value of any potential clan alliances."

Harry grinned at Griphook, and asked, "Let's hope that wise and responsible consorts would think the same way if they found out."

A wheezy cough erupted out of Harry's throat when he looked down at the ledger.

"Oh. My. Sweet. Merlin!"

After working through the list the Potter Patriarch asked, "Is there a reason why so many families would be willing to offer one of their daughters to me?"

The goblin chuckled. "Besides the fact that you are famous, wealthy, and the patriarch of one of the oldest wizarding families in Britain?"

"Yes, besides that."

After they shared a few more chuckles (who knew that goblins liked a good joke just as much as any other sentient?) Harry asked for a copy of the list, as well as all of the correspondence and documentation associated with each offer. Griphook called another goblin into the room and sent him scurrying with orders to honor this request.

"The records will be available in a few minutes time," said Griphook. The goblin then asked, "Is there anything else, then Clan Chief?"

Harry scowled a bit. "I'm sure that there is, let me take a look at the list Hermione made out for me." He then glanced down at the piece of parchment pulled from his pocket. After a quick glance at his muggle wristwatch, he said, "Merlin, I'm supposed to be over at the Palace in a few minutes. But I also wanted to eat lunch with Hermione."

Harry looked over at Griphook and asked, "What do you think, my friend... Queen or Consort?"

The goblin squinted a bit and pursed his lips, before asking, "Do they serve food at this Muggle Palace?"

Harry smiled at the goblin's question. He then stood, shook Griphook's hand, and said that his wisdom went far beyond the world of finance.

Thirty minutes later, Harry answered a badge-call from Hermione.

"Hello, Hermione...how is your meeting going with the goblin ward masters?" he asked.

"Erm, fine...well, better than fine, actually," she replied. "But we're on break...they all just got called away to check on some warding down within the vaults."

"Really?" asked Harry. "Does that mean you have a bit of time for lunch?"

"Imagine so," Hermione replied. "Have a place in mind?"

"Actually, I do...why don't you jump over."

Hermione paused. "Will I remember where I ate afterwards?"

She couldn't see the grin on Harry's face when he replied, "Yes, I think you just might."

The jump took Hermione to an elegantly-decorated room with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on three sides and large windows set within the fourth. A gentle breeze passed through these windows, bringing the scent of freshly-mown grass into the room where it mixed and mingled with the scent of century-old books and Beef Burgundy (the later coming from a table within the room's center, elegantly set for lunch). The intoxicating combination of aromas nearly made Hermione's knees buckle.

"Little woozy from the jump?" Harry asked cheekily.

Hermione shook her head as she turned to the sound of Harry's voice. She startled at just how handsome he looked in his dark-olive two-piece suit, shirt and tie. She looked down at the workday robe she was wearing and frowned.

"Wish you had told me that lunch was a formal affair, Harry."

"You've got a wardrobe full of new clothes here, if you like," he replied with a grin. "But it is just the two of us here, and I think you look beautiful just as you are."

She nodded as she took a second look at her surroundings. "We're at Buckingham Palace, then?"

Harry nodded. "Welcome to the Royal Wizard's Suite...would you rather take a tour or eat lunch?"

Hermione looked towards the room's closed door, then over at the table. Focusing beyond the table towards one of the bookcases, she resisted the urge to add browsing as a third option, and suggested that they eat while the food was still hot.

Harry nodded as he pulled out a chair for her.

"Quite the gentleman, Harry," she said.

"Well, comes with the territory, I imagine," he replied, as he took his own seat and lifted up his already-filled wine glass. "A toast?" he asked.

Hermione's thoughts drifted back towards Gringott's and her unfinished work. But the label on the open wine bottle was just too intriguing (and Harry just too handsome) for her to care. She raised her glass towards Harry

He smiled and proposed, "To fairy tales with happy endings."

The breath that got caught in her throat kept Hermione from replying. With moisture gathering in the corners of her eyes she clinked her glass against Harry's.

"To our happy endings," she replied.

It took a few moments for either to be inclined to start up a conversation.

Harry finally asked about Hermione's meeting with the ward masters. She happily reported that the goblins were thrilled with her successful bench-scale demonstration of attenuated anti-apparition fields. There was a lot of work left to do with power boosting and spell focusing before they could recreate this success on a full-scale model, but these were already-established processes, and the ward masters were confident that they'd have a marketable process by week's end.

Harry smiled and congratulated Hermione on her success. "So do you think this means we'll have wards up at Windsor by week's end?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "I might know for sure later today. They're bringing the Director of Warding Services in this afternoon to start negotiating a licensing agreement."

"Wow, that's great Hermione...any ideas on how much your ideas are worth?"

Hermione hemmed and hawed a bit, before Harry encouraged her to not be so modest.

"The ward masters think that by reducing the boundaries down to the exact footprint of the warded area they'll reduce their power requirements by an average of twenty-five percent. But they also think that they can charge at least ten percent more for "custom-tailored" wards."

"So they get paid more for something that will cost them less to build?"

Hermione nodded. "They started talking about either selling the idea to them outright, or granting them an exclusive license to use it."

"Wonderful," said Harry. "I'm so proud of you...so which way are you thinking?"

"Not sure," Hermione replied. "I'm thinking of offering a trade instead...I let them use my attenuation mods, and they teach me how to build wards

that block magical detection.”

Harry thought about Hermione’s statement, before his eyes lit up. “With those kind of wards up over a building, underage wizards could practice their magic!”

Hermione smiled. “Exactly what I was thinking.”

Harry couldn’t contain his enthusiasm, and almost jumped across the table to give Hermione a hug. “Oh, that’s simply brilliant, Hermione.”

Before Harry could turn his admiration into a snogfest Hermione asked how his morning had gone. Harry sighed, then sat back down and recounted his adventures within the Rookery flat. He then jumped over his meeting with Griphook to describe his introduction to staff at Buckingham Palace. Harry had met most of the Queen’s Palace security detail, as well as the head of SO14 (Scotland Yard’s Royal Protection Force), whom he described as a bit “Snape-ish.”

“How so?” Hermione asked.

“Well, he was a bit put-off that he had to give me a tour of their command center...thought that the ‘Queen’s little magician’ didn’t have a good enough reason to know.”

“So what happened?”

“Steve sat him down for a little chat,” he replied. “Right after he gave us new identification badges to deal with the bureaucratic git.” Harry then reached into his pocket, pulled out a plastic ID card, and passed it across the table.

Hermione’s eyes widened, and she gave Harry a questioning look. He responded by flipping his own palace staff ID around to show an identical badge.

“So is this just a fake ID for cover?” she asked.

Harry shook his head. “Afraid not,” he replied. “They don’t want there to be any questions about our authority to lead others magicals in the defense of the Royal Family.” He then stood up straight and extended his hand. “Agent Granger, welcome to Her Majesty’s Secret Service.”

Hermione shook her head, not sure that she liked the idea.

Harry noticed her concern, and said, “Look on the bright side, Hermione. They’re starting us with mid-grade commissions.”

“So?”

Harry smiled. “So how many teenagers get to outrank their parents?”

Hermione broke out into a small smile, and then asked, “Well that’s all fine and good, but the real question is whether or not I outrank my boyfriend.”

Harry grinned, and then replied, “They initially wanted to put me a couple of grades higher than you, but then I asked if that would prevent me from snogging a junior officer.”

“So what happened?”

“I made them demote me down to your rank.”

Hermione laughed, then walked over and gave him a hug. “Oh, Secret Agent Potter, how romantic.”

Harry paused, then chuckled at her response. “Merlin, there’s another one.”

“Another what, Harry?”

“Another title...ties me up with the Prince.”

“Really?” Hermione asked. “I didn’t know it was a competition.”

Harry shook his head. “It isn’t really. There’s only one title that I really care about...and chuck the rest.”

“And what title would that be?”

Harry placed a kiss on her forehead and replied, “Hermione’s boyfriend.”

Hermione looked into Harry’s eyes before snorting and pulling him into a hug.

“Oh, Harry,” she cooed. “I wish that I didn’t have to go back to that meeting right now.”

Her boyfriend looked at his wristwatch and said, “You don’t need to be back for another forty-five minutes.”

“Really?” asked Hermione. “And just how might you know that, Mr. Potter?”

Harry smiled and said, “Griphook assured me that the ward inspections would take at least an hour-and-a-half to complete their work.”

Hermione shook her head, not sure whether to admonish Harry for his scheming, or praise him for his ingenuity. Some ear nibbling forced the issue.

“So Harry,” she said, “you promised to give me a tour of the Royal Wizard’s suite?”

The Queen's wizard stopped chewing on an earlobe so that he could whisper in her ear. “Any particular room you might be interested in, Hermione?”

She pulled him into an even-tighter embrace and nodded. “Don’t suppose they gave you a broom closet?”

Harry smiled as he shook his head. “Sorry,” he whispered, “No broom closets. I do have a rather large master bedroom at my disposal, though.”

It was Hermione’s turn to smile as she broke the embrace, grabbed his hand, and started pulling him towards the door.

“Guess that will have to do.”

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Harry felt rather guilty that he hadn’t told Hermione about the marriage contracts before she returned to Gringott’s. He had planned on doing so during lunch, but the romantic atmosphere engineered to soften the blow of that revelation had gotten the best of them. Next thing he knew, they were snogging in his newly assigned bedroom at Buckingham (and he didn’t want to ruin any of that).

The Queen's Wizard suspected that things would be worse, now that the first chance to tell her had come and gone. Best he could do was rationalize the need to find out more about these contracts before the next chance came at dinnertime. But who to talk to? It was the kind of problem that he’d bring to Hermione first, but that wouldn’t do. Ron was clearly out... Harry loved him like a brother, but this was another one of those times when his Champion’s jump to jealousy might get the best of him. The ideal candidate would be a married wizard that Harry trusted, but the only one to fit that bill was Arthur Weasley, and he was clearly out given that Ginny’s name was on the list.

And so it was that Harry reluctantly sat up in his new bed and decided to call Remus Lupin (whose conflict of interest was almost as bad as Arthur’s). With assurances that Harry wasn’t interrupting his afternoon, Remus badge-jumped and immediately dropped to one knee.

“My liege,” he intoned.

“Oh knock it off, Remus,” Harry scolded, as he rose from his seat on the mattress edge. “It’s either ‘Just Harry’ or a hex for you.”

The former DADA professor broke out into a grin as he stood. That grin grew wider as he took in his surroundings.

“So Harry,” Remus asked, “did I ever tell you about my nights on patrol as a Hogwarts Prefect?”

Wondering why his former professor was raising this topic, Harry shook his head.

“Quite something,” Remus continued. “With my were-enhanced sense of smell I always knew when pheromones and bra hooks were being released behind closed broom closet doors.”

It only took Harry a few moments to catch on, and to realize that his recently-used bedroom might not have been the best place to receive a guest. Waffling between acute embarrassment and roguish camaraderie, Harry decided to put on the brave front.

“Down, boy,” he replied, “or do I need to mark my new territory?”

Remus broke out into a hearty laugh. “No worries, Alpha,” he said in reassurance. “Although it would be great fun to watch you pee around the perimeter of the Palace.”

Harry rolled his eyes as he grabbed Remus’s elbow and showed him around the new apartment. Of particular note were two large walk-in closets. Harry guided his mentor to a section that bore his name and handed him a clothes hanger.

“Thought we’d grab a cup of tea in the Mess,” he explained.

Remus nodded as he shed his robe and hung it on the bar next to a bespoke shirt and tailored suit. Hanging next to the suit were black combat fatigues, and two wizard’s robes (one plain and one formal). Looking down his black trousers and lightweight sweater, he snorted and asked, “Do I need to change into that fancy muggle wear?”

Harry gave Remus the once-over and smiled. “Good enough to throw on just the jacket...it’ll give you someplace to hang your credentials.” As he handed over both the jacket and a security badge, Harry explained that each member of the Order of Arthur had his or her own sets of clothing to facilitate travel between the muggle and wizarding worlds. Similar mini-staging areas were planned for Hogwarts, the back of Fred and George’s shop, the Round Tower, and the Farm.

“Five sets of clothing?” Remus asked. “Harry, you don’t need to do that. I mean, at the very least I can transfigure my clothing whenever there’s a need.”

Harry shook his head. “Not happening, my friend,” he replied. “The Queen insists that her Order be properly uniformed at her expense. Some of us could transfigure, sure, but Wally, Steve and the Granger’s can’t.” He then added, “And in any event these outfits are more than they might seem.”

Remus cocked his head as he slipped on the jacket and took a closer look. It was slightly heavier than he expected, and hung a bit stiffly, as if there

were something between the wool fabric and silk lining.

"An inch-and-a-half of steel-reinforced Kevlar, magically thinned and lightened," Harry said. He then explained what Kevlar was, and noted that MI-5 ¾ testing had proven that the material's stopping power hadn't been compromised by the magical alterations.

"So this would protect me from what, exactly?" Remus asked.

Harry grinned. "Oh, not much...knives, swords, bullets..."

"Expecting to fight against Muggles, are we?" Remus asked with a confused smile.

"Not really," Harry explained. He then surprised Remus by withdrawing the Sword of Gryffindor from its hidden scabbard and whacking it against the werewolf's wand arm. "But I imagine any magical opponents I face might wish they were Muggles if I catch them without something similar on."

Remus winced from the sword's impact. While the Kevlar had completely stopped the blade from slicing through his arm, it hadn't cushioned against the blunt force behind the sword stroke. Embarrassed by his failure to maintain his guard, Remus gritted his teeth and struggled not to rub the area bruised by the attack. As he sheathed his sword Harry noted that Fred and George had also added the same shield charms used on the robes they had sold to the Ministry.

As the two left the apartment, Harry told Remus that the Muggle identification badges would be needed whenever they ventured beyond his quarters (the same held for trips outside of the Round Tower at Windsor). He also informed Remus that his badge identified him as a member of Palace security, and that he'd need to wear an earpiece similar to the one worn during the Battle of Ascot, if for nothing else than show.

Harry's functional earpiece and transmitter came in handy when he got turned around on his way to the Mess. He could, of course, have used his badge to get directions from Steve, but there were Muggles about in the hallways. With Steve's aid it only took them a few minutes to reach a mess hall strikingly similar to the one Harry visited so often at Windsor. As it was between lunchtime and teatime, the two found it easy to find a table where they could chat without need of privacy charms. Five minutes later, they were settled in with tea and fresh-baked scones.

After complimenting the service, Remus asked, "So I imagine you wanted me here to do more than dress me and show off your bachelor pad?"

The Queen's Wizard snorted. "Most definitely, Remus." After the few seconds of silence that accompanied a bite of biscuit, he off-handedly said, "I had an interesting chat with my Gringott's advisor this morning."

"About your financial situation?"

"Amongst other things," Harry replied with a smile. He took a moment to pique some interest, then asked, "So what can you tell me about wizard world marriage contracts?"

Remus choked a bit on his tea, just barely managing to avoid a spray. "Have the goblins added matchmaking to their portfolio of services?"

Harry chuckled as he shook his head and began to recount his conversation with Griphook. Lupin was pleased to learn that Lily and James hadn't agreed to any binding betrothal agreements, but lost it at the idea of Harry having to deal with open-ended marriage contracts.

"So did Griphook tell you how many open offers there were?"

Harry nodded, and told him. Remus couldn't help but spray upon hearing the number.

"Forty-seven?" he exclaimed, loud enough to catch the attention of staff standing on the other side of the room.

Harry shushed his friend, and nodded.

Remus stated, "As a Muggleborn witch I take it Hermione's parents weren't involved?"

Harry nodded in confirmation.

"So what did she think about all this?" Remus asked.

"That's the thing," Harry replied sheepishly. "I had the chance to tell her during lunch, but couldn't bring myself to do it."

Lupin squinted at Harry. "But you found time enough to work up a sweat, eh?"

Harry nodded. "Well, yes...I was going to tell her, but we just got carried away a bit, and..."

"And now you're worried about what she'll say not just about the offers, but the fact that you didn't immediately tell her."

Harry sighed. "Right in one."

Remus scratched his head. "Don't know quite what to say, cub. I mean...my experience with witches isn't any longer than yours....So what made you hesitate?"

"Besides the fact that she was making doe eyes at me all during lunch?"

"Erm...yes."

Oh...well..."

"Do you know which witches we're talking about?"

Harry nodded, but made no move to show Remus the relevant parchment.

"Anybody on that list that we know?"

Harry snorted. "Of course, Remus...seems like just about every pure-blood family with an unattached female under the age of sixty has made an offer.

Remus nodded in understanding as he mentally reviewed his class lists.

"I mean, really," Harry spouted. "what were my parents thinking?"

Remus paused before replying. "Your mum and dad never mentioned anything about marriage contracts for you, cub...besides the fact that they had rejected binding offers from the Malfoy and Nott families.

With a questioning look, Harry said, "Well if that's the case then why is there a Malfoy on the list?"

Remus shook his head. "Dunno, Harry. It could be that those open offers were extended after your parent's deaths." He then snorted. "Didn't realize the Malfoys had a daughter to marry off, although I wouldn't put it past them to offer up Draco for the right amount of money and power."

Harry shuddered at the thought. "I asked Griphook about that...apparently there's a line of Malfoys still in France."

"Makes sense, I guess," Remus replied. He then said, "If it helps any, I do know that your father fought tooth and nail to avoid one of these contracts so that he could marry your mum."

"He did?"

Remus nodded. "It was a right mess. Words were spoken between James and your grandfather that never had opportunity to be taken back before either of them...well..."

After trailing off, Remus's eyes lit up. "But that wouldn't matter, here, right? As Head of Family, you could reject all of these open offers out of hand."

When Harry nodded, Remus asked a logical follow-up. "So what's the problem? Is there somebody on the list that you fancy?"

Harry shook his head forcefully. "Of course not."

"So what's the problem telling Hermione? It's not as if you asked for these contracts, right?"

Harry shook his head once more. "Guess I'm worried that Hermione would insist I consider the potential benefits of family alliances."

Remus waved his hand dismissively. "Please, Harry...have a little faith in your girl. And if not faith, at least a sense of humor...I mean, what other teen-aged wizard has that many offers?"

"Haven't a clue," Harry replied. He paused, then gave Remus a evil look. "Think I should have a sense of humor about all this, eh?"

"Most definitely."

Harry chuckled as he retrieved a small parchment scroll from an inside coat pocket. As he handed it across the table he snarked, "Let me see your sense of humor after you work your way through the list."

Remus nodded and began to scan down the scroll. Harry was dead on with respect to comprehensiveness. All the big family names were there, including more than a few aligned with Voldemort. "*Comelius Fudge's daughter, nowhere's a match,*" he thought to himself. Most of the specific witch's names were unfamiliar to him; Remus guessed they might be older sisters (or the spinster aunts) of Harry's classmates.

Two names caught his eye. "So you've been offered your choice of the Patil girls?" he asked.

Harry shook his head and sighed. "Not just my choice of one, but under the laws of magical India their parents offered me *both*."

Remus chuckled. "Now you see Harry? Plenty of humor right there."

"Yeah, right Moony," Harry snarked. "Just scroll down to the end of the list."

Remus nodded as he let the bottom end of the scroll fall. The first thing to catch his eye was Ginerva Weasley's name. "That could be awkward," he thought to himself. But then he glanced up a couple of lines and blanched.

He looked up at Harry and noticed that his eyes were twinkling like Dumbledore's used to. He looked back down and confirmed that the name he thought he saw was really there.

"Apparently," Harry dryly noted, "open-ended offers can come from more than just pure-blooded families."

Remus nodded, and said nothing for ten full seconds before breaking out into a series of gut-wrenching guffaws. Harry couldn't help but join in,

earning them scolding looks from the mess hall manager. They got the non-verbal cue and quickly returned to Harry's quarters to begin their scheming.

In the end, they decided that there was little need to embellish what was, all by itself, a rather wonderful prank. Harry found the nerve to spill the news to Hermione, and was pleased to be on the receiving end of her empathy. She even agreed to help with their plans.

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Nymphadora Tonks had no idea why her parents and Remus were invited that night to a hastily arranged dinner at Buckingham Palace. Ted and Andromeda Tonks, on the other hand, thought they knew why they had been invited, but had no idea why Hermione and Remus were there with Harry.

The entire Tonks family, therefore, was rendered speechless when (after an amazing dinner) Hermione presented everyone a copy of an open-ended betrothal contract and announced that as Potter Clan Consort she would take the lead on negotiating the terms offered in advance of Nymphadora's marriage to Harry.

As the one with the least experience in the fine art of pranking, it was all Hermione could do not to burst out laughing at the look on the Tonks family's faces. She held on just long enough for Remus to take a wizard photograph that documented the only time in his future wife's life that she was able to display a beet-red hair color that so completely matched her face.

Remus considered the many future nights spent of the couch to be more than worth that photo. Harry and Hermione agreed, right up to the point where Tonks so brilliantly pranked them back.

But that's another story.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Senior Advisor, Part 1

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

Chapter 21 - Percy's Problems

Thursday, June 28
Ministry of Magic

Special Assistant Weasley strode into his Special Assistant's office and barked at the small wizard painting mounted behind his desk.

"Tell the Muggle Prime Minister that he should make himself immediately available for Minister Scrimgeour's arrival."

The echo wizard scowled at the live wizard's arrogance and stomped out of his frame in a huff. The portrait had never heard so much as a "please" or "thank you" since it had been moved to Percy's office two months previous. Special Assistant Weasley was oblivious to this reaction, as he was busy arranging parchments in his portfolio. It was the first time the Minister had invited him along to one of these meetings, and Percy didn't want to give him any reason to make it the last time he did so.

He was all packed-up and halfway to the Minister's office when the portrait returned to its frame with some disturbing news. "I was unable to determine whether the Muggle minister heard my announcement."

Percy frowned. "What do you mean, you were unable to determine if he heard you? Did you make the announcement?"

"Yes."

"Did the Muggle notice you were speaking to him, or say anything in reply?"

"I was unable to determine that."

"Why not?"

"Because my other portrait is covered with some sort of black cloth and no sound is coming through from the other side."

"What?" Percy yelled. "Since when?"

The wizened old wizard echo snorted, then replied, "Two days ago."

Percy's face turned pale. He then shouted, "Two days ago? Why didn't you report this to me?"

The echo smiled as Percy's knickers twisted. "You ordered me to spy on the Muggle minister and report back if I saw any wizard in the office besides Auror Shackbolt or heard any discussion of the wizarding world," the painting explained. "I have neither heard nor seen anything that required me to interrupt your *busy* day doing *very important things*."

Shocked at this response, Percy sat down on his desk, put his head in his hands and fretted. This was bad. Very bad. Minister Scrimgeour was expecting to flog straight away to the muggle Minister's office once he returned from lunch, and Percy didn't even know whether the muggle Minister was in his office.

"Well if the portrait can't deliver the message, I'll have to do it myself," he muttered. Percy rushed down the hall to the Minister of Magic's office. Brushing aside questions from the receptionist and Aurors that stood guard, he burst into the empty executive office and grabbed a pinch of flog powder. Kneeling in front of the hearth, he threw the powder into the fire, confidently yelled out "muggle minister's office," and stuck his head into the blue flames.

A few seconds later Percy's head was forcefully cast out the flames with enough momentum to throw his entire body ten feet back from the flog. As he painfully pulled himself up from the floor he heard a tinny female voice announce, "*The flog destination you have requested is no longer in service, or has been disconnected. Please check your address and try again.*"

Special Assistant Percy closed his eyes and sighed. It wasn't as if the Muggle minister's flog was paid on subscription, so somebody must have magically shut down the connection from the other side.

"*The Muggle Minister's office has been attacked,*" Percy immediately thought. "*Or worse, Potter shut it down.*" With second thoughts, Percy discounted the former, as they would have heard from the Auror stationed there. "*Unless the Aurors are betraying the Ministry as well,*" he worried. That there might be some disloyal Aurors wouldn't have surprised Percy one bit, given just how unhelpful Head Auror Robards had been the past couple of weeks. The chances that he would be given an Auror team to check in on the Muggle minister's office were nil (especially after Auror Dawlish's team performed so dreadfully for Madame Umbridge).

Percy thought of a way to potentially circumvent the Auror department, and scurried towards the Magical Surveillance Office, where records could be checked for magic use anywhere within the British Isles. While the MSO worked closely with the Aurors, Percy knew that he could trust at least a few of its staff. After all, they had been hand-picked by the Minister's office just last week to replace the Fudge-hired traitors that used to work there.

As he impatiently waited for a lift, Percy's thoughts drifted to the other replacements the Ministry had been forced to place. He'd been shocked to

find that so many of the covert Death Eaters had been seemingly high-performing loyal Ministry employees. They were, of course, Fudge-hires and not at all Minister Scrimgeour's responsibility, but still...a rather radical shake-up, and not just in the MSO. Lots of new hires taking over the running of the magical transportation network, too. As he entered the lift he realized that this was probably the reason why the Minister's Office wasn't notified about the shut-down floo connection.

Percy reached the desired floor and stormed the surveillance office with an expectation of immediate respect and immediate answers. What he received was grudging confusion. As best as they knew, no magic had been used within the Muggle minister's office for the past week. Which didn't make any sense, since magic would be needed to shut down the floo connection and (possibly) shroud the portrait with magical silence.

Special Assistant Weasley returned to his little office and ordered the portrait to check again for the Muggle minister. While the echo was gone he leaned against his desk and tried to catch his breath. The dashing about had tired him, and he was very much looking forward to having interns do the running for him.

The thought of Ginny doing some of that running brought a small smile to her older brother's face. Receiving her tear-stained owl-post that practically denounced her former boyfriend and begged for Percy's forgiveness was, without a doubt, the highlight of his past week. Minister Scrimgeour had been most pleased with the development, and Madame Umbridge had been more than happy to have Ginny's internship switched from Centaurs to the Minister's office. Percy himself would manage his sister's development as a loyal Ministry employee.

The portrait returned with nothing new to report, forcing Percy to take drastic and decisive action (mainly because he was too afraid to reveal his mistakes by asking the Minister for direction). He walked over to the corner of his office that had been specially cleared for outbound-only apparition, drew his wand, and disappeared with a loud crack.

Percy had planned on apparating directly into the Muggle minister's office (having previously scouted out the street location for just that purpose). He was therefore quite surprised when he bounced off anti-apparation wards and landed with a crack some 200 meters east of his target... particularly as this displacement put him a few meters above the Thames River. Once there, the non-magical forces of gravity came to bear, and he fell feet-first into the murky waters.

Shouts from Muggle bystanders who had heard the crack and splash greeted Percy's ears when he resurfaced. He cursed, transfigured his wizard robes into Muggle clothing, and swam to shore. He had just found a relatively quiet spot to magically dry himself when an all-too familiar voice addressed him from behind.

"Oy Percy...nice day for a swim, eh?"

Special Assistant Weasley immediately thought to grab his wand, but realized that Harry Potter would have hexed him by now if that was his intention. He slowly turned and found the Queen's Wizard standing a few yards away, dressed in a Muggle suit.

"Queen's Wizard Potter, I figured that you must have been involved in this outrageous and wanton disregard for magical secrecy."

Harry snorted. "If you ask me, your little tour of the Thames was more obliviator-worthy." He crossed his arms in front of his chest and asked, "I suppose you have a legitimate reason for trying to gain entry into the Prime Minister's office?"

Percy frowned at the thought that Harry knew his intentions. "You're clearly out of bounds, Potter. Whatever schemes you have as Queen's Wizard have no relevance to official matters between the two Ministries."

"Ah, but I must disagree, Special Assistant Weasley," Harry said with a grin. "By right of treaty, the Queen's Wizard is allowed to defend the Crown and all members of Parliament from magical attack...used to just be the monarch but apparently some guy named Cromwell saw fit to work out an add-on."

"So?"

Harry smirked. "Percy, Percy, Percy...I would think that the Ministry employee in charge of spying on the Prime Minister's Office would at least know something about his subject. The Prime Minister is a member of Parliament."

Percy sputtered. "But, but this is an outrage...you're meddling with official means of communication..."

"Nothing of the sort," Harry replied. "The Muggle Prime Minister requested that I evaluate some rather specific security issues, and asked me to shut down the floo connection. You see, he doesn't know a lot about our world, and is afraid that if the Minister of Magic can floo into his office, then any old wizard might."

"But that's rubbish!" Percy exclaimed. "It's a secured floo-connection that only connects the two Minister's offices."

"Oh is that so?" Harry asked. "And has anyone bothered to explain that to the Prime Minister?" When Percy didn't respond Harry added, "Thought as much. Don't worry, though, I made sure that the Prime Minister has a thorough understanding of *all* of the magical objects that have been placed in his office."

Breath caught in Percy's throat. "*All* of the objects?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, Percy, that includes the magical portrait that has been spying on the muggle Prime Minister for who knows how many years." He then shook his head, adding, "Have to say that he was a bit peeved to learn that the painting was more than just an ugly magical doorbell."

Percy sputtered again, then tried to recover whatever dignity he could muster. "Well, I'll have you know that I was trying to conduct official Ministry business. The Minister of Magic has urgent business with the Muggle Minister."

Harry straightened his own back and replied, "And the British Prime Minister is not at Scrimgeour's beck and call. If the Minister of Magic wants a meeting, he'll have to do what everybody else has to do."

"What's that?"

"Make an appointment."

Percy turned beet red at Harry's insolence. "And just how is the Minister's Office supposed to do that without use of the floo or portrait?"

Harry paused, and then fished his mobile out of a trouser pocket. Hitting the right speed-dial combination, he put the phone to his ear and soon said, "Good afternoon, Auror Shackbolt, this is Queen's Wizard Potter, how are you?...oh, fine thanks...say, just needed to let you know that somebody tried to apparate into 10 Downing Street a few minutes ago...yeah, wards worked like a charm...who?...oh, Percy Weasley of all people...said he was trying to set up a meeting between the two Ministers....yeah, I'll tell him. Thanks."

Harry pocketed his mobile then looked over at a puce-colored Percy. "Auror Shackbolt has been in Glasgow the past few days with the Prime Minister. They're expected back tonight, and he suggested that you provide Head Auror Robards with a meeting request and proposed agenda. He'll make sure that Auror Shackbolt gets it to the Prime Minister."

"That's hardly an appropriate protocol chain," Percy sputtered.

"Maybe so," Harry replied, "but it's the best you'll get until the two Ministers can get together to agree on methods of communication that don't involve espionage and trespass."

Percy shook his head at the thought of just how much shouting he'd hear when he returned to the Ministry. Resigned to his fate, he couldn't resist asking Harry an additional question.

"So just how did you construct anti-apparation wards and shut down the floo without tripping the Ministry's magical-detection devices?"

Harry beamed a wide smile back at Percy and replied, "Magic."

The Queen's Wizard then escorted Special Assistant Weasley down the street to a location just outside 10 Downing Street's wards. He magically opened a pretend public loo and pointed Percy inside.

"Why do you want me to go in there?" Percy asked.

"Because you apparate too loud," Harry replied simply. "It has both magical and muggle soundproofing on it. After all, we do want to keep our secrets, right?"

"I most certainly do not apparate too loudly."

The teen-aged wizard snorted. "How would you know?" he asked. "You don't stick around long enough to hear."

Percy scowled in response, but did take care to close the door as he stepped inside. It took the Special Assistant longer than usual to focus on his destination, as he was distracted by the nagging suspicion that crossing Harry Potter would ultimately prove *not* to be a savvy career move.

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10:00am, Saturday, June 30
Mucking Marshes, Essex

Ronald Weasley found it hard to believe that his first full day in official service to the British Monarchy would involve dressing up in white muggle jumpsuits and poking through heaps of Muggle garbage with a willow branch.

"Cor, Hermione, can't you just give us bubble heads?" he whined, as he caught a whiff of waste. "I'm this close to adding my breakfast to the rubbish pile."

The teen-aged witch looked up from her own heap and shot him a look of disgust that had little to do with the soiled disposable nappies that were underneath her Wellies. "Save it for someone who's got nothing better to do than to care, Sir Ronald."

"I mean, really," Ron continued, "didn't expect being a knight would always be a walk in the park, but this is just *foul*."

"Suck it up and take the good with the bad, mate," Harry called out from his position a few feet away. "Didn't see you complaining about your duties last night when you were mucking about with the Queen."

The grin on Harry's face conveyed more amusement than anger; even he had to admit that their present situation was quite a step down from the previous night's ceremony at Buckingham Palace. Not that it mattered to him, mind you...they were horcrux hunting, and when compared to an *inferi*-infested cave this *was* a walk in the park.

Mucking Landfill was the kind of appropriately descriptive name that authors love to give to their characters and places. Only this place was far from fictional. A waste disposal facility located in Essex, Mucking Landfill was the current recipient of nearly all of the rubbish produced by the City of London. Had been, actually, since it was commissioned in 1994, which is why the Trio were busying themselves dumpster diving on a grand and magical scale.

Like seemingly everything else that had supported their campaign against Voldemort, the lead had come from the Muggle world. One of Wally's colleagues had suggested that preparing a background profile of Voldemort's personality might help predict his future actions. As part of that effort, Harry and Hermione had reviewed the pensieve memory of Dumbledore's first encounter with young Tom Riddle. The memory began with a curbside view of the orphanage where he was raised, which caused Hermione to pull Harry out of the pensieve even before they saw Tom Riddle. She excitedly explained that the orphanage might be a potential horcrux repository, given its significance as the place where Tom first learned he was a wizard. Harry agreed, but told her that Dumbledore had already thought of that possibility, and told him that he hadn't found anything magical when he had returned to the site.

Figuring that there was no harm taking a second look (and thinking that they might find records of other orphans who lived there with Tom), Hermione went about trying to find the orphanage. With Wally's help, she used the internet to locate the names and addresses of seven different orphanages that had operated within the City of London during Tom Riddle's childhood. Internet map sites then provided not just the locations of these addresses, but point-to-point driving instructions and route maps.

Harry, Ron and Hermione then visited all seven sites during a afternoon's drive in her Bentley. Unfortunately, only two of the seven street addresses were attached to buildings of appropriate age, and neither of these buildings had an exterior that matched what they had seen in the memory. Seemingly at a dead-end, they had returned to Windsor only to have Wally take renewed interest in one of the street addresses. A check on his laptop subsequently revealed that one of the street addresses with newer construction had been the site of a seemingly random Death Eater attack on Muggles.

"That's it, then," Harry decided, once he heard the news. "Voldemort hid a horcrux at the orphanage, then sent his toadies around to check on it once he returned."

"Are you sure?" asked Hermione. "Why would he risk storing something so important in a building that could be torn down so readily?"

"Because he was thinking like a wizard," Ron explained.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked.

"Ever notice that there aren't many new magical buildings?" said Ron, answering a question with a question. "Wizards never tear down old buildings...reshape them, resize them, add on to them, sure, but never tear them down...think Burrow."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because you'd lose the magical energy that was poured into the original construction," said Hermione, with a nod of comprehension.

"So Voldemort didn't plan on urban renewal?" Harry concluded.

"Exactly."

"So why would Dumbledore tell you that he didn't find a horcrux in a building that no longer existed?" asked Ron.

Harry thought back to his conversation with the Headmaster. He then said, "Dumbledore told me that he apparated back to the orphanage's location, but came up empty when he cast detection spells for magical objects."

"And he said 'orphanage's location,' rather than 'orphanage'?"

Harry nodded. "Maybe Dumbledore didn't think it mattered if the building was gone."

The other two agreed that explanation made the most sense.

"So if there was a horcrux hidden in the orphanage at one time, where would it have gone?" asked Harry.

Ron paused, and then said, "Either somebody removed it from the building before it was torn down, or it went wherever the building rubble went."

"Could one of his supporters have taken it before the tear down?" asked Harry.

"Doubtful," surmised Hermione. "Those buildings are more than a few years old, and Voldemort wasn't around to let anyone know."

"That makes sense," Harry concluded. "Now, I wonder where the construction debris could have gone?"

Wally's inquires subsequently placed them where they were today, with their rubber boots ankle-deep in the detritus of a disposable society. From the street address they got a building permit, which led to the demolition permit, which identified the general contractor, whose records provided both the date of building demolition and the location where the debris was sent. The landfill that had accepted the waste kept rather meticulous records themselves, and could identify, within a quarter-acre area and twenty-foot depth interval, where the debris had been placed within the facility.

They'd arrived on site at 8am that morning, only to find that the Queen's men had once again done some excellent advance work. Two large backhoes had stripped off the protective soil cap and the waste that overlay the layer of interest. The Muggle backhoe operators weren't surprised by the fact that there were government officials conducting this type of search; Scotland Yard investigators were out there on a near-monthly basis looking for this or that piece of evidence. They would have been very surprised by the search equipment, though, had they hung around after they had completed their work. But as it was time for morning tea, the two men cleared out of the search area before they could spy the forked pieces of wood that the three visitors had pulled out of their kits.

The search wasn't to involve active magic, as Harry had no desire to reveal their interest in the site to either Voldemort or the Ministry of Magic (explaining why Ron's desire for a bubble of fresh air went unmet). The forked willow branches were magical dousing rods, charmed by the Weasley Twins to point towards magical objects (MI-5 3/4 had already deployed prototypes of these rods to security checkpoints at Windsor, Buckingham Palace and 10 Downing Street). The rods were another reason why they weren't using magical spells...at the beginning of their search the only magic that the dousing rods would point to were their wands and Art Club badges. So, until Fred and George found a way to modify the charm to screen out known magical objects, the three were forced to take turns searching; two would douse while the third stood just outside the detection range with their own wand in one hand and the other two wands in the other.

The work was hot, sweaty and exhaustive. In the first hour of searching they had uncovered a small bag of gobstones, the tip of a forever-inked quill and a broken shard from a magical mirror. With each positive response they had to stop and dig down through the waste by hand until they uncovered the object. Given their search results, the three greeted the fourth time one of their divining rods gave a sharp jerk downwards with as much resignation as excitement.

"Any guesses on what it will be this time?" Ron asked, as they swapped out their dousing rod for shovels and began to dig into the waste.

"I'm actually surprised we've found anything," Hermione replied. "I wouldn't have expected to have wizard waste mixed in with the Muggle trash."

"Well I still can't get over just how much Muggle trash there is in the first place," Ron replied.

"What, you think the wizarding world is any more environmentally responsible?" asked Harry.

"Of course," said Ron. "You don't see wizards heaping their trash out over the countryside."

"So exactly where do they put their rubbish?" Harry asked.

"Haven't a clue," Ron replied. "Back home, Mum and Dad just banish the garbage with the bin is full."

Hermione shook her head. "Typical...out of sight, out of mind."

"Oh, so like you know?" Ron quipped.

"Yes, and you would too if you ever..."

"*Bothered to read Hogwarts, a History,*" Ron and Harry finished for her in unison.

Hermione frowned a bit. "Well it's true, you know...the standard waste management spells were developed at Hogwarts in the Eleventh Century, with all banished material magically transported to the Waste Plane.

"Waste Plane?" asked Harry.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "It's an off-shoot of the small bit of ethereal plane used by the floo network."

"You mean the floo connections transport people through heaps of garbage?" asked Ron incredulously.

Harry snorted. "Always knew there was a reason I didn't like floo travel."

Hermione sighed (as much as she could sigh without breathing in too much stench). "I did say off-shoot, Ron," she explained.

Ron's retort was cut off by Harry's cry of discovery. During the conversation they had dug through a layer of household garbage and uncovered a separate layer of rough-hewn wood and plaster. Harry stepped down and began to push and pull at the timber. Ron eventually jumped in to help, and with shoulders underneath the end of one length of wood the two were able to pry up on a large piece of plaster.

"See anything?" Harry asked Hermione, as he and Ron struggled to keep the section of wall elevated off of the base of the pit.

Hermione jumped into the pit with her rod (which now pointed sideways rather than straight down). Following down the length of willow branch with her eyes, she quietly replied, "Yes, Harry, I do,"

She then stood and added, "Give me a second and I'll crawl under to get it."

"Don't you dare, Hermione," Harry replied. "Don't know how long Ron and I can hold this piece up."

Hermione looked at Harry and nodded as she swapped out the dousing rod for her wand. Deciding that just a small bit of active magic could be justified given circumstances, she pointed her wand underneath the wall fragment, and uttered an incantation that brought a grim smile of satisfaction to Harry's face.

"*Accio Helga Hufflepuff's Cup.*"

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The discovery of another horcrux rekindled the destruction debate on the way back to Windsor. They just so happened to have planned on visiting Hogwarts the following day, as the network of Slug Club alumni had finally gotten word to Horace Slughorn that there was a fortune in potion supplies sitting underneath the castle. Ron thought that they ought to bring the cup down with them into the Chamber and try and destroy it straight away, until Hermione cautioned that it would be difficult to explain to their former Potions Professor why they were trying to ruin a priceless

Founders artifact. And so, after returning to the Round Tower and cleaning off the filth and grime, they met with Wally and asked to “Indiana Jones” the cup to wherever the locket was presently stored.

Talking with Wally about the need to destroy these objects then brought out all types of creative contingency plans. It was understood that if the three teens were killed or captured before they could do the job that the Muggles would have to try to do it themselves. Steel factory blast furnaces and other industrial sources of amazingly high temperatures had been discounted as possibilities, for fear that there might be a destructive explosion associated with the release of the soul fragments. The best two ideas so far were either blasting the objects during an underground nuclear bomb test, or sending the objects out into space, in a low-altitude orbit that would force the horcruxes back down to the Earth (when they would presumably be destroyed by the heat of reentry).

After completing their afternoon meeting with Wally, the three teens were delighted to find themselves unscheduled for the balance of the day. Ron decided to head back to the Burrow for a kip, as he was still getting used to a normal sleeping schedule (his overnight guard duty at St. Mungo’s now at an end). He badge-jumped from the Round Tower to the Twins’s shop so that he could use their floo connection.

Harry plopped down the sofa that sat in front of their main fireplace, cracked open a butterbeer, and arched an eyebrow towards Hermione.

“So,” he said off-handedly, “I imagine there’s at least a dozen reasons why we can’t spend the rest of the day snagging?”

Hermione smiled as she spread out on the rest of the sofa and placed her head in his lap. She fluttered her eyebrows up at him and said, “Funny, but I can’t think of any at the moment.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Harry tried not to get his hopes up as he began to mentally review his “To Do” list. “Warding all done?”

Hermione nodded. “The goblin warders are done down here and have moved up to Edinburgh in advance of the Queen’s stay at Holyrood Palace.”

“The Queen?”

“Down in her State Apartments, I imagine...she heads back to Buckingham tomorrow night.”

“Prime Minister?”

“That meeting is Wednesday, in advance of Thursday’s mini-summit with Scrimgeour.”

“Fawkes Foundation?”

“Mum’s over at Cumberland Lodge today, doing the advance planning for the Summer Institute. We’ll be chatting with the Headmistress about that tomorrow.”

Harry nodded, thinking that they did have a lot planned for their return to Hogwarts. He then continued down his list.

“Peanut Butter Brigade?”

“Ron and Neville have got their cells in place, Ginny’s practically moved in with Percy and Penelope, and the Goblins have promised that Ron’s first day in the Liaison Office would be rather productive.”

“Well that sounds dangerous,” Harry replied with a grin. “How about MI-stuff?”

“We’re meeting with the Twins on Tuesday and touring headquarters, wherever that is.”

“How about the Rookery?”

“Only seen run-of-the-mill patriarchal perverts so far. Oh, you will have to swap out the camera’s battery packs next week, though.”

“The Farm?”

The Clan Chief’s Consort let out a big sigh. “So it comes down to worrying about The Farm? If you don’t want to snag you could just say so.”

Harry looked down at his girlfriend with a look of horror on his face. He took her into his arms and said, “Oh Hermione, of course I want to...it’s just that we need to stay on top of things, right?”

Hermione lifted her head up so that her lips met his in a quick kiss. Leaning her head back down onto his lap she replied, “Harry, you are on top of things. Why don’t you just move ‘Act like a normal horny teen-aged male’ to the top of your ‘To Do’ list?”

The Queen’s Wizard cocked his head and waggled his eyebrows. Trailing a hand down Hermione’s torso, he grabbed a soft mound of flesh and said, “Wouldn’t it be easier just to put you on top of my ‘To Do’ list?” He then punctuated this question with a pinch.

Hermione let out a soft moan as she ground the back of her head into Harry’s lap. Quickly getting the desired response, she smiled and cooed, “Looks like I’m the one that’s on top of things now.”

And with that statement, Harry decided to trust in the power of delegated authority.

There was no further talk of “To Do” lists that night.

Chapter 22 - Hairnets and Headmasters

5:00am, Sunday, July 1
Windsor Castle

Harry Potter looked out over the gray horizon and scowled. The storm clouds that had brought high winds and three inches of rain to Windsor had lingered long enough to ruin what would have likely been a very pretty sunrise...as if they already hadn't annoyed him enough for the lost sleep. About the only good thing he could say about the weather was that it had given him an excuse to break out his Firebolt.

Without shifting his gaze from the clouds Harry said, “We need to be finishing up, Hermione...sun's rising, my arm's getting tired holding this “notice-me-not” screen, and the tourists will be out and about soon enough.”

The Consort glanced up at her Clan Chief, who was hovering a few feet above her position on the roofline, and nodded. “Think I've almost got this last set lined up again.” She then tilted her head towards her badge and asked, “How is it looking down there, Dad?”

Some hundred yards away (and twenty yards beneath her) Roger Granger scanned down the length of the castle's western wall with the lens of his digital camcorder.

“I still see some hairnet about fifteen feet in front of you, Hermione,” he replied.

“Well, bugger this, then,” she said as she crouched back down to check her crystal alignments.

“Hermione,” Harry admonished lightly, “with your dad listening in?”

“Where do you think I learned that kind of language?” she replied tersely. “And for the last time, father, my wards are *not* hairnets.”

In the time it took for the laughter and banter between her father and boyfriend to settle down, Hermione managed to finally get her crystal sets realigned. With her dad's confirmation that his daughter's protective wards were once again invisible to both the naked and digital eye, Hermione badge-jumped down to his ground level vantage. Harry rolled up his distraction shielding and (rather reluctantly) flew down and joined them.

They had discovered that Hermione's attenuated anti-apparation wards were visible to electronic sensors earlier in the week. She had been monitoring the master rune stone set during start-up of the wards around Buckingham when Wally called and asked if she knew why the Palace was covered in a black hairnet. Hermione had immediately dropped the supposedly invisible wards and badge-jumped to Wally's location, where she reviewed videotape of the Palace shrouded in a black hemispherical lattice of magical energy. This had been a source of great embarrassment for Hermione... not just that she hadn't accounted for this phenomenon in her modeling, but the fact that Wally's “hairnet” nickname for her wards had somehow stuck. To liken her protective warding to the mundane devices that protected cafeteria food from unwanted strands of hair? Humiliating.

It had taken her an entire day to diagnose the problem. Hermione's working hypothesis was that the black strands of magical energy that were woven into a standard anti-apparition net had very localized notice-me-not charms. As a result, when a person (whether muggle or wizard) looked towards the wards, their brains would ignore the black net and only “see” what was on the other side (Mrs. Granger had suggested window screening as an appropriate Muggle analogy). This effectively made the wards invisible to the naked eye, but not to digital eyes (akin to what they had already seen at The Rookery).

The goblins working with Hermione had suggested “notice-me-not” charms on the structures themselves, but it was rather impractical to ask Muggles to ignore some of the most famous architecture in Great Britain. Hermione's solution was a second rune line that shifted the “color” of the netting from visible black to “invisible” far ultra-violet (a spectrum that was outside of the sensor range of nearly every digital camera and camcorder). This add-on required the placement of optically perfect quartz crystals set at ten-foot (or less) intervals along the ward perimeter. The exact placement of these crystals was critical, since each piece of quartz needed to be in the line of sight of the crystals on either side of it. Alignment was relatively easy for rectilinear structures like 10 Downing Street, but more difficult for castles with irregular footprints (and turrets and parapets). As a result, the wards around 10 Downing Street that had bounced Percy into the Thames were in place two days before similar warding could be raised around Windsor.

Windsor's wards had only been up and running for thirty-six hours when high winds associated with the nighttime storm blew away three of Windsor Castle's crystals and shifted the alignment of ten others. Part of the problem was the fact that they couldn't use magic to stick the crystals to the rooflines and walls. Finding a more durable Muggle adhesive had therefore been mentally placed high on their “To-Do” list in the midst of their early morning's repair.

Later that morning, when Harry and Hermione met her parents for breakfast in the Royal Mess her mum quipped, “Well from the looks of you two I'd never have known you'd been up half the night.”

Harry gave Hermione's mum a guilty-looking smile and replied, “Amazing what a little pepper-up potion can do.”

“And this potion explains why you two are dressed so nicely?” Emily asked. “I thought you had plans on butchering a basilisk today.”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. She arched an eyebrow, and when Harry replied with a shoulder shrug she turned back towards her mum.

“We aren't going to Hogwarts until eleven,” Hermione said. “We're meeting with the Dean at eight.”

Emily furrowed her eyebrows a bit in confusion. “You're meeting Dean Thomas, my broom-buddy?”

Hermione shook her head as she reached under the table and grabbed Harry's hand. "Erm, no...we're meeting with David Conner, the Dean of Windsor."

It was Mr. Granger's turn to be confused. "Dean of Windsor? That's not a royal title I'm familiar with."

Hermione giggled. "That's because it isn't, daddy. Dean Conner is the vicar in charge of St. George's Chapel, here at Windsor."

Roger's eyes brightened. "Is he now?" He looked over at a suddenly nervous-looking wizard. "I didn't realize that you were much of a church-goer, Harry."

Harry fidgeted a bit in his seat and replied, "Guess I haven't been, actually. The Dursley's were the Christmas and Easter kind of church people, but they never brought me along. Then at school, well...can't say that I've seen much of an active Christian community within the wizarding world."

"Can't imagine why, given all of the burnings and inquisitions," Mrs. Granger said. "So now that you are your own man, you've become interested?"

"More like now that he's Hermione's man, dear," Roger quipped.

"Hush," Emily scolded, with a swat on her husband's arm for emphasis. "I think it's wonderful, whatever the reason."

As Roger rubbed his sore arm he turned and asked brightly, "So just why would you two be needing to meet with the vicar, Harry?"

"Dad!" Hermione scolded, as she whacked Roger's other shoulder. "Be nice...there's all kinds of reasons why Harry and I would want to meet with Dean Conner. St. George's is, after all, the home of the Order of the Garter."

"Yes, yes, I know," Roger replied. With a wink he added, "They also do an occasional wedding, right?"

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand a little harder as her eyes narrowed. "Yes, weddings," she said evenly, "but don't forget baptisms too."

Roger choked on his juice, and quickly sought reassurance. "Please don't tell me that you two will be looking for that kind of service any time soon."

Harry and Hermione turned to each other, and held serious expressions for all of five seconds before Hermione broke, and broke into a grin.

"No worries, there, Dad," she replied.

As Mr. Granger let out a sigh she explained Dean Conner had requested an informal meeting with the Queen's Wizard, and that he might be a good resource for meditation skills that would bolster their occlumency techniques.

"So," Roger mused, "meditation is all you'll be talking about, then?"

"Well," Harry replied, "we won't have that much time...there's a Communion service at eight-thirty."

"You two are welcome to join us, of course," Hermione said brightly.

"We'd love to, dear," Emily replied. "Thank you for asking."

With Roger's hopes to gain back some of the sleep he had lost whilst helping repair the wards dashed, he turned to his daughter and asked, "Any chance I can get a jigger of that pepper-up stuff in my juice?"

Hermione chuckled as she passed the carafe of coffee across the table. "Sorry, Dad, but muggle ears aren't built to spout steam."

oo00000oo

11:00am, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

With a change of clothing more appropriate for combat than church, Harry and Hermione keyed into Tonks and Remus's badges and jumped directly into the Headmistress's Office. Minerva didn't know what was more disconcerting...visual reconfirmation that badge-jumps ignored the castle's wards, or the fact that her two favorite students were dressed in Muggle military issue. She furrowed her eyebrows as she gave their goggle-covered wool caps, equipment-laden belts and thigh-packs the once-over. "I thought that this was mostly a social call, Mr. Potter," she said.

Harry grinned as he walked up and offered his hand. "Our apologies, Headmistress...we were asked us to field test some of our new gear for comfort and ease of movement."

"I see," Minerva replied, as she shook Harry's hand. She was about to compliment Harry on just how much straighter he was standing when compared to his last visit to her office exactly one month previous when she noticed his eyes dart up to a spot over her right shoulder.

"See something that interests you?" she asked.

Harry nodded as he considered the fact that a black cloth that was presently draped over Dumbledore's portrait (eerily similar to his handiwork within the Prime Minister's office). "How long has he been awake?" he asked.

"Five days, now," the Headmistress said with a smile.

Hermione frowned. "Excuse me, Headmistress, but if Professor Dumbledore's portrait is awake then why do you have it covered?"

The question drew some interest (as well as some cat calls) from the other Headmaster portraits that hung on the office walls. After Minerva properly shushed the paintings she replied, "Albus's echo is in training, Miss Granger."

"Training?"

"Yes, dear," Minerva replied. "I have learned and come to appreciate the fact that there is an adjustment period for every newly animated portrait."

Hermione's eyebrows were raised in interest. "Adjustment?" she asked. "I thought that the echo's service to the current Head of School could begin just as soon as it woke up."

"Theoretically, yes," the Headmistress replied. "The compulsion for a headmaster's portrait to faithfully serve is magically bound to the paint itself. Unfortunately, it takes a bit of time for each new headmaster to...erm, appreciate...how to best provide that service."

"I don't understand," said Hermione.

The portrait of Phineas Black could stay silent no longer. "Stupid witch, she's trying to tell you that Dumbledore's echo is trying to be just as bossy and manipulative as the original."

"That will be quite enough, Headmaster Black," McGonagall scolded. She then looked back towards Hermione and said, "while his analysis is a bit caustic, it is also fairly accurate....apparently every Headmaster echo comes out chomping at the bit to offer unsolicited advice to their successor."

"He should have known that well-enough," another portrait quipped. "It's not like Dumbledore could forget that he had me under wraps for a full year and a half."

Harry and Hermione swung their heads around and took in the portrait that had made this comment.

"Headmaster Dippet, at your service," the bald echo said. "Well, at the Headmistress's service, actually."

Hermione nodded. "You were Headmaster before Dumbledore," she said, matter-of-factly.

"Indeed," added McGonagall, "and Headmaster back in the day that I was a student."

"I always knew that you were destined for great things, Minerva," the echo replied.

That comment brought out some coughing and throat clearing from the other portraits. Harry thought that Phineas's cough sounded more like an accusation (specifically, a rather rough-voiced accusation that sounded like "*Suck-up!*") He tried to get the conversation back on track. "So what does the portrait's training regimen involve, Headmistress?"

McGonagall smiled as she waved towards the walls. "Well, there has been no shortage of suggested techniques," she said. "Right now I take off the wrap and silencing spells at the start of each morning, with a warning that they go back right on after the first piece of unsolicited advice."

"Oh, so how long did he last today, then?" asked Harry.

The Headmistress smiled, "A little less than three minutes." She then gave Harry a more somber look. "I imagine that you might have questions for the Headmaster...I can unwrap him if you want."

Harry held the Headmistress's gaze and thought quietly. While there were a hundred different questions he wished to ask the echo, they also had a busy day and were already a bit behind schedule. He also wondered whether this might be some sort of test. Looking around at the others he replied, "Maybe another time, Headmistress...I think that I already have people here in the flesh that I trust and can turn to for advice."

The radiant smile that burst upon Hermione's face (and the no-less-warm look in McGonagall's eyes) told Harry that he had passed whatever test might just have been administered.

"Well, then," the Headmistress asked, "How might I help you navigate through Hermione's "To Do" list?"

Tonks snorted as Harry pulled a piece of parchment out of a pocket.

"Nothing wrong with a little delegated authority," the young wizard said with a smile. "Right, then, first things first...Remus told you that we've enticed Horace Slughorn to come out of hiding to brew some wolfsbane?"

"Nothing like a bit of basilisk bait to bring out his nobler instincts," Tonks quipped.

"Whatever it takes," Harry replied. "Next full moon is a week from today, and it wouldn't do to have Hogwarts's Castellan out of sorts too much, right?"

Remus shook his head at the title. "Harry, I've asked you before not to call me that...I'm nothing but an invited guest around here until the Board of Governors approves your proposal."

"Okay, fine," Harry shot back, "*Acting* Castellan Lupin." He glanced at his watch. "We've arrangements to meet Slughorn in Hogsmeade at one o'clock. We had originally thought to have him oversee the potion ingredient harvesting, but after taking a good look at the memory of my last trip down to the Chamber we are thinking about a new plan."

"Oh?" asked the Headmistress. "So what caused your change of heart?"

"Couple of things," Harry said. "First, the goblins expressed some concern about the stability of the tunnels when we showed my memory of the cave-in."

"Really?" asked McGonagall. "You've decided to have goblins involved here?"

Hermione nodded and explained. "They are, after all, experts at caverns and tunnels, what with their underground vault system."

Harry added, "They also have the best curse-breakers in the world, which will be handy to have in our pocket."

"You're expecting to encounter curses that you didn't trip before?"

The black-haired wizard shrugged his shoulders. "We might...after all, I really didn't have time to properly explore the Chamber, and there could be secret rooms and doors."

The Headmistress thought for a moment. "Harry, I know you've gotten along very well for the goblins, but they don't do these sorts of things for free."

The Queen's Wizard smiled. "No, they certainly don't, which is why I'm raising the issue with you." He pulled a scroll from his rucksack and placed it in front of the Headmistress. "We did a bit of hard bargaining, but nothing will happen without your blessing."

"And just what kind of bargain did you get, Harry?"

"The goblins will give us one of their best engineering teams, a half-dozen curse breakers, and adequate security during the exploration. They'll clear out and stabilize the tunnel, remove any curses they encounter, and provide a safe work environment while we harvest the basilisk carcass. They also have agreed to give us a full three-dimensional rendering of the Chamber of Secrets and all of the associated tunnels, piping and caves. In exchange, they get to keep any treasure we find."

"Less the fifteen percent finder's fee to Harry," Hermione added.

"Which I plan to add in full to the castle's defense funds," Harry quickly stated. "I also should note that we get to keep the basilisk carcass, which will be worth far more than its weight in galleons, as well as any books, documents, and relics attributable to any of the Founders."

Hermione nodded. She had made sure that that last provision was in place on the odd chance that a Riddle had hidden a horcrux other than the diary down there.

The Headmistress rubbed her chin with one hand and thought. "What makes them think that there is anything worth anything down there besides the basilisk?" she asked.

Harry grinned. "They consider it to be a bankable hunch," he replied. "At the very least they will be able to pry out four rather large emeralds from the Chamber's door."

Minerva gave Harry a tight-lipped grin. "I must say, Harry, that it is refreshing to see you adopt a more cautious attitude, and that you are not afraid to ask for the help of experts."

The Queen's Wizard chuckled. "Like I said earlier, Headmistress...I'm learning to appreciate the benefits of delegated authority and subcontractors...were it not for Hermione's desire to learn first-hand about harvesting potion ingredients, I might have had the goblins do that as well."

McGonagall nodded, then asked, "Do you have an idea on how long your subcontractors will take?"

Harry nodded. "If you agree to it, I'll return tonight with the goblin teams and open the entrance for them. Barring discovery of some major secret tunnels or passageways, they'll be in and out within the week."

As the Headmistress looked over the contractual details, the echo of Phineas Black asked, "So how will this little adventure benefit the school, young man? The Chamber of Secrets is, after all, part of Hogwarts itself."

McGonagall's gaze snapped up from the parchment and she glared at the portrait. "Perhaps Dumbledore's portrait isn't the only one lacking in training?" she asked.

Harry chuckled. "No, he's right, Headmistress, I imagine that you might need to defend your decision before the Board of Governors, particularly if we find lots of valuables down there." He then stood and paced a bit as he thought back to his second year.

"This 'little adventure' as Phineas puts it, is directly related to an adequate defense of the school. We currently have a very poor understanding of the tunneling and piping down there, and it could well be the case that there is more than one entrance to the Chamber. Having an accurate map of where all of the pipes lead to, for example, will help Remus decide which areas to block, which to monitor, and which to leave alone."

"I agree, Minerva," Remus added. "We don't think there's a separate way out from the Chamber...if there was then Voldemort wouldn't have had Draco Malfoy spend most of last year looking for a different way inside the castle."

"But at the same time we don't want to bank the school's safety on assumptions concerning Lord Thingy's rational thought processes," added Tonks.

"Lord Thingy?" asked the Headmistress.

Tonks shrugged her shoulders. "I've got other nicknames, but they're not for polite company."

"Then we must find time to be impolite, my dear," Minerva replied with a smile. She then turned back to Harry. "If the goblins don't start their work until tonight then why are you still meeting with Horace?"

Harry replied with a smile. "If you allow me, I'll show you something he'll surely consider to be worth at least a few month's dosing of wolfsbane." He then led the group out of the office and down the moving stairway.

Along the path to Moaning Myrtle's haunt, the Headmistress decided to broach a different topic.

"Miss Granger," she said, "I've made arrangements for you to meet our entire school staff, as you requested."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you Headmistress, I'm looking forward to doing a little brainstorming with them on lesson planning."

"And if a few of them volunteer to teach at your so-called Summer Institute, so much the better, eh?"

The bushy-haired witch smiled. "We're offering paid teaching positions to every staff member, including yourself, Headmistress."

"So you noted in your owl post," McGonagall replied. "While I doubt that I could leave the Castle, I would enjoy learning a bit more about your plans."

Hermione agreed, and gave an impromptu preview of her recruitment presentation for the Hogwarts faculty. But before she could get too far into explaining how their summer school would work around the Ministry's underage magic laws they arrived at the porcelain entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

Myrtle, unfortunately, wasn't there to flirt with Harry and provide comic relief.

As the group gathered behind Harry he rather unceremoniously opened the Chamber with the appropriate Parseltongue command. The small gust of air that burst up out of the piping was fresh, and carried no stench of decay. Harry couldn't decide whether this was a good or bad sign.

"So this is the piping that you slid down on using your bum?" asked Tonks.

"The very same," Harry said.

"Salazar didn't think to add some stairs, then?" Tonks replied.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Guess it couldn't help to ask." He turned back towards the open entrance and tried unsuccessfully to order stairs to appear using Parseltongue.

"So what now?" asked Remus.

"Well," said Harry, "Tonight the goblins will be bringing modified magical carpets that act sort of like an elevator. But it really doesn't matter right now."

"Why is that, Harry?" McGonagall asked. "How do you plan on getting to the basilisk?"

Harry smiled. "Magic."

"Magic to get to it, then?"

"Oh, I'm not going to it," Harry replied. "It will come to me."

"And how do you plan to do that?"

Harry waggled his eyebrows at the Headmistress. "The same way I completed the first task." After warning the group to step away from the entrance, he pulled his wand out, pointed it down the pipe, and yelled out "*Accio Basilisk Skin.*"

It took fifteen seconds for the scaly skin that Harry had encountered during his second year to make its way up the pipe, which was more than enough time for him to conjure the shield that kept the dark green skin from slapping him the face.

"Did you leave the inner door opened?" asked McGonagall.

Harry shook his head. "This was lying in the tunnel before we even got to the Chamber," he replied, adding that the pensieve review had shown the shed skin to have been on the near side of the cave-in. As he ran a hand down the length of it he noted, "Shed Basilisk skin isn't as magically resistant as the bit that's still attached, but it's still worth a thousand galleons an ounce."

"So how many ounces of skin is there in a twenty foot length, Harry?" Remus asked.

Harry smiled as he held out the skin for Remus's examination. "More than enough to keep Slughorn happy, and for you to keep your wits about you next weekend."

And with that analysis, Harry spoke the words that closed the entrance until he returned later that night with the goblins.

Chapter 23 - Queer Eye for the Mad-Eye

“Wally!”

Special Agent Jackson smiled as he crossed the threshold of one of his favorite London pubs. The fact that he looked nothing like the overweight actor that portrayed Norm on the Yank television show was annoying, but not enough for him to not play along with the running gag.

The publican drew a pint of ale as Wally walked towards his usual seat, and asked, “What’s up, Mr. Jackson?”

Wally looked over the crowd of mostly middle-aged men and let out an overly dramatic sigh. “Certain not my interest, given the ugly mugs sported by you lot.”

The other pub patrons laughed, and responded with their own blunt assessments of Wally’s fashion sense as he took a seat at the bar. He bantered back and forth with a few as he scanned the room for potential threats. The only thing that looked out of place was a handsome blonde-haired man that was nursing a beer and scowling at anyone and everyone who made the mistake of getting within five feet from his position in a corner booth.

On a hunch, Wally took out his mobile phone and casually pointed it towards the man as he punched buttons on the keypad. While it looked like Wally was placing a call, he had in fact activated the device’s digital camera. A thin smile crossed his lips as he captured the image of a man that looked very different within the camera’s viewfinder. He e-mailed the image to Harry, and then followed up with a phone call.

“Good afternoon, Lord G...it appears that your guest has arrived early and is sporting one of those glamour charms.”

“I expected as much,” Harry replied. “So is Mad-Eye any better looking in disguise?”

Wally smiled.

“Perhaps better looking than he wishes, at the moment.”

Harry chuckled dismissively. “Please, Wally, don’t tell me that your favorite pub is the kind of place where Mad-Eye looks fetching enough to flirt with.”

“Now, hush,” said Wally. “I’ll have you know that ‘The Stag’ is a fine upstanding establishment.”

“Not to mention the only gay bar within walking distance of Buckingham Palace,” Harry snarked back. He then asked, “So should I wait until our prearranged meeting time, or do I need to rush over before he hooks up with someone?”

A patron walked up to Mad-Eye’s table and asked if he was looking for some company. As Moody barked out a warning, Wally replied, “No, take your time, Harry. I can always jump in if things start getting desperate.”

“More like the other guys are getting desperate if they’re hitting on Mad-Eye,” Harry replied. “So...any fashion requests?”

Wally snorted, and then said, “Oh, that Paul Smith jacket you had on today is fine. Just change into the white trousers, lose the tie, and wet down your hair.”

“Anything for you, Sweetheart,” Harry replied cheekily, “but no promises on the hair...see you in fifteen.”

Secret Agent Jackson acknowledged Harry’s promise, pocketed his mobile, and wondered whether he could expense report a second pint of ale as necessary for his undercover guise.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, Harry closed the book he was reading and walked from the library into his bedroom. After rummaging through his closet he swapped gray trousers for white, black wingtips for black dragonhide boots, and a tie for an opened collar. Knowing that it wouldn’t make a bit of difference, Harry did nothing to his hair.

The ten-minute walk from palace to pub placed him in front of the meeting place just as Big Ben began tolling the hour. The establishment’s exterior was unassuming, and nothing at all like the kitschy seventeenth century dressings worn by other pubs in the area (which relied much more upon the patronage of tourbook-wielding tourists). In fact, given its flat face, red paint and large square windows, Harry thought it resembled the exterior of a Muggle double-decker bus.

As Harry entered the pub he caught the eye of more than the two people inside that he knew. He would, if asked, have blamed it on his designer clothes (despite Hermione and Wally’s frequently-offered assessments that he was easy on the eyes of either sex). But Harry was too busy following Wally’s eyes towards the retired-Auror’s location to notice that others were in the room. Wally remained at the bar as Harry walked confidently up to the Moody’s table and asked, “Looking for some company, handsome?”

Mad-eye scowled and replied. “More like I’m looking to hex the boy who arranged for this meeting place.”

Harry laughed as he slid into the booth. “Then it appears we’ve both found what we’re looking for.”

A waitress came by and took Harry’s drink order, which gave the retired Auror a chance to order his fourth pint of the afternoon.

“Careful, there, Mad-Eye,” Harry said once the waitress disappeared. “You wouldn’t want to get too tipsy to apparate.”

The glamour-charmed wizard scowled. “Never been a problem before.” After finishing off the pint he had been nursing he asked, “Mind telling me

how you saw through my disguise, milord?"

It was Harry's turn to scowl. "Lay off the lordship, Moody. It's just me."

"Aye," Mad-Eye replied, "but the you that you appear to be has never been quick enough before to see through my glamours."

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he took out his mobile, pointed its camera lens and captured an image. He then passed the device across the table and said, "Digital eyes can't be tricked by magic."

Moody held the mobile just long enough to look at the screen, then dropped it as if the Muggle device would give him a rash. "So you're too good and too smart for magic now that you're the Queen's favorite wizard, eh?"

Harry shook his head as he retrieved the mobile from the table top. "Of course not," he said. "Just trying to be smart enough to find any advantage I can when it comes to fighting Dork Lords."

Mad-Eye nodded as he jerked his head Wally at the bar. "He's your man, then?" he asked.

The Queen's Wizard nodded. "Yeah, he's the one that was doing the commentary during my magic show at Ascot."

The retired Auror acknowledged the response with a grunt, then looked around and said, "You know, this lot look dodgier than what you'd find at the Hogshead."

"Hush, now, Moody," Harry replied. "What more could you want than a pub that shares the name of my patronus?"

"How about a pub where the patrons don't all share the same kind of plumbing?"

Harry laughed at Mad-Eye's whining. "You do have to admit that this is the last place you'd expect to find a pure-blooded homophobic Death Eater....and it's even karaoke night if we stay long enough."

When Moody failed to banter back Harry changed topics. "So how have you been doing as an de-retired Auror?"

The older wizard looked around the pub, and decided that for all of it's shortcomings that it was loud enough to ensure some privacy. "It's been a right pain in the arse," he then replied. "Nothing but twelve-hour shifts since Ascot, training wet-behind-the-ears cadets and Auror-wannabe's...and it only got worse today."

"How's that?"

Moody replied with a question of his own. "Imagine that you've heard about the Ministry's so-called intern program?"

Harry nodded. "Hermione's meeting with Ron and some of the other indentured students as we speak." He then asked, "I imagine that they've asked you to train some of these pureblood students to become Aurors?"

"More like 'ordered,' rather than asked," Moody replied. "The lot of them so young and raw I half-expected them to be storing their wands in their nappies."

Harry smiled. "So you plan on whipping them into shape?"

"Whipping them is what I wish I could do," Mad-Eye replied. "With what that Umbridge woman has assigned me...if they weren't so lazy and incompetent I'd be worrying over the fact that half of them will likely be taking the Mark." In support of his assessment he handed Harry a list of names.

Harry let out a low whistle as he scanned the list of Auror Department interns. "I see what you mean," he replied. "Guess it would make too much sense to assign students that are actually good in DADA."

Moody snorted. "From what Lupin's told me, that'd be hard to do, given the fact that the only purebloods that were any good in defense were part of your little club."

"And therefore completely uncontrollable and unreliable from Umbitch's standpoint," Harry concluded. He then added, "Which is part of the reason why I wanted to meet with you."

Harry then gave Mad-Eye an abridged version of the presentation/sales-pitch that Hermione had made the day previous at Hogwarts.

Muggleborn students had been asking for defensive training from the earliest days of Emily Granger's organizational efforts. There were understandable (and in Harry's mind justifiable) fears that the Ministry of Magic would provide an inadequate response to any Death Eater attacks on Muggleborns and their families. The fact that the Ministry's compulsive "internship" program was restricted to purebloods only bolstered these concerns. Harry's willingness and desire to help had been initially thwarted by the underage magic laws. That all changed when the goblins taught Hermione how to set up wards that shielded an area from the Ministry's magical sensors.

The Royal Family had offered the Queen's Wizard the use of one of their properties for the establishment of a magical summer school for Muggleborns. Cumberland Lodge was a former Royal residence located in Great Windsor Park, just a few miles from Windsor Castle (along Harry and Hermione's morning running route). Since it belonged to the Queen, it was easy for Harry to justify protective warding, and if the Ministry of Magic didn't notice the extra bit of warding Hermione added to shield their magical probing then it was their loss, right?

Once the idea of a magical summer school became feasible, the scope had (predictably) expanded beyond defense against the dark arts. They hoped to offer some kind of instruction in all of the magical arts, save for divination (at Hermione's insistence). And even that would be reconsidered should they be able to convince Firenze to join them. They planned on a six-week session, from the middle of July right up to the departure of the Hogwarts Express on September 1 (should the school reopen that fall).

"And you're telling me about this for a reason, I imagine?" Mad-Eye asked.

Harry nodded. "We're recruiting potential staff, and there's a few of us who wouldn't mind learning from the real Mad-Eye Moody."

The older wizard grinned. "What, that Barty Crouch Jr. didn't channel my thoughts well enough for you?"

Harry shook his head and smiled. His retort was interrupted by the waitress, who had been thoughtful enough to bring the two a second (and fifth, in Moody's case) round. During that time, Harry heard a soft whirring coming across the table and assumed that the retired auror's glamoured magical eye was giving him a thorough inspection. The frown that Mad-Eye sported as that eye focused on Harry's jacket suggested that he saw something rather disagreeable.

Moody then quietly asked, "And will this school of yours be teaching kiddies how to use Muggle weapons like that toy that you're hiding under your jacket?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "First off, the answer is no on firearms training. But more importantly, are you thinking that my Browning 9mm doesn't have enough stopping power?"

"What I think is that you're daft to be carrying a Muggle firearm in the first place," Mad-Eye replied tersely. "Do you even know what happens to wizards that use guns instead of their wands?"

Harry gave a slight nod as he closed his eyes for a half-second. "Yes, Hermione has made me fully aware that the wizard who uses a gun against another wizard is signing his own death warrant...even if it's in self-defense."

"And so she's told you that even carrying a weapon like that sets a wizard up for treatment as a pariah?"

"Yes, Mother," Harry replied with a rueful grin. "Though I dare say the wizarding world already thinks of me in those terms."

Moody shook his head back and forth as he took a long draw from his glass. "That's not something to be glib about, laddie...for all of their depravity even the Death Eaters refuse to use those things."

"Probably because the pureblooded bigots couldn't imagine it'd do them any good to use a Muggle weapon," Harry replied.

"And they'd be wrong?" asked the retired Auror.

"Alastor, Alastor, Alastor," Harry replied. "You sound like Molly Weasley on polyjuice...surely over the course of your career you've seen what a modern firearm can do in a fight?"

"Aye, nothing that well-placed hex couldn't," the retired Auror replied.

Harry snorted. "So you can teach me a hex that would fill Fenir Grayback full of silver slugs the next time I meet him?"

Moody cocked his head and closed his good eye as he thought for a moment. He then replied, "So you think the Ministry's own laws can be used against them?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not looking to find out, but if it comes to it, then yes." He took a sip of his own beverage and then added, "They can't have it both ways, Mad-Eye...if they want to discriminate against lycanthropes and consider them to be beasts rather than humans..."

"Then you can't be charged with using a Muggle weapon against a wizard," Mad-Eye replied. "Makes sense, though I don't like it one bit."

"Why is that?"

Mad-Eye shook his head. "I suppose you've spent some time learning how to use that thing?"

Harry nodded. "About an hour of training every day for the past couple of weeks."

"So have you spent the same amount of time working on your spell casting?" Mad-Eye asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, can't say that I have...Hermione and I have been rather busy."

"Busy doing something more important than readying yourself to fight Voldemort?"

"Maybe not more important," Harry admitted. "But I'd wager you'd consider it nearly so."

The retired Auror shook his head dismissively and rolled his non-magical eye. "I'm listening, then," he said.

"Well," Harry began, "aside from creating and executing the plan that resulted in the death or capture of more than a hundred Death Eaters..."

Mad-Eye brushed the quip away with a wave of a hand. "That was two weeks ago," he said. "Been busy resting on your laurels?"

No, not at all...though it'd be fair to point out of a Death Eater attack anywhere in Britain since then."

When Mad-Eye rolled his hand around in a "get-to-the-point" gesture, Harry added, "Well, aside from learning how to mask our magic use underneath protective warding, setting up various types of surveillance systems, and setting up defensive perimeters for Hogwarts, we've been working with the Muggles on some protective equipment."

"Too lazy to duck when a spell's thrown your way, then?"

"No," Harry replied, "just trying to protect ourselves from the killing curse."

"What?" Mad-Eye asked incredulously.

"The killing curse," Harry repeated. "You know, *Avada Kadavra*, nasty green beam that kills on contact unless you're a boy-who-lived..."

"I know the curse, boy," the older wizard growled. "I was asking what makes you think that Muggles can produce a defense against a curse that can't be defended against."

Harry smiled. "But Mad-Eye, you know that's not really the case, right? Besides from ducking, there's always hiding behind something solid."

"Or summoning something solid in the curse's path," Mad-Eye said with an approving nod.

"And there's the rub," Harry replied. "I've seen the spell stopped by a brass statue, and I've seen it swallowed up whole by a phoenix. But I've also seen it set a wooden desk aflame, and we all know that the curse isn't stopped by normal clothing."

Mad-Eye nodded. "I could add a few items to that list, you know."

"We were hoping you would say that," Harry replied. "Muggles have protective armor that will stop a bullet, but we haven't a clue if it is solid enough to stop the curse."

"So what do you want from me, then?" Mad-Eye asked.

"Well, that list of things solid enough to stop an AK," Harry replied. "Or better still your pensieved memories of battles where the killing curse has been tossed about."

The retired Auror thought for a few moments. "Can't say I like the idea of giving this kind of information to the Muggles...never know when they might turn on the wizarding world."

Harry shook his head. "And on the other side I've got Muggles worried about letting wizards know they aren't as helpless as they're thought to be... c'mon Mad-Eye, work with me here."

Moody frowned, finished off the contents of his pint glass, then said, "I'll get you the memories if you promise me that it'll just be you and your lassie taking a peak."

Harry nodded. "Fair enough," he said. "Oh, and there's one more thing I need to ask."

"What's that then."

"Erm...we were wondering if you'd be willing to help us test prototypes."

Moody raised an eyebrow. "What, you want me to wear this Muggle armor and bait a Death Eater into cursing me?"

"No, no...other way around," Harry replied. "The thing is, I don't know too many people who have ever cast the killing curse before, so I was wondering..."

"Yes, laddie, I've used that spell once or twice in my day," Moody admitted. "So you want me to curse somebody while they're wearing your contraption?"

"If it wouldn't be too much to ask," Harry said quietly.

Mad-Eye snorted. "And who would be dressed to be killed?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Still working on that one...we're thinking maybe of transfiguring some pigs."

"You want me to do a pig?" Mad-Eye barked, loud enough to catch the attention of some of the pub's other patrons. The wizard then sat befuddled as laughs and catcalls were thrown back at him.

"What'd I say?" he asked Harry.

"Erm, must have been a punchline to a joke," Harry said, trying to suppress his own laughter.

Mad-Eye sighed, then said, "Now, you go find me a nasty enough Death Eater, and we'd be talking."

"Really?" Harry asked.

Mad-Eye shrugged. "It's war," he explained, "and I'm tired of capturing Death Eaters just so they can be sent to Azkaban and escape."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Well, we had a few low-level recruits for a while, but we gave them back to the DMLE...I'll put you down for some provisional target practice, then."

The older wizard nodded, and was about to catch the waitress's attention for another round when Wally left the bar and joined-in on their conversation.

"Hate to interrupt, Lord G," Wally said with a grin, "but Dame Hermione did ask that I ensure you return to the Palace with your wits about you."

Harry rolled his eyes as Mad-Eye let out a hearty laugh. "Mothers...surrounded by mothers, I am," he lamented.

Wally smirked as he put his arm around Harry's shoulder and brought him into a loose embrace.

"Now, now, lad," he chided as he fluttered his eyebrows. "You wouldn't want me any other way...or would you?"

Harry grinned. "Sorry old bean, but you know that I'm taken." He then pointed his thumb towards Mad-Eye and added, "but this handsome man might appreciate your charms."

Wally chuckled as he waved his mobile phone towards the retired Auror for another look underneath the glamour.

"Your friend might better appreciate some fashion tips," he quipped.

Alastor Moody sat gobsmacked, trying to figure out not just if he had been insulted, but whether or not he should care.

Wally then said, "So Mr. Moody, be a love and tell me more about this glamour charm."

Mad-Eye hesitantly asked, "What you want to know?"

"Well," Wally replied, "I was wondering what would happen if I tried to give you a kiss...would my lips touch the handsome prince's or those of the frog that lies underneath?"

When Mad-Eye let out a growl Harry figured that it was a good time to demonstrate that he was still a wizard. The sticking charm (cast under-the-table) that kept Moody in place while he and Wally made their escape worked like...well, it worked like a charm.

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**10:30pm, Queen's Wizard's Quarters
Buckingham Palace, London**

The Queen's Wizard's watched with fascination as the body of an Auror who'd been felled by one killing curse was used to intercept the path of a second, and burst into flames. That fascination turned bitter when the smell of seared human flesh flooded his olfactory nerves. Harry briefly pocketed his Muggle pen and notebook so that he could cast a bubblehead charm. He then retrieved his journal and began to document the successful block of a killing curse (with a note in the margins to add spellcasting to the growing list of things one could do within a pensieved memory).

The end of the memory caught Harry by surprise and within mid-sentence, causing ink to smear across page as his body was swept back into the library of the Queen's Wizard's Quarters. After taking a moment to gather his wits, he noticed that his Art Club badge was vibrating and anchored his girlfriend's jump. He then lost some of those regained wits when Hermione pulled him into a bear-quality embrace.

"Thanks," Harry said, once they pulled back a bit from each other. "After fifteen different battles I needed that."

Hermione gave him a sympathetic look. "You can *Finite* the bubblehead...unless you think I need a shower of something."

Harry chuckled as he drew his wand and he canceled the spell. "You, my dear, are a scent for sore nose. Not that I wouldn't mind joining you in the shower."

The bushy-haired witch looked down at his journal notes, then gave him a smack on the shoulder.

"Not until you've finished your homework, young man."

When Harry gave her his best puppy-dog eyes look she softened a bit and said, "Right then, clean up out here then you can finish up in the bedroom while I get set for bed."

"So we're spending the night here, then?"

"I think so," Hermione replied. "It's a bit past Sir Evan's bedtime...wouldn't want to wake him for a badge-ride to Windsor...Wally's here with Steve, the Queen is here for the balance of the week, and mum and dad have the night watch at the Rookery."

"Ah," Harry said suggestively, "so it's just you and me."

You, me, and that data you tried to send to headquarters tonight," Hermione replied. She then pulled him close by grabbing the front of his shirt and gave him a rather intense kiss. "So finish up and send it out," she said, "because I don't do threesomes."

Harry was too shocked to snark back a witty response, but not too shocked to know what Hermione was suggesting. As she turned and headed towards the bedroom he made a mad grab for the open vial that was sitting next to his pensieve. He quickly coaxed the smoky strands out of the bowl and into the vial, stoppered it shut with the cork, and then set the vial on a shelf next to all of the others that he had reviewed. After grabbing his notebook and the laptop computer on which he had been transcribing his notes, he made a mad dash to the master bedroom, where he found Hermione inside the walk-in-closet...with her back to the door, wearing only her knickers.

As she reached into a built-in chest of drawers for a cotton nightgown Harry said, "Don't feel as if you have to get all dressed up on my account."

Hermione startled, and reflexively dropped the nightgown so that she could cover her chest with her arms. She looked over her shoulder and said, "I'll be dressing in the other bedroom if you don't finish up your work."

Harry raised his arms up in surrender, and said "Okay, okay, I get your point...no playing with your points until I've finished up."

Hermione gave Harry a sharp smack on his other shoulder as she walked out of the closet and into the attached bath. In the time it took her to wash her face, braid her hair and brush her teeth Harry had finished his hand-written notes, fully-transcribed them into a MS-Word document, and attached that file to an e-mail to be sent to MI-5 3/4's version of Q Branch. Taking advantage of the Palace's secure wireless network, he was polishing off this last task whilst in bed, wearing only some pajama bottoms.

When Hermione re-entered the bedroom Harry looked up and asked, "What's with the ponytails?"

Hermione smiled demurely and said, "I didn't want my hair to get in the way tonight." And to emphasize her intentions, she flipped the cotton nightgown that she was wearing over her head and tossed it down to the floor.

Harry gulped as he looked down at his laptop screen. "You're making it awfully hard for me to balance this laptop on my lap, you know."

Hermione chuckled as a bit of silk joined the cotton nightie on the bedroom floor. "Am I making it hard for you to send that e-mail, or just making you hard?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

With a rather feral growl, Hermione crawled across the king-sized mattress and grabbed the computer from Harry's lap. The click of the "Send" button was quickly followed by the snap of the laptop cover as she rather carelessly dropped the computer onto the nightstand.

"Well, now that I've taking care of one of those problems, perhaps it's time I tackled the other one."

Harry gave her a saucy grin as he flicked the sheets off of his lower body and said, "You know that you have delegated authority to deal with that kind of problem any day...or night."

And as Hermione pounced on him, Harry wondered why all of his other problems couldn't be solved in such a satisfying manner.

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The next morning Hermione woke up (as she usually did) just a few seconds before the alarm clock was set to ring. When she reached across Harry's torso to turn it off before it chimed, he surprised her with an arm that wrapped tightly around her back and a nose that nuzzled tightly against her chest.

"Guess you're up already," she said.

"You could say that, then say it again," he replied impishly.

Hermione shifted her weight back off of Harry's chest so that their eyes could meet. "Let's go, Lord Loofa...PT with the Palace Guard in fifteen."

Harry frowned as he plopped his head back against his pillow. "Can't we sleep in and run later in the morning?"

"No...we've got Breakfast Club at eight, remember?"

"Well, we could always do that in bed, like yesterday's conference call."

Hermione smirked. "This is a big bed, Harry, but not big enough for all twelve of us...remember we're doing it live today."

"Oh...right," the Queen's Wizard replied with no small amount of disappointment. He then joined Hermione for another trip to their closet, where they dressed in trainers and work-out clothes.

It was the fourth time that Harry and Hermione had joined the Muggle Guard for their morning regimen. Fifteen minutes of stretching was followed by a short three-mile run along the Palace's garden paths (with two-and-a-half miles of walkways, they didn't see too many flowers twice). From there it was straight inside the Palace and downstairs to the underground firing range, where Harry and Hermione worked on handgun accuracy under elevated heart rates. They then moved on to an exercise room, where a twenty-minute circuit of weight machines focused on the development of upper-body strength.

During the hour-long program they took every opportunity to meet and chat with the other participants. The group was a mixture of Foot Guard

Regiment soldiers (active military that provided photo-ops for tourists and a perimeter guard for Buckingham Palace), SO-14 Unit Metropolitan Police, and MI-5 security personnel. After the initially cool reception that Harry received from Palace security forces, they had decided that the path to their acceptance as members of the Queen's security detail was from the ground up. And so Harry and Hermione did their best to blend in... joining in training exercises and eating in the Palace Mess as much as their schedules would allow.

Acceptance at Buckingham Palace was slower than what they'd faced at Windsor Castle. Hermione thought it had something to do with their status...not as Lord Gryffindor and Dame Hermione, necessarily, but rather as credentialed teen-aged MI-5 agents that barely knew how to shoot (a gun) straight (since MI-5 3/4 and their status as witch and wizard were state secrets, Harry and Hermione's official "cover" was as members of MI-5). While the two had shown no signs of "airs" or pretense, their living arrangements within the Palace had only accentuated their unique status... few members of the Royal staff actually lived at Buckingham Palace, and none of them had accommodations like the Queen's Wizard's Quarters.

It was to these Quarters that Harry and Hermione returned after their work-out, with barely enough time for (necessarily separate) showers before breakfast. Staff from the Palace kitchens arrived precisely five minutes before eight bearing carts and trays filled with a variety of breakfast dishes (ranging from heavy traditional English fare to lighter, healthier entrees). With swift efficiency, they set up the food buffet-style on the dining room's side table. After thanking them for their assistance, Harry showed the staff out with all of thirty seconds to spare before the appointed meeting time.

Not that this punctuality turned out to be necessary, mind you...while most of the Art Club arrived by badge-jumping spot-on eight, Fred and George had to be called more than a few times before one of them was roused from their beds. With a tight-schedule for many of the other Art Clubbers, Harry insisted that the Twins join the group in their bathrobes, if need be. His decisiveness was rewarded by a glaring vision of twin brothers dressed in garishly charmed pajamas that would have made Dumbledore proud. Except, maybe for the animated characterizations...Fred's hot pink pajamas sported a dirty-old-wizard who was creating wind gusts to lift the robes of unsuspecting witches, while George's lime-green outfit hosted a herd of satyrs on the prowl.

"Oi, you two...since when am I the responsible one?" demanded Ron, who was busy balancing a plate full of food on the way from buffet-line to table.

"Since your promotion, little brother," replied Fred.

"Promotion?" asked Emily Granger with a yawn (as she had just come off of working the night shift). "But didn't you just start your job yesterday?"

"That he did," Harry interjected. "But perhaps he can talk about that during his two minutes."

And with that gentle prod, Harry moved the Art Club through the buffet line and to their seats around the dining room table. Hermione gave Harry an approving nod when he sat at the head of the table; not so much because he was entitled to be there, as the fact that Harry recognized that he needed to be there (despite his reticence).

"Alright folks," he said, trying to quiet the group down, "thanks to Fred and George's late arrival we're already a bit behind schedule." He nodded towards the twins and added, "You two will be sharing time as a result."

"If that's our punishment we'll make it a point to be late more often," Fred quipped.

Over top of the chuckling that Fred's comment provoked Harry said, "So just to review...yesterday's conference call went a bit long, so we're limiting everybody's oral reports to two minutes or less, and Hermione's got something to help keep to schedule."

When Harry gave her a nod, Hermione cast a mist-producing spell down the length of the table. When the smoke cleared, everyone found that they had an egg suspended eighteen inches above their heads.

"These are egg timers," Hermione explained. "If you don't finish your report in time then your egg will drop, thereby making you aware of the fact."

The announcement brought a mixture of laughter and mild protests (that would have been far stronger had each and everyone in the room known that magical cleaning spells were available to take care of any inadvertent mess). It turned out to be incentive enough, though, for everyone to provide timely and concise reports. It was during these updates that several bits of interesting and important information was shared.

Lupin informed the group that the goblin engineers were still hard at work shoring up the tunnels that surrounded the Chamber of Secrets. They estimated two more days time before it would be safe to enter the Chamber, which actually worked well given everyone's schedule. Meanwhile, Slughorn was back inside Hogwarts brewing the wolfsbane potion that was needed by week's end.

Tonks gave a brief report...things were relatively quiet within the DMLE. There still hadn't been any detected Death Eater activity since Ascot, and Mad-Eye Moody had been a right pain in the arse whining about the new interns that he'd been forced to train.

Roger Granger reported no unusual activity at the Rookery, with only the usual patriarchal perverts making use of the facility. The only patron to have used the building's street entrance hadn't been under a glamour, but would have been easy enough to track had they wanted to based on his rather flamboyant attire.

Emily Granger used her time to report on the Summer Institute at Cumberland Lodge. The teaching area was nearly ready, and class lists finalized. With Mad-Eye Moody agreeing to help with DADA instruction, their staffing was complete, so long as they could find a way to ferry Firenze the centaur back and forth between Hogwarts. The most pressing issue was getting the names of incoming Muggleborn students, and she enlisted Remus's help in working the Headmistress McGonagall to work out those details.

Sir Evan informed the group that he had spent the most delightful day with his Muses, and that there hadn't much to do otherwise with the Queen back at the Palace.

When the elderly Muggle failed to speak much past thirty seconds, Ron asked if he could have the extra time (he was refused). He then proceeded in turn, with news that upon his first day as an intern within the Goblin Liaison Office that Ragnok himself had sent word that they would only deal with the Potter Clan Champion. As a result, he'd been made active Head of the office, effectively re-retiring Cuthbert Mockridge, who had been asked to step into that role when Dirk Cresswell (the well-liked and respected Muggleborn who had held that position) had been killed during the battle inside the Ministry. Mindful of the egg, he failed to mention anything about the Peanut Butter Brigade.

Which left it to Hermione to fill in the details on the first day of the Ministry of Magic's intern program. Based on the reports of their network of friends and sympathetic Ministry employees, nothing much happened beyond the goblin ultimatum. There was a fair bit of orientation" (which, from the sounds of things, consisted of boring speeches and propaganda from the likes of Umbridge and Percy). The network had been given orders to lay low, for at least the first few weeks, and to do nothing more than to blend in and observe how things played out.

Fred and George next used twin-speak to describe their time within MI-5 3/4's Q Branch as "guest researchers." While much of their day had been spent dancing around the Magical Secrecy Laws (under Harry and Hermione's stern supervision), there had been a few opportunities to meet and get to know some R & D-wonky kindred spirits. They had hammered out an agreement to jointly develop AK-resistant body armor, and had also started talking about supply chains and mass-production for some of their product line.

Wally and Steve followed with a joint report of their own, passing out the Royal Family's schedule for the day. They mentioned that the Queen and her Consort had plans to visit Canada and a few of the Caribbean Commonwealth countries in two-weeks time, and asked whether something should be done in terms of magical security. When asked, Tonks told the group that the MLE only watched over the PM, and not the Royal Family. She said that other muggle sovereigns and leaders weren't normally provided magical security coverage while in Britain, but that they suspected many brought magical security on their own (either knowingly or unknowingly). She didn't know if this was always the case, or due to the fact that Voldemort was running rampant within Magical Britain.

Feeling some responsibility for the safety of the Royal Family as Queen's Wizard, Harry stated that he would discuss the matter with Head Auror Robards at their next meeting. He then used this decision to transition into his own report. He described (in very circumspect terms) his meeting with Mad-Eye at The Stag, and noted that he had already cataloged fifteen different objects that the retired Auror had used to block the killing curse. He ended by noting that Hermione and he were meeting with the Prime Minister later in the day, in advance of the next day's meeting with Scrimgeour.

And with that, the Breakfast Club concluded. Cars were waiting to ferry individual Art Club members out beyond the protective wards. Ron and Tonks were driven directly to the Ministry of Magic, while Fred, George and Remus were delivered to the Leaky Cauldron (where the Hogwarts Castellan floo'ed to Hogsmeade and the Twins walked into the Alley and their shop). Sir Evan and Wally shared a ride out to Windsor Castle, while Steve walked from Queen's Wizard Quarters to the Palace's Security Command Center.

This left Harry and Hermione in their quarters with two very tired parents. While Hermione and Harry had been switching back and forth between living in the Round Tower and the Palace, Mr. And Mrs. Granger had become quite settled within their Windsor apartment. But with the prospect of an hour's commute out to the Castle they were happy to accept Harry and Hermione's offer for them to use their guest bedroom. So grateful, in fact, that Hermione's parents either didn't recognize or didn't care about the fact that their daughter referred to it as the "guest" bedroom, rather than hers.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Senior Advisor, Part 2 (part 1)

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

Chapter 24 - 10 Downing Street

Tuesday, July 3, 11:30am
Buckingham Palace, London

Hermione was startled when she heard a soft knock on the library's door. She tried to close the open window on her laptop display, but missed and clicked on the "minimize" button instead. She silently cursed as Harry entered the room before she could fix her mistake.

"Lunch is here," he announced, as he crossed the room with a neck nuzzle in mind.

The bushy-haired witch tried to casually shut her laptop screen down before he could look over her shoulder at her display.

"Still working on your presentation?" Harry asked, as he gave her a hug from behind

She nodded and leaned her head back into the hug. "There's no such thing as perfect when you're presenting to the Prime Minister."

Harry chuckled into her ear. "But they already have the summary version of the brief you wrote for the Queen, right?" he asked. "They'll only need more in case your report wasn't comprehensive enough, and what are the odds of that?"

Hermione sighed. "Comprehensive would have meant giving them the latest edition of *Hogwarts, A History* ...how could anyone expect us to brief Muggles on Voldemort and the current state of the wizarding world in two-thousand words or less?"

The Queen's Wizard opened both hands and as he counted off, he asked, "How about 'Voldemort sucks and the Ministry of Magic isn't much better'?...that's only ten."

"Bah!" exclaimed Hermione. "No time for cute banter."

"Agreed," said Harry. He then impishly added, "Which makes me wonder why you are taking a "virtual tour" of 10 Downing Street on the internet."

Hermione blushed, and stammered a bit. "Well, I...guess I was just wondering what the inside looks like, and, erm..."

Harry smiled as he pulled his girlfriend up from her chair and led her by hand out to the dining room, where plates of food were waiting. "You could have just asked me," he noted, as he took a seat, "I was there a few times last week, after all."

"Well, you were busy in the bedroom practicing wandless magic," Hermione explained. "Didn't want to disturb you."

"It's alright."

"What's alright?" Hermione asked, as she sat and started to tuck in. "My explanation, or 10 Downing Street?"

"Both," Harry quipped, with an intentional air of indifference. "The building's a lot smaller than Windsor or Buck, of course, but the upstairs flat was kind of cozy."

"What? You didn't tell me you were inside the P.M.'s living quarters as well."

"You didn't ask, and I didn't think it was important,...besides, I was only up there long enough to check all of the fireplaces for hidden floo connects."

"What's it like?"

Harry paused, and then said, "Erm, cozy, like I said." He then shook his head and asked, "You aren't a little starstruck at the idea meeting the P.M. at his place, are you?"

"No," Hermione quickly replied.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Well, maybe...a little," his girlfriend admitted.

Harry smiled. "I'm a bit surprised," he admitted. "I mean...you didn't get this wiggy when we met the Queen, or the Royal Family."

"Well, that's different," said Hermione. "I didn't have time to get nervous before meeting the Queen, or before arriving here at the Palace...somebody thought it best to keep the whole thing a surprise."

"I'll only take partial blame on that point," said Harry. "I was mostly clueless for most of that day as well." He then asked, "But why be nervous now? I mean, Tony's a nice guy, and he..."

"First-name basis already?" Hermione asked in almost a shriek.

The Queen's Wizard shrugged his shoulders. "He kept wanting to call me Lord Gryffindor, so I had to strike a deal in order for him to call me Harry."

Hermione sighed deeply while her head shook back and forth in amazement.

Harry squinted a bit, as if trying to solve a puzzle. He had seen this look on Hermione's face before, but couldn't quite place it...*Lockhart!*

"School-girl crush on the Prime Minister?" he asked nonchalantly.

Hermione's cheeks flushed red. "No, of course not," she quickly replied.

Harry smiled, and used the conversational pause to finish off his bowl of soup. And to force Hermione's hand, because there was something behind that reply...

"Well, not any more, at least," she sheepishly admitted. "Half the girls in my primary school class had crushes on him...I mean, he was young, and handsome, and articulate..."

Harry patted her arm. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Prat!"

The Queen's Wizard snorted, then noted, "Funny that you didn't seem all that giddy when we were introduced at Ascot."

"Probably a bit too nervous about riding in the Queen's landau, your show and the Dementors," Hermione explained. She then looked at her watch and stood, throwing her serviette on the table. "Not much time...my hair's still a mess, I need to change, and brush my teeth, and..."

Harry followed her into their bedroom's walk-in-closet for a look into the full-length mirror. He grabbed her from behind and looked over her shoulder as Hermione flattened the front of her skirt with her hands. "It's so much easier in the wizarding world when robes cover everything...are you sure that I look good in this outfit?" she asked.

Harry smiled as he angled around her shoulder for a kiss.

"I'd rather that you were wearing only a smile and your Art Club badge."

Hermione shushed him and pushed him away. He stumbled a bit and fell against the closet wall with a "thump."

"Quiet!" she hissed. "You'll wake up mum and dad next door."

The messy-haired wizard grinned and asked, "Who says that they're still sleeping?"

"Why do you say that?" Hermione replied. "Did they leave while I was in the library?"

"Erm, no...I'm quite sure that they're still in there."

"But I haven't heard them," Hermione noted.

As if on cue, they heard a mumbled comment and a short giggle coming through the wall that separated the two bedrooms.

Hermione's look of shock reflected well in the full-length mirror. "Did I just hear my mum giggle?" she whispered.

Harry snorted, and then said, "Guess I should be more thorough and cast a silencing spell on back of the closet as well."

"You mean you heard more than...more than that?"

With arched eyebrows, Harry asked, "Do you really want me to answer that question?"

"Erm, no...not really."

Harry nodded as he grabbed Hermione's hand and led her out of the master bedroom.

"You know, your mum and dad have been brilliant this past month. We're lucky to have them around."

"Yes, I know that, it's just that sometimes they seem to forget that we are around."

"Well old habits might be hard to break...it's not like you've been home much the past six years."

"Old habits?" Hermione said. "Too much information, I think."

"Speaking of too much information," Harry said, changing the subject, "are you still fretting about the magical secrecy laws?"

"Shouldn't I be?"

Harry shook his head. "We've got things all lined up...you wrote the report for me, I gave the report to the Queen, and then she decided to give it to the Prime Minister. I was technically the only person that broke the secrecy laws, except that I didn't because that's my job as Queen's Wizard."

"You know, we never did get around to meeting with a wizard barrister to discuss all of this."

Harry nodded. "You're right, we haven't, and we probably should...have a meeting time in mind?"

"Sure," Hermione replied with a bit of sarcasm, "I'll just shoe-horn it in between meeting the Ministers, harvesting the basilisk, setting up the Summer Institute and horcrux hunting."

Harry smiled as he reached over and grabbed Hermione's hand. "Hey, I'm supposed to be the one overwhelmed with the enormity of my task, not you," he noted. "Buck up, Hermione...it certainly could be a lot worse."

"You think so?"

"I'm certain of it," Harry replied. "Without the Prince's help and everything since, I might still have been alone on Privet Drive with my Aunt and Uncle, with another month's time ahead before I could legally do magic."

Hermione smiled. "It does sound like a rather bleak alternative universe, doesn't it?"

Harry looked around the suite, gave Hermione's hand another squeeze, and said, "All in all, I'm becoming very fond of present circumstances." He then noted, "We still have the name of the barrister that Mr. Weasley recommended...maybe we can owl and see if he'd consider making housecalls?"

Hermione nodded as she returned the squeeze. "Sounds like a plan...so long as he doesn't come calling while my parents are..."

"Hey!" Harry interrupted, "were you just about to make smutty comment?"

His girlfriend smirked. "Maybe."

Harry smiled as he leaned back in his chair. "Amazing," he concluded. "This summer is getting better by the minute."

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The two magical teens only had a few minutes to talk with the Prince of Wales during the short drive from the Palace to 10 Downing Street. He was along as the Crown's representative, and to facilitate any discussion on the role of Queen's Wizard.

The Prince handed each of them a two-page document and said, "Here's a brief work-up on meeting participants. Besides the P.M. there will be the Home Secretary Michael Duluth, Sir Walter Hibbing from MI-5 and Sir David Eveleth, who heads MI-6."

Harry looked down at the page, which had small head shots and brief biographies of the three men. "They're all card-carrying Muggles, right?"

"Erm...as far as you know," the Prince replied. "Mind the Home Secretary...he's a bit mugglish, and a rather outspoken critic of the Royal Family."

"Really?"

The Prince nodded. "Hates the peerage in general...grew up in one of the rougher parts of Manchester, and rails against anything that smacks of privilege."

Harry nodded, then noted, "So he's the reason why you've suggested we avoid using our titles, and play down my financial resources?"

"Exactly," the Prince replied. "We need to give him every reason to listen to what you have to say."

"And just what will we be discussing that would make it so vitally important that they listen to us?"

The Prince paused, before giving Harry a rather rueful grin. "Life, The Universe, and Everything."

This response didn't do much to ease the two teen-ager's nerves, despite its cheekiness.

Upon their arrival, the Palace's car drove through the opened wrought-iron gate that blocked off the small cul-de-sac. Tourists clamored to see who might be stepping through what the Prime Minister's very own web site calls "the most famous door in the world." They weren't disappointed when the Prince of Wales exited the vehicle. A cheer rang out and camera shutters clicked as the Prince turned, took a few steps towards the crowd, and waved. He had hoped that this gesture might focus attention away from Harry and Hermione as they quietly stepped out and made straight for the building's entrance. These hopes were quickly dashed, however, as squeals of recognition rang out.

"It's the Queen's Wizard!"

"Oh, my he's so dashing in that suit!"

"And even more handsome, in person!"

Fleet Street photographers and television cameramen on permanent stake-out for these sorts of arrivals called out for Harry to stop long enough for a proper photograph. Harry rolled his eyes, but figured that it would be best to comply. He winked at Hermione as he grabbed her hand and spun around for a joint wave.

"There's that bird he was with at Ascot!"

"She's so lucky!"

"Oi, Mr. Wizard, leave her and marry me!" shouted one teen-aged girl, to the delight of the assembled crowd.

"Forget that," a male voice cried out. "Leave him and I'll show you some real magic, miss!"

The fake grin that Harry had plastered onto his face for the cameras turned real with that response. Luckily, the door opened and they were shown through the front entrance without hearing any more competition for Hermione's heart.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione exclaimed as they settled themselves in the front entryway. "How much did you pay that bloke to say that?"

Harry snorted. "Pish-posh, Hermione," he replied in a singsong voice. "Your beauty provides every reason for equal-opportunity ogling." He then turned and addressed a rather bemused-looking Royal. "No disrespect intended, Your Highness."

"None taken, Harry," the Prince replied. "I can assure you that I am quite used to be upstaged when traveling in the company of a beautiful woman."

Hermione blushed at the comparison as they were shown through a pair of not-quite-as-famous white French doors and into the ground floor proper.

"Looks bigger than what I expected from the web site," she admitted.

Harry smiled as they were shown to small reception room adjacent to the Prime Minister's office. Kingsley Shacklebolt was there, dressed in a three-piece Muggle suit and openly flirting with a pretty aide who sat behind a desk.

"Looking good, Mr. Shacklebolt," Harry called out.

Kingsley reluctantly turned his attention away from the Minister's aide. "You look almost as snappy yourself, Harry...or are we Lord Gryffindor today?"

The younger wizard grinned. "Just Harry, thanks."

Shacklebolt nodded as he shook hands all around. That the Prince responded by calling the Auror by name suggested that it wasn't the first time the two had met.

"Do try and stay out of trouble in there," Kingsley asked.

"Don't I always?" Harry replied a smile. "Oh, and Shack, let's not have any Weasley products extending underneath the doorway, right?"

"Of course, Harry," the Auror replied, with a shocked "who me?" expression on his face.

Just then the room door opened and the Prime Minister himself welcomed the Prince, Harry and Hermione into his office. He gave both the Prince and Harry a firm handshake, quietly welcoming Harry by first name. The Queen's Wizard wished he had better peripheral vision when the P.M. added an elbow grab to the handshake he gave Hermione.

Two members of the house staff followed behind the three in order to clear away the remnants of a working lunch. The Prime Minister waited for these staffers to clear out before introducing the two teens as "Agents Granger and Potter."

The MI-5 and MI-6 chiefs smiled in recognition; while neither had met Harry and Hermione face-to-face, their photographs had been included in the dossiers built in advance of their appointment as intelligence agents. Both men stood and gave warm handshakes. In contrast, the Home Secretary's tepid handshake seemed designed to minimize (to the greatest extent possible) the amount of skin contact.

"Thank you for joining us this afternoon," the Prime Minister said, as he walked behind his desk and took a seat.

"Erm, thank you for the invitation, Prime Minister," Harry replied. "If I might ask, would you mind if we magically secure the room?"

"You, secure the room?" asked the Home Secretary incredulously. "Where do you think you are, boy?"

"I suspect, Mr. Duluth," said the Prince, "that *Agent* Potter is talking about ensuring that the magical protections he set in place last week are still functioning."

"Yes, Your Highness," Harry quickly added, "although our scans will also detect mug-...erm...mundane eavesdropping devices."

"Oh, well..." the Muggle leader replied, "Mr. Shacklebolt swept the room an hour ago, but please, feel free."

"Thank you, Prime Minister," Hermione replied, as she and Harry removed both wands and mobiles from their pockets. "Would everyone please power down their mobiles, laptops and other electrical devices?" she asked.

There was only a little bit of grumbling as the shut down chimes of computers and mobiles sounded out. Once getting nods from everyone in the room, and ascertaining that nobody was wearing a pacemaker, Harry and Hermione cast a series of heavy-duty silencing spells on every wall, the ceiling and floor. They also checked the shrouding of the magical portrait, as well as the de-activated floo connection. After giving everyone the "all-clear" to power-up their various electronics, Harry and Hermione took their seats.

"That looked like a rather thorough sweep," the MI-5 Chief noted. "But was it completely necessary? It was my understanding that the protective

walls..erm...wards?...yes, the protective wards you set up last week kept magic out."

Hermione nodded. "The anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards are still in place, as are the magical sensor barriers and the block against floo travel put on the fireplace." She then added a caveat. "But that doesn't mean that a wizard couldn't have walked through the barriers, and then found a way inside the building so that they could eavesdrop."

The Prime Minister frowned. "Do you two have reason to doubt Mr. Shackbolt's discretion?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "I've known Auror Shackbolt for a couple of years, now. Although he is a Ministry employee, he's also been involved with the Order for some time, and I have no reason not to trust him."

The Prime Minister nodded, as the Home Secretary flipped through a stack of papers in front of him. "Order?" he finally asked with a scowl. "Are you talking about your so-called Order of Arthur, or that vigilante group mentioned in your briefing documents?"

It was Hermione's turn to frown as she replied, "He was a member of The Order of the Phoenix, Mr. Home Secretary, and I'd like to think of them more as an NGO than a vigilante group."

"Ah yes," the MI-6 Chief interrupted. "That brings up a question raised when I read your brief...which, by the way, was quite brilliant, Agent Granger...I'm glad to have you aboard."

"Don't get too territorial, there, Sir David," the MI-5 Chief chided. "She's just as much an MI-5 asset as yours."

As Hermione blushed at the compliment, Harry politely noted that correct chain-of-command for the briefing documents, saying that for their purposes Hermione was working for him.

"And that technicality is necessary to keep your noses clean with respect to magical secrecy laws?" the Prime Minister asked.

"Yes, Prime Minister."

"No need to worry," the MI-6 chief noted, "All of this is covered under the Official Secrets Act, and none of us are about to reveal your actions to the wizard police."

Harry nodded and gave the chief a grim smile. "Unfortunately, Sir David, good intentions aren't always good enough when you want to keep secrets from the wizarding world."

Both security chiefs frowned. "And why is that, Agent Potter?" the MI-5 Chief asked.

"Some wizards can read minds, Sir," Harry explained, "and there is an effective magical truth serum called veritaserum."

"Mind readers?" the Home Secretary asked with alarm. "Should we be worrying that you are reading our minds right now?" he asked. Then, not quite under his breath, he muttered, "Not that we'd be able to trust that you'd tell us the truth."

Harry took in a sharp breath, and Hermione thought it prudent to reach over and grab hold of his hand while he silently counted to ten.

"Sir," Hermione replied, "You needn't worry that either of us are traipsing through your mind right now. Legimency is a difficult art to master. I can't do it, and even if I could there are ethical issues involved with invading someone else's mind without permission."

The Home Secretary nodded, then turned his gaze towards Harry. "Do you have the ability?"

The Queen's Wizard nodded. "I have been studying the technique for the past month. As Hermione indicated, it is a difficult subject, and so far the best I can do is read some hidden emotions and the occasional surface thought."

The Home Secretary sat back in his chair and asked, "For what purposes are you attempting to become a mind reader?"

Harry replied coolly, "So that the mental defenses of Hermione and my colleagues can be tested and improved upon."

The MI-6 chief asked what type of mental defenses existed, and whether it would be possible for non-magical people to learn them. Harry and Hermione then spent a few minutes describing mediation as a useful technique for anyone, with the caveat that it would be hard for a Muggle to completely occlude his or her mind from even a moderately competent legiimens. The Home Secretary then tried to steer the conversation back towards his concerns.

"In the section describing the different political and military groupings within your world, this Order of the Phoenix was identified as having an 'unknown status'...why can't you tell us what this group is doing at present time?"

Hermione paused for a moment, then turned to Harry and offered him the chance to respond. He replied, "Neither Hermione or I were part of that organization. They have likely gone to ground, as they were likely compromised by the same spy that murdered Headmaster Dumbledore."

"Yes," said the Home Secretary, rather coolly, "There was mention of more than one case of divided loyalties in the briefing document." He then stared directly at Harry and said, "It gave me pause to wonder exactly where your loyalties lie."

Harry's brow furrowed. He once again silently counted to ten as static electricity seemed to build within the room. Finally, he said, "With all due respect, Sir, I take my sworn fealty to Her Royal Majesty quite seriously."

It is one thing to say you are loyal to the Queen, young man..." the Home Secretary countered.

"On that point you are wrong, Sir," Harry coolly exclaimed. "When it comes to a sworn oath, a wizard's word is *everything*."

The Prime Minister tried to wrestle back control of the meeting. "I believe that any questions of where Agent Potter's loyalties lie were put to rest at Ascot," he concluded. "Wonderful job there, by the way," he noted as an aside to Harry. "Most spectacular battle that I never saw."

"That's my point exactly," the Home Secretary said, "We don't know that he was fighting against anything real...it could have been a complete fabrication."

"That's quite enough, Duluth," the Prime Minister said firmly. "I'll tolerate no more of this tripe from you."

"It's not tripe, it's the truth, and if you're too blinded by whiz-bangs and Royals to see it, then Lord God help us all." He then stood and announced, "I, for one, have heard all I need to hear."

As the Home Secretary reached down to retrieve his briefcase the Prime Minister turned towards the Prince and pointedly asked, "Your Highness, given present circumstances have you an opinion on how Her Majesty might view my use of royal prerogative?"

The Prince smiled. "In this situation, I am quite confident that your powers of patronage would not be challenged by the Queen."

"Very well, then," the Prime Minister replied. He then turned back towards the Home Secretary and said, "Duluth, I can no longer afford your narrow-mindedness within my Cabinet. Consider yourself sacked."

The Home Secretary's face turned a brilliant shade of red (Harry couldn't decide if it was due to anger, embarrassment, or the fact that the man was holding his breath). As he stormed out the office door, Harry could see the edges of the Prime Minister's lips curl up slightly.

There was nothing "slight" about the grins on the faces of the two intelligence chiefs.

"Splendid play, old man," the MI-6 chief told the Prime Minister.

"Well done indeed, Prime Minister," the MI-5 chief added.

The Prime Minister nodded gravely. "I'm sorry that you had to see that," he said to Harry and Hermione. "He was a right pain even before he was briefed in on the wizarding world, and it's only gotten worse since then. Coming face-to-face with a witch and wizard obviously sent him over the edge."

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry, Sir, for causing such a mess for you."

The Prime Minister smiled. "No worries, Harry...he'll go sulking back to Parliament and whine behind my back during the Labor conferences, but he was already doing that."

"At least he can't go to the papers," the Prince noted.

The MI-6 chief nodded in agreement. "Not without violating the Official Secrets Act, and even then he runs the risk of looking the fool for taking a principled stand against the Queen's Wizard and magic use."

"Almost worth using one of those memory charms on him," the MI-5 chief noted.

"Almost, but not nearly close enough," the Prime Minister concluded. "That was, after all, one of the chief complaints to be lodged during my meeting with the Minister of Magic."

The MI-5 chief nodded, and then tapped his knuckles down on his copy of Hermione's briefing document. "So based on this report, do you think it's time to convene a War Cabinet, Prime Minister?"

The Prime Minister thought for a moment. "Not right now, Sir Walter," he replied. "That would mean bringing in the opposition leader, and briefing in a few others on the wizarding world. I'm leaning towards a crisis committee...at least until we've cleared up some issues with the Ministry of Magic." His eyes then narrowed a bit, and he said, "We'll have to reschedule that meeting, however...I suddenly have a Home Secretary to replace." He then rang up his Chief of Staff and instructed him to have a press release worked up, and to set up an emergency Cabinet meeting for later that day.

After ending the call, the Minister turned his attentions back to his guests. "I am afraid that we no longer have time to fully address our meeting agenda, other than to say that the report was top-notch."

"Thank you, Prime Minister," Hermione replied with a blush.

"I have to say, though, that I was a bit disappointed that you didn't make any recommendations on how the Ministry of Magic could be changed for the better...for example, whether we should work to have Scrimgeour sacked."

Harry nodded. "The Queen didn't give us that particular charge, and neither Hermione nor I thought it to be our place to offer unsolicited advice to Her Majesty and her government."

The Prime Minister nodded. "Well, then, perhaps I'll have to tweak your charges," he replied. He then turned towards the intelligence chiefs and added, "Unless either of two have any objections?"

The heads of MI-5 and MI-6 shook their heads. "You are obviously in their chain of command, Prime Minister," the MI-6 chief explained.

The Muggle leader's eyes lit up. "I am, aren't I?" he replied.

The Prince cleared his throat. "Her Majesty might take issue should you lay claim to too much of Her Wizard's time."

The Prime Minister nodded. "What if I arranged to have Agent Granger reassigned to my office?"

Hermione let out an audible "eep!" as the Prince smiled. "Her Majesty is quite fond of Dame Hermione, but has no formal claim on her time. That said, I think that the question should be posed to Agent Granger and the Queen's Wizard."

The MI-5 chief concurred. "Their primary assignment as MI-5 3/4 agents is to continue what they were doing to battle Voldemort and protect the Realm and its citizenry."

The Prime Minister nodded. He then asked, "Agent Granger, I have need of a Senior Advisor for all issues involving magic and the wizarding world. I also am keenly interested in how other Muggle governments interact with their magical communities, and would like to appoint a Special Ambassador to the greater wizarding world. Would you be interested in either or both of these posts, so long as they didn't interfere with your primary mission?"

Hermione sat gobsmacked, doing the fish-out-of-water thing with her lips, before replying. "I'm honored that you'd consider me, but I'm not sure that I'm the best candidate, and not sure about how we could work the secrecy laws, for that matter."

"Don't be so modest, Agent Granger," the Prime Minister replied. "Can you think of any other person in the realm that knows the Muggle and wizarding worlds as well as you do?"

"I'm sure that there's somebody older that does..."

"And would you imagine that this hypothetical person would hold top-secret security clearances, a close working and personal relationship with the Queen's Wizard, and the resources available to you as a member of the Order of Arthur?"

Hermione snorted at the rhetorical question. "No, I imagine not." She then asked Harry what he thought.

The Queen's Wizard gave her a bright smile, and said, "I think it's a brilliant idea." He then turned to the Prime Minister and asked, "As a Senior Adviser and Special Ambassador, would she have a desk here at 10 Downing Street?"

As Hermione gasped and swatted Harry on the arm for his presumption, the Prime Minister smiled. "We're a bit cramped for space, but I think that I might be able to pull a few strings."

He then stood up from his desk, causing everyone else to do the same. He then asked, "Agent Granger, have you had a proper tour of the building yet?"

"Erm, no Sir, not that I..."

The Prime Minister walked around the desk and grabbed Hermione lightly by the elbow as he gestured towards the door. "No, no, I think a bit of a look about would be appropriate...you and I can scout out suitable desk space for my newest Senior Advisor."

"Erm..um...whatever you say, Prime Minister,"

The Muggle leader turned to Harry and the Prince. "Would you two like to join us? I'll have at least a few minutes before all Hell breaks loose with the Home Secretary situation."

Harry smiled as the Prince gave him a hand gesture indicating that it was his decision to make.

"No, that's quite alright, Prime Minister," Harry replied. He then turned to Hermione. "Why don't you go along and just pop back to the Palace when you're done? I'll go and get an owl off to that barrister."

Hermione smiled brilliantly. She wanted to give him a proper snog, but decided in present company to limit her affections to a gentle hand squeeze. "Okay, Harry, just call if you need me."

And with that, the meeting concluded. The Prince asked the Prime Minister if they might linger in his office long enough to sample his collection of single malts. The Prime Minister readily agreed, then escorted Hermione out for her tour and introductions to his staff. Once the door closed, the Prince walked over to a sideboard and poured out four glasses of whisky. As he distributed them he said, "Well, that went better than expected." He then raised his glass and offered a toast.

"Gentlemen, to Dame Hermione's bright future within these walls, and to the former Home Secretary's less-than-luminous future outside of them."

"Hear, Hear," the MI-6 chief said, as they each sipped from their tumblers. Harry considered tossing his glass into the fireplace, but then thought better of it.

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In bed that night, Hermione finally remembered to ask what was discussed whilst she was on her tour.

"Well," Harry said with a smile, "we shared a toast to your potential posting, and then Sir Walter asked Sir David whether he thought they had just lost a future MI-5 3/4 Chief to the Prime Minister's Staff."

"No, he didn't!"

"He most certainly did."

"So what did Sir David say?"

Harry's smile grew. "He said it was more likely that they lost a future Prime Minister, rather than a P.M.'s staffer."

"No, he didn't!"

"Really he did...and then the Prince asked whether he was thinking Muggle Prime Minister, or Minister of Magic."

Hermione pulled the top sheet over her head in embarrassment. "Oh, Merlin!"

"Yeah, and they asked me what I thought."

"Oh, Harry," she cried out, still covered, "Don't tell me you went along with that nonsense."

"Okay, I won't tell you then," Harry replied brightly.

After a moment's silence, Hermione pulled the sheet down in frustration. "So tell me what you said."

Harry pulled Hermione into a comforting embrace. "I told them that I'd be proud of you whatever your career path was, and that it wouldn't matter to me if you were one or the other or both, so long as it didn't require you to leave behind what I thought was an even more important posting."

"What?" Hermione asked with surprise. "What are you on about, Harry?...what position would be more important than Prime Minister or Minister of Magic?"

Harry grinned

"Lady Gryffindor."

Hermione gave Harry a look of shock. "Please don't tell me that they asked you that same question, or that you gave them that same answer."

"Okay, I won't tell you that they asked me that very same question, or that I gave them that very same answer."

Hermione tried (and almost succeeded) to push Harry off of the bed. "Oh, you prat...tell me!"

"What's the problem?" Harry asked innocently, "Would you have been embarrassed if I really did say that?"

She was about to answer when she remembered being in a similar situation before.

"Why Harry, are you back on your Slytherin passive-aggressive path of finding out the answer to a question that you don't dare ask outright?"

Harry smiled as he crawled back towards Hermione. "Maybe," he said, as he ran a hand up her leg.

Hermione swatted Harry's hand away before stating her opinion on Harry's tactics.

"Gillyweed, Mr. Potter...gillyweed."

Chapter 25 - The Senior Adviser

***Wednesday, July 4, 7:35am
Buckingham Palace, London***

The fact that Harry Potter was dressed and ready before Hermione was spoke volumes about just how nervous she was about her first official day on the job at 10 Downing Street.

"Can I do anything to help?" he asked, walking into the walk-in closet of their Buck Master Bedroom. He found his girlfriend facing the full-length mirror, dressed in a tailored two-piece suit, black hold-ups, and low-heeled pumps.

Hermione used her hands to pull her hair away from each side of her face. A moment later, she turned and asked, "Which earrings?"

The Queen's Wizard cocked his head to one side and squinted, first at the gold hoop in her left ear, then the pearl that dangled from her right. After a moment of consideration, he replied, "Erm..they both look nice."

"I said, *which* earrings, Harry."

The well-dressed wizard smiled as he closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist. She tried to push him away with the admonishment, "Wrinkles!"

Harry snorted, and only pulled her closer as he placed his nose within nuzzling distance of the pearl and softly replied, "Ironing Charm."

While Hermione was protesting that there wasn't time to recharm her clothes, he stepped back, gently held each of her ear lobes in his hands, and asked, "Perhaps you might want to consider 'none of the above'?"

The Boy-Who-Lived then answered Hermione's confused expression by retrieving a small box from his trouser pocket. Inside was a pair of flawless three-quarter carat diamond earrings.

Hermione's eyes lit up as she quelled a frown of frustration by biting on her bottom lip. "Oh, Harry," she said as she pulled him into a hug. "Thank you...you shouldn't have."

"Why not?" he replied. "It's only fitting that you look your best on your first day."

A chuckle came from her lips as Hermione quickly swapped out her mismatched pair of earrings for the diamonds and placed the rejects back into her jewelry box with their mates. She turned back towards the mirror and let out a sigh.

"Harry, they're brilliant, but I'm working undercover," she noted. "Not too many interns could afford to be wearing earrings as nice as these."

"Oh, sorry," replied her boyfriend, as he wrapped his arms her and pulled her back into a firm embrace. "Maybe I can chew them down in size?" he asked, as he tried to determine whether diamonds have any taste.

Hermione swatted his hands away from her waist and craned her neck away from Harry's kisses. "Stop it...this is exactly why I blocked out extra snagging time in our schedules last night."

When a wand snapped out from her arm holster Harry thought she might be trying to back her brush-off with a hexing. He quickly backed away, which gave Hermione plenty of room to cast a weak reducing spell that shrank the gemstones down to a much more modest size.

"You know," Harry said, "I also bought a smaller pair if you wanted the stones to be that size."

Hermione smiled through the mirror. "Oh, no, these are fine," she replied, as she viewed her handiwork. "I rather like knowing that they are larger in real life."

"Even if they look the same?"

The bushy-haired witch nodded. "It's like wearing expensive lingerie," she explained. "They're just as functional as plain-Jane knickers, but a girl just feels better knowing that she's hiding something luxurious under her outfit."

"Is that so?" Harry replied with a smirk. "Anything like a bloke getting excited at the thought of his girl going commando, even if he can't see it for himself?"

Hermione smiled, having discovered a way to thank Harry for his thoughtful gift. After making one final check in the mirror, she *Accio*'ed her briefcase, then used her free hand to pull Harry's head into a crushing kiss. Tearing her lips away from his, she bit down lightly on his left ear lobe, and then whispered sweetly into his ear.

"I don't know if it's the same thing," she replied. "But maybe you can tell me when I get home tonight."

Harry was too shocked to provide a witty retort, and by the time that his tongue had regained functionality Hermione had reached inside her jacket to activate her badge. With her mum "on the phone," he didn't dare say anything as she made a silent adjustment to her wardrobe. Mother and daughter chatted just long enough for Hermione to get the all-clear to badge-jump.

She disappeared. Her knickers didn't.

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Hermione reappeared in Windsor Castle, inside the ground floor Round Tower apartment that her parents now called home. A few minutes later, she got a call from her boyfriend while she was walking with her parents to the Royal Mess.

"Hi, Harry."

"Erm, Hermione...did you forget something that you'll need for the day?"

"No, I don't think so...oh, and I just wanted to say thanks again for your thoughtful gift this morning."

"Erm...you're welcome," Harry replied. "I have to say that your thank-you gift has wreaked havoc with my thoughts."

"That was my intention."

"Want to hear just what kind of thoughts I've been having?"

"Maybe later," Hermione replied. "I'm with mum and dad right now."

"Really?" Harry asked. "Well, if that's the case, then I'll let you go. Good luck, Sweetheart...I know you'll knock them dead."

"Thanks, Harry."

"Oh, and just so you know, I've got your little gift in my coat pocket, in case you need them back sometime during the day."

"Erm, no...Harry...that's quite alright."

"Hey, no problem, Hermione...I never realized it, but if you fold them just right they make a rather dashing pocket square....the red silk even matches my tie."

"Don't you dare...don't you think about daring to....wait, don't tell me that you're serious."

"Maybe," said Harry, rather cheekily. "Are you going to tell me that you're seriously considering not wearing knickers to work today?"

"Maybe."

"Merlin, Hermione...I mean...not even going to fire a 'notice-me-not' charm up your skirt?"

"Oh! ...you are quite the perver...erm, perfect boyfriend."

Harry laughed. "Didn't want to say 'pervert' within earshot of your parents, Hermione?"

"No, not really."

"Well fortunately, I don't have that problem...nobody here to hear me go on and on about exactly where the skinny part of this thong was just a few minutes ago."

Hermione mouthed a silent curse.

"Something wrong?" Emily Granger asked.

"No," her daughter replied, "Harry's just providing some therapeutic distraction....aren't you Harry?"

"Only looking out for you, my Dear."

"Yeah, right, Harry...talk to you later."

Once she pocketed her mobile her father asked, "A distraction from this big surprise you want to tell us about?"

"Erm...maybe," Hermione said with a grin. She waited until they had been seated for breakfast and had their orders taken before elaborating.

Roger and Emily Granger had worked a second shift from 3pm until 11pm on the day previous, so there hadn't been a chance for Hermione to tell them about her visit to 10 Downing Street. They were thrilled when she stated that she had provisionally accepted both postings as Senior Advisor and Special Ambassador. One of the first questions they asked was about her age...while Roger and Emily were quite certain that she would be up for the job, they wondered what the Muggle public, the press, or her co-workers would think about a teen-ager advising the Prime Minister. Hermione assured her parents that they had already thought of that issue, and come up with a work-around.

Hermione's working relationship with the Prime Minister was to be a tightly-held secret, and revealed only on a need-to-know basis. Roger and Emily were on the "need-to-know" list as Art Club members, as there might come a time when they'd be called on to badge-jump to the Prime Minister's defense using Hermione's badge as an anchor. She would be working undercover as a summer intern, and assigned to the office of the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff. Hermione would still be a bit young for the job, as almost every intern came to the Prime Minister's office after university. But the age difference wasn't that great, and MI 5 ¾ had worked up a plausible backstory.

"So what kind of intriguing history have they manufactured for you, Sweetheart?" her father asked.

"Oh, nothing too exotic," Hermione replied. "My mum and dad are expats working in the States, and I did all my schooling over there. Apparently, I was some sort of child prodigy that entered uni at thirteen."

"Well that part's not far off the mark," Roger proudly boasted.

"Daddy!" Hermione exclaimed. She then went on to note that she supposedly just graduated from Duke University with a degree in political science, and will doing the internship while she decides whether to study law at Oxford or Cambridge.

"Duke?" Emily asked. "Any particular reason why they chose that school for you?"

"It's the best known American university that wasn't attended by anyone presently working in the Prime Minister's office," Hermione explained. "That reduces the risk of me getting tripped up by somebody who actually read at that school."

Emily nodded in understanding. "So, then, how is it that our college graduate suddenly found herself working for the Prime Minister?"

"Oh, in the usual manner," Hermione replied. "Personal connections."

"Really?" Roger asked. "Of what sort?"

Hermione smiled. "Why, didn't you know that the Prime Minister is a close friend of the family?"

"Erm...no."

"Oh, yes," said Hermione. "We see him nearly every time he visits the States. So I have to remember to call the Prime Minister T-t-t-Tony once in a while."

Roger shook his head. "Afraid to call your childhood crush by his first name, Sweetie?"

"Dad, no!" Hermione shot back. "It's just that, well..to call the Prime Minister by his given name..."

"It's just a name, dear," her mum replied. "Just like Voldemort, right?"

"Erm...right...just like Voldemort," said Hermione. "So, if you ever visit the office you'll have to call him T-Tony as well."

"Right."

"And I no longer have a schoolgirl crush on him, I'll have you know," Hermione noted. "In fact, it was Tony that introduced me to the Queen's Wizard."

"Really? Then let me guess," said Emily. "Since you're so close to the Prime Minister..."

"It's *Tony*, mum... *Tony*."

"Erm..right...since your on a first name basis with the P.M. you won't have to do all of the menial tasks that interns are assigned to complete?"

"Right in one, mum," Hermione replied. "Probably won't make me any friends amongst the other interns, but there had to be a reason for an irregular work schedule, and independent research projects that involve a lot of travel."

Roger snorted, then asked, "So are you going to be spoiled by a nice office with a view, then?"

Hermione shook her head. "That would be a bit too much," she explained. "There's only a couple of offices besides the P.M.'s...erm...Tony's that have windows, and the interns are assigned tiny workstations down in the basement."

"Oh, I see," said Roger. "So how do you plan on maintaining your cover with so little privacy?"

Hermione smiled. "They also assigned me a broom closet."

"A broom closet?"

"Yes, a broom closet. It's a bit cramped, but it's on the main level and has four hard walls and a door."

"And just what do you plan on accomplishing within a broom closet, dear?" her mum asked.

"Oh, nothing too naughty," Hermione replied with a smile. "Fred and George are going to stop by for a visit sometime today and help me do a little interior decorating."

"Fred and George?" asked Roger. "Oh...imagine that they might know a few room expansion charms?"

Hermione gave her dad a wink. "Don't tell Tony, but I think that by the time they're through I'll have a bigger office than he does."

The Grangers laughed at Hermione's joke, and added their own comments about taking care not to be seen entering or leaving her broom closet with the Prime Minister.

"So what else are you planning on doing today, dear?" her mum asked.

"Well," Hermione replied, "I may be asked to brief in the new Home Secretary on the wizarding world. I gather you heard about Duluth being sacked?"

Roger gave his daughter a knowing grin. "Yes, the story was in all of the papers this morning," he replied. "Although I have to say that my eye was drawn more towards the other headline story of the day."

"Oh, no...don't tell me..."

Roger nodded as he rose from their table and walked over towards a stack of the morning dailies. Pulling four different newspapers from the pile, he returned to his wife and daughter and spread them out on the table.

Hermione grimaced at a page-covering photograph of Harry and her standing in front of 10 Downing Street. The headline over their heads read, "***Abracadabra!***" with the underlying subtitle "*P.M. Seeks Magical Cure for Sagging Poll Numbers.*"

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione lamented. "Did *The Sun* have to put me on the front page?"

"Would you rather they made you a Page Three Girl?" Emily asked.

Erm, no," Hermione replied with a blush in her cheeks. She looked over the other dailies and asked, "The *Mirror*, the *Times*, even the *Guardian*? Is there a newspaper that didn't publish a picture of Harry and me on the front page?"

Emily patted her daughter's arm. "I'm sure that there were a few on the Continent that didn't dear."

"Oh, Merlin help me!"

Roger Granger shook his head in amazement. "You know, it is amazing...the publicity you and Harry get, the company you keep, and the ease at which you move within the circles of power and privilege..."

Hermione gave her father a rather cross look, then let out a sigh. "Guess I never really thought about it before," she admitted. "After all, the wizarding community is rather small, so it never seemed all that strange to be rubbing elbows with the Minister of Magic and other top officials at the Ministry. Especially being Harry's friend and all...he's the one that's had a rough go of it."

"What about that awful story during fourth year?" her mum asked.

Hermione snorted. "Well, that one turned out to be almost accurate, in the end, didn't it?" she asked. "But I never had it as bad as Harry...he's always struggled with the unwanted fame and notoriety."

Mrs. Granger smiled, "So now you can better empathize with Harry?"

"More like commiserate," said Hermione. After a moment, though her expression brightened, and she asked "Can I have that copy of the *Times*, Dad? I want to clip out that photograph."

Roger looked over his shoulder at the unread stacks of newspapers. "Erm...don't see why not, Sweetheart," Roger replied. "Starting a scrapbook, then?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm afraid that some Royal staffers have already been assigned that task. I have a simpler plan in mind for that picture."

"What's that, dear?"

Hermione gave her parents a conspiratorial smile.

"Posting it off to the Dursleys in Romania."

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8:40am, Prescott's Bank, London

Had he been given a choice, Harry Potter would have still met with the Prime Minister and Minister of Magic, just to get it off of his planner "To Do" list. Not that the replacement of a major cabinet minister wasn't a good enough reason mind you...and he had to admit that upsetting Scrimgeour and his lackeys with the delay was a nice consolation prize. It also opened up a large block of time in his schedule, and allowed him to book a meeting with the wizard barrister who had come so highly recommended.

The early hour reflected the barrister's busy schedule, while the meeting location reflected an agenda that went beyond magical secrecy laws. It also gave Harry an excuse to dig Sirius's spell-shrunk motorbike out of his rucksack and take it for a spin.

He had arrived at Prescott's a good twenty minutes before his scheduled appointment...had the morning traffic been any less congested he might have considered riding around the City for a while longer. As the bank didn't open to the public until nine, he had been directed to a side door, where a uniformed guard was waiting to greet him. Less than a minute later, Harry found himself downstairs within the expansive office of the bank's president.

"Good morning, Lord Gryffindor, please have a seat," said the president.

"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins, but please, call me Harry."

The elderly bank executive smiled. "As you wish, Harry. Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, thank you."

It didn't escape Harry's attention that the bank president knew exactly how he took his tea without asking. As Jenkins handed the young wizard his cup and saucer he asked, "So how is the weather upstairs...rain still holding off?"

"Erm, yes," Harry replied, as he took in the obvious fact that a basement-level room wouldn't have windows (at least within a Muggle building). "Pardon me for asking, but I'm surprised that your office isn't up on the bank's top floor."

Jenkins smiled as he returned to his seat behind his desk. "In any other Muggle bank I dare say you'd be right. But given our bank's ownership, well...a basement-level location makes it easier for some of our Directors to pop in and out without bringing attention to themselves."

Harry nodded. "Makes sense," he replied. "I'm sorry that I'm a bit early for the meeting...I could wait upstairs in the lobby so as not to inconvenience you."

"Not a problem at all, Lord, erm...Harry," the bank president replied. "Your request for meeting space yesterday reminded me to review our

commitment to provide you our highest levels of service. As such, I was just going over your accounts.”

Harry sighed. “You know, I really should object to all of the special treatment, but as I’m sure that you’re acting on Ragnok’s instructions, I’ll just have to accept it and offer my thanks.”

The bank director smiled warmly. “While you are most welcome, I hope you realize that given the extent of your holdings that you would still be receiving this level of service.”

“By the bank’s president, himself, Mr. Jenkins?”

“Actually, that could have been the case,” Jenkins replied. “There are only a handful of senior account managers that are both aware of the wizarding world *and* capable enough to handle active portfolios as large as yours. As a result, I’m much more involved in client services than the president of a typical Muggle bank.”

“So you manage the accounts of other wealthy wizards, then?” Harry asked.

Jenkins nodded.

“Anyone that I know?” Harry asked with a grin.

The bank president chuckled. “Confidentiality rules prevent me from answering that question, Harry. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no, I understand,” the Queen’s Wizard replied. He paused for a moment to flesh out a thought that had popped into his head, and then asked, “Is it hard to keep track of the rules and regulations of both the Muggle and wizarding worlds, Mr. Jenkins?”

The bank president shook his head. “Despite the fact that Prescott’s is goblin-owned, it is chartered under the Bank of England, and operates completely under the Muggle government’s rules and regulations.”

“So my money in this bank is managed separately from the galleons in my Gringott’s vaults?”

The bank president nodded as he took a sip of his tea.

Harry then said, “So if I got into trouble with the Ministry of Magic, and it ordered my accounts frozen or tried to confiscate them...”

“We would not be bound by that order,” the president replied. He added, “I daresay that Gringott’s would also take a dim view of complying with that order under present circumstances.”

The Boy-Who-Lived frowned. “So, if a convicted Death Eater had his accounts frozen or confiscated by the Ministry of Magic, and the goblins did comply with that order, then he or she could still get money from accounts they may have in your bank?”

The bank president coughed a bit, then confirmed for Harry that was indeed the case.

“So, Mr. Jenkins, what would it take to have a Death Eater’s Muggle accounts frozen?” Harry asked.

“The order would have to come from Her Majesty’s Government,” the president replied.

Harry nodded. “Is there any sort of cooperation between governments, so that the Ministry of Magic could ask the Muggle government for its help in this kind of situation?”

Jenkins nodded as he finished off his tea. “The possibility exists, but I’m not aware of that kind of request ever having been made. Frankly, I doubt that the Ministry would ever dream of a pure-blooded Death Eater sully himself enough to use the Muggle banking system.”

“But without violating your confidentiality rules, would it be fair to say that the Ministry ought to be having those kinds of dreams?”

The bank president thought for a moment, then smiled. “Yes, Harry, I think I can say that the Ministry’s dreams have always been too... unimaginative.”

Harry nodded as a clock chime struck the hour. A few seconds later, the bank president’s telephone rang, and he informed Harry that a Mr. Abrams had arrived and asked for him.

As Jenkins walked the younger man upstairs to an empty conference room, he said, “I understand that Mr. Abrams is one of the very best barristers in the wizarding world.”

Harry replied, “He came highly recommended, but I’m glad to hear you say that as well.”

The bank president then said, “Forgive me if it is not my place to ask, but have you set your affairs in order in case, well...”

The Queen’s Wizard gave his host a rueful grin. “No worries, Mr. Jenkins. Given your advisory status it wasn’t out of place.” He added, “Making sure I have a ironclad will is actually high up on the list of services I’m hoping to have a barrister provide.”

Jenkins nodded. “Well, if there is anything else I can do either during or after your meeting, please let me know.”

Harry shook the bank president’s hand, and replied, “Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. I can assure you that you have already been a big help this morning.”

The bank executive nodded, as Harry turned and introduced himself to the wizard who, within a few minute's time, would become the head of Clan Potter's legal staff.

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11:40am, 10 Downing Street, London

Hermione Granger was in the middle of a transfiguration spell when her Art Club badge lit up with a call from her boyfriend. She abandoned the effort mid-incantation and immediately activated her badge.

"Harry, is something wrong?"

"Erm, everything's fine...sorry Hermione...I know we said mobiles for non-emergency calls but I haven't been able to reach you that way for some time."

"Oh, guess I have been doing a fair bit of active magic," she replied.

"Where?"

"I'm in a broom closet with Fred and George."

"The Weasley Twins, eh?" Harry asked. "Do I need to send a prefect patrol over there?"

"Very funny," Hermione replied. "I do believe that I told you they had volunteered to help set up my new office."

"Yes, yes...just messing with you a bit. So how is it going?"

"Brilliant, for the most part...bit of resentment from the other interns, like I feared."

"Well that's too bad...any chance that you can join me for lunch?"

"Erm, I'm sorry, Harry, but my new boss already asked me," Hermione replied. "And then I've got meetings all afternoon."

"Oh, well, that's alright," replied her boyfriend. "Just thought I'd check."

"I'm sorry, Harry, really."

"No, Hermione, it's fine...I've still got you for dinners and late-night snacks, right?"

"Absolutely."

Harry smiled into his badge, wondering if Hermione knew what he wanted to see on his menu that night. But he put those randy thoughts aside and focused on business.

"So the new barrister is going to work out rather nicely, I think."

"Really? In all of the ways that you were hoping?"

"Uh-huh," Harry replied. "I told him to make his legal research on the secrecy laws his top priority, by the way...he thinks he might have an answer by tomorrow."

"That soon?" asked Hermione. "That seems awfully fast if he plans on doing a thorough job of it."

"I thought so too," said Harry, "but he assured me that he had a bit of magic up his sleeve."

"Well, he is a wizard barrister, I guess."

"Oh, and another thing," said Harry. "Right before that meeting I had the chance to talk with Prescott's president."

"Mr. Jenkins?"

"That's the one," Harry replied. "It was a very interesting conversation...he danced around his confidentiality requirements well enough to let me know that there are Death Eaters withdrawing funds from their Muggle bank accounts."

"Rather ironic, isn't it?" said Hermione.

"Yes, indeed," said Harry. "Anyway, the point is that while the Ministry of Magic has frozen the Gringott's accounts of all of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban, those orders don't affect any money they might have in Muggle banks."

"And the Ministry hasn't asked the Muggle government to follow their lead?"

"Not according to Mr. Jenkins," Harry replied. "So, I was wondering if..."

Hermione quickly agreed. "I'll ask about it during lunch."

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9:30pm
567 Fulham Road
Fulham, London SW7

It was all Lucius Malfoy could do *not* to hex the Muggle bird that was ahead of him in line to use the ATM machine. Humiliating enough to have to dirty his hands with the Muggle bank cards and confounding money boxes, but to have to wait for the privilege?

The money run had been a nasty part of his daily routine ever since the Ministry of Magic had frozen his Gringott's accounts. The Dark Lord hadn't cared much for his excuses for the first missed "donation" to their cause, and shown his displeasure quite emphatically. His initial response was to rob a Muggle bank, but those prats had put some sort of exploding blue ink bomb in the bag of pounds that they'd made off with, and the black-market money changers had refused to convert the notes into galleons. And that brought about the next round of expressed displeasure from his master...after their devastating defeat at the Ministry of Magic, Voldemort had ordered his remaining forces to go to ground, and to not draw attention to themselves.

Apparently, robbing a Muggle bank at wand point whilst wearing a Death Eater costume was considered attention-getting.

And so, the elder Malfoy was forced to tap into his own Muggle accounts. He knew that Prescott's was goblin-owned, and hadn't been willing to risk walking into the bank and withdrawing funds in person. ATM machines were the only reasonable recourse. He could have given his bank card to someone else to get the funds, but there were trust issues, not to mention his reluctance to reveal to anyone his dependence on a Muggle machine.

The woman in front of him finally completed her button pushing and walked away with her cash in hand. Lucius approached the machine (confidently leaving his crib sheet of written instructions in his pocket), pushed his card into the slot, and punched in his secret code. When he got to the withdrawal screen he hit "other," then punched in a request for 350 pounds (a daily withdrawal limit that forced him to repeat this process all too frequently).

Malfoy then stood impatiently while the ATM informed him that it was "completing the requested transaction." He had done this enough times to know what came next...the "thump-thump-thump" sound of notes being counted out, just before the little door opened and pushed out his money.

"I wonder how spitefully low the exchange rate will be tonight," he thought to himself. Suddenly, he heard a low growling, grinding noise coming from a different part of the machine. He looked up and read, "*We are unable to release funds from your account at this time. Please contact your bank for more information.*"

"What!" he shouted, pounding on the side of the machine.

His raised voice and actions drew the attention of a bobby who just happened to be driving down the street in his squad car. The Metropolitan Police officer stopped, rolled down his window, and asked the predictable question.

"Well, well, well, what's all this then?"

Malfoy whipped around, ready to raise his wand, before realizing just whom he would be aiming it towards.

"My apologies, officer," he finally drawled. "There seems to be a problem with this machine...it won't give me my money."

"Really?" the bobby asked. "Well, that happens sometimes when you don't have the funds to draw against."

"But you don't understand, officer, I have more than a million quid in that account."

The bobby squinted at Malfoy.. "Is that so, sir?" he asked. Recalling his pre-shift notice that arrest warrants had been issued and bank accounts frozen for a number of suspected terrorists, he added, "Perhaps if you give me your name and account information, we can clear this matter up?"

The Death Eater startled a bit at the suggestion. "Erm, no officer, that won't be necessary. I'll visit the bank in the morning. Must be some sort of clerical issue."

The police officer nodded as he considered the man's appearance. Malfoy was dressed in a suit and tie, but was under a glamour spell that made him look nothing like the photographs that had been circulated around with the notice.

A radio call came into his squad car, announcing that a group of hooligans was pestering some tourists just down the road. The bobby decided that there wasn't enough in front of him to justify not responding to that call.

"Mind you temper, Sir," he said, just before driving off.

Malfoy let out a deep breath, realizing just how close he had come to creating a little more attention to himself. With a string of curse words seldom heard in the wizarding world (much less Muggle London), he turned back to the machine, hoping to at least retrieve his bank card.

The machine had no intentions of giving it back.

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Thursday, July 5, 10:15am

Hampstead Gardens, London

On the morning after the ATM ate Malfoy's bank card, the sound of multiple apparition arrivals on a street in Hampstead Garden caused Harry Potter to curse his hastily made plans.

"Merlin's balls! Multiple pops in an alley-way half-block down the street...knew we should have taken time to set up the anti-app wards!"

"Language, Harry and save it for the after-action," Hermione advised through her Muggle com gear. As she was inside the building that Harry had been guarding, she asked, "Are they inside or outside the perimeter?"

"Outside."

"Enough time to clear the street and call for help, then."

"Agreed."

Harry looked at the half-dozen Muggle police officers that were milling about and ordered, "Get off the street and inside, the lot of you!"

"What for, Guv'nor?" asked one of the older constables (who was clearly not used to taking orders from a teenager).

Harry let out breath in frustration as he ran up to the officer and shoved his MI-5 identification badge up into his face.

"Because I'm the ranking officer on the scene and I bloody-well say so, you git!"

The older man took a step back, quickly apologized, and then took it upon himself to ensure that the orders were carried out. Harry then took cover behind a post box, and looked across the street towards Hermione's father. Despite the situation, he couldn't help but smile at what he saw.

Roger Granger had already established a defensive position behind a police car and donned his dragonhide vest, shield-charmed headgear and "wizardvision" goggles. His mini-Uzi rested on his thigh (shoulder stock open and finger on trigger) while he carefully arranged a small collection of Weasley products in a line down beside his feet.

"Roger, Emily...are you with me?" Harry asked into his radio.

Hermione's father looked up and smiled. "Locked and loaded, Harry," he replied.

"My husband, Secret Agent Rambo," lamented Emily, as she took in the scene from her perch. "All set here, Harry," she added.

"Should I come out and help?" Hermione asked.

"No, stay put for now," Harry replied. "Easier for me to explain away my presence as Queen's Wizard, and you can anchor if it hits the fan out here." He then added, "Switching over to badge-phone now."

Harry quickly activated his Art Club badge's "party line" and announced, "Listen up, folks...Harry here with an update...we've got nine...no, ten unidentified wizards in Muggle clothing that just apparated outside our notice-me-not line. Prepare to back-up."

Too many people replying at once made it impossible for Harry to make anything out.

"One at a time,"he complained. "Remus, you first."

"Are they friendlies?"

"Probably not," snarked Harry, "but that doesn't mean they aren't from the Ministry."

"Where did they arrive, and what are they doing right now?" asked Tonks.

Harry looked down the street and announced, "The apparated into an alleyway, and tried to make their way towards our position before they hit our defensive perimeter. Right now they're...they're talking with the Muggle police who've got the street blocked off on their side."

"Talking?" asked Tonks. "Harry, what kind of magic have you guys used in the last few minutes?"

"I used a detection spell and *Finite Incantatum* five minutes ago," Hermione replied.

"Thought you said you set up notice-me-nots?" said Tonks.

"We used the pre-spelled police tape," Hermione explained.

"Well, then, doesn't sound like it would warrant sending out an Obliviator squad," Tonks replied. "Harry do you want me with you, or should I go to the Ministry and see what they're up to?"

The Queen's Wizard paused and said, "Well, since they haven't drawn wands yet...go to the Ministry, Tonks."

"Will do, boss." Tonks replied.

"Ron...found out anything yet?"

"Erm, hold on," Ron replied, from his office within the Ministry of Magic. In the intervening seconds the Queen's Wizard ordered Fred and George to badge-jump to Emily Granger's roof-top position with a bag full of their toys.

"Harry," said Ron, once he got back on, "Neville heard a rumor that MSO detected use of an *Imperious* curse forty-five minutes ago, about a mile from your location.

"Well that makes sense, given what I've found here," said Hermione.

"MLE dispatched Mad-Eye and an Auror team to investigate," Ron added.

"Mad-Eye?" asked Harry. He quickly looked back down the street and asked, "Roger, is there more there than what meets the eye?"

Hermione's dad peeked around the corner of the police car and compared what he could see with his bare eyes against the view fed to his goggles from a helmet-mounted camera.

"Same-same," he announced (using the code phrase that indicated that he didn't electronically "see" any disguised, disillusioned, or invisible wizards).

"Same here," said Emily.

"Auror teams have five members, not nine or ten, and Moody's not one of them," Harry reasoned. He was just about to order a nasty welcome for their guests when another series of pops was heard coming from the opposite direction.

"More Muggle-dressed company," Harry announced, as a second group of wizards appeared from an alleyway.

"Five of them," called out Fred from the rooftop. "And the blond hair bloke with a limp is one-eyed. peg-legged, and uglier than he seems."

"Really?" asked Harry. "How do you think we should greet him, Fred?"

"Harry...play nice," warned Hermione.

The Queen's Wizard sighed. "Yes, dear...Roger, stand down, pick up, and move to Emily's position."

Harry joined the other Art Clubbers on the roof, scribbled out a quick note, and called for Hedwig (who had been perched on a nearby lamppost). With the message attached to her leg, he gave her a quick pet and soft-spoken command.

Fifteen seconds later, a rather distinctive owl swooped down and landed on a newspaper box right next to where Mad-Eye Moody was standing. The retired Auror turned towards her (while his magical eye remained locked onto the building's entrance) and took the offered message.

Dear Moody,

CONSTANT VIGILANCE!

We had the situation under control before you guys showed up. We also have the drop on you and your men.

Meet me in two minutes inside the donut shop just to your right if you want an explanation. Or, if you want a live-fire training exercise, walk through the notice-me-not charms and climb up onto one of the parked cars...you'll have a better view of Fred and George's inventory in action.

Hugs and kisses,

The-Boy-Who-Swamped

The retired Auror looked up along the rooflines and let out a deep laugh that carried down the street. He really wanted to see Harry in action, but as he glanced down both ends of the street he saw at least fifty different Muggles that would need to be obliterated if he pushed for a fight.

"Another day," he decided. He turned and began barking at the other Aurors, berating them for not immediately recognizing the perimeter warding. Sending both teams of Ministry personnel back to the office with a cryptic comment about an ongoing Unspeakable operation, he stepped inside the restaurant.

After a quick threat assessment, he sat down at the counter and asked the waitress for a cup of tea.

"Well," he said to himself, "*At least this time the Boy picked a meeting place that has both types of plumbing.*"

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Later that afternoon, Hermione Granger attended a meeting in the Prime Minister's office, along with the new Home Secretary, the MI-5 and MI-6 Chiefs, and a recording secretary. The only agenda item was that morning's action.

The MI-5 Chief began by reciting known facts. At 9:30am that morning, Mrs. Evelyn Hawthorne, a thirty-four year old mother of three from Hampstead Garden, calmly walked into a NatWest branch on Golders Green Road and, after patiently waiting her turn at a teller's window,

attempted to rob the bank at gun point. The bank teller wet his trousers, then made the startling observation that the gun being held to his face had a plug solid barrel. He alertly called for help, and bank security apprehended the woman before she could exit the building.

The Yard investigators that arrived at the scene were puzzled by the fact that the suspect made no attempt to hide her face, or wear a disguise. While there had been other criminals that had displayed this kind of brazenness/stupidity, none that they could recall had done so *and* chosen to rob their own personal bank. In addition, the "gun" she had used turned out to be a solid piece of metal, with no working parts (much less bullets).

But perhaps most puzzling was her freely offered (and unique) motive:

"Because a very nice man asked me to."

Mrs. Hawthorne had no criminal record, and was described by her neighbors as an intelligent, polite and outgoing person who frequently volunteered her time at church. She had no apparent financial issues, and obviously didn't fit any of the standard profiles.

On the day previous, MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ had made arrangements with Scotland Yard to be immediately notified of any bank robbery attempts, particularly those involving criminals dressed in odd clothing or black robes and white masks. While the woman's clothing was relatively normal (if a bit dated), the other facts in the case warranted a phone call, and ten minutes later, MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ arrived on scene and took situational command.

When the MI-5 Chief reached this point in the story, he asked Hermione to pick it up from there. With both her original and revised notes in front of her, she stood and began her presentation.

"The facts as they were first relayed to us suggested the possibility that Mrs. Hawthorne had been magically coerced into the attempt. This, by the way, has since been confirmed by sources within the Ministry of Magic. On the chance that the wizard or witch responsible might still be at or near the scene I immediately apparated to the site."

"Apparated?" asked the new Home Secretary.

"Erm...I used magic to travel near-instantaneously from my office here at 10 Downing Street to the crime scene. Once there I anchored the badge-jump of Agent Potter and two other MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ agents."

"Badge-jump?"

"A different means of magical transportation that allows the twelve Order of Arthur members to come to each other's aid."

"Were you in need of aid?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "Had there been Death Eaters in the area, then yes. But as a practical matter, it's much easier to badge travel to a location that you've never been to before, and two of the agents were Muggles, and therefore unable to apparate."

"But you didn't badge-travel, right?" asked the Home Secretary.

"Erm, no, I apparated. It's not impossible to apparate using only a coordinate set, just more difficult."

"Let her get on with the story, Mr. Chisholm," asked the MI-6 chief.

Hermione waited for an exchange of stares between the two men before continuing. "My three colleagues immediately established a perimeter around and above the bank entrance while I entered to examine Mrs. Hawthorne's weapon. Diagnostic spells indicated that there was magical residue on the object, so I used *Finite Incantatum* and discovered that the gun was, in fact, a transfigured stainless steel fork."

"What did you say you did?" the Home Secretary asked.

Hermione smiled. "I cast *Finite Incantatum* ...it's a magical spell that stops currently operating spell effects...for example, do you remember yesterday when you asked me for proof that magic was real?"

"Hard to forget a flying pig that sings Gilbert and Sullivan."

"Yes, well... *Finite Incantatum* is the spell I used to turn that pig back into the folding chair."

"So can *you* make a gun using that same sort of trick?" asked a skeptical Home Secretary.

Hermione looked towards the Prime Minister for guidance. After getting a nod of approval she drew her wand. Not seeing a fork in the immediate area, she looked down at the Prime Minister's desk and asked, "Would that stapler do?"

When the Home Secretary gave a noncommittal shrug Hermione gathered her thoughts and cast her spell. The others in the room marveled as the stapler slowly melted, morphed and reformed into a handgun. Once Hermione lowered her wand and gave an all-clear, the MI-5 Chief reached over for a closer look.

"A P226?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

Finding what appeared to be the magazine release, he popped open the box and examined the individual bullets as he handed the gun over to his colleague. Letting out a low whistle he then asked, "And .357 cartridges, as well?"

“Erm...that was what I was aiming for, sir.”

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Senior Advisor, Part 2 (part 2)

The MI-5 Chief passed the gun over to his colleague, who reloaded it and began playing with the release.

"Will this handgun fire, Agent Granger?" he asked.

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "I'm not sure, sir, and quite frankly wouldn't want to be the one to find out."

The MI-6 Chief looked up and smiled as he carefully placed the handgun back onto the desk. "Perhaps, then, it might be more useful in its original state?"

Hermione nodded as she raised her wand and canceled out the transfiguration.

The Prime Minister, who had been almost beaming with enthusiasm at this display, asked, "Dame Hermione, why is it that your transfigured handgun was so much more realistic than the one used at the crime scene?"

The witch's ears turned a bit red, and she paused before responding. "There are probably a couple of different reasons why, Sir. First, it's easier to transfigure objects that are similar in size, weight and material."

"And the stapler was closer in weight and size to a handgun?"

"Yes, Sir," Hermione replied. "Second, it's much easier to get a realistic transfiguration if you are familiar with the target object."

The Home Secretary smiled. "And just how would a pretty young lady such as yourself be familiar with a gun like that?"

This time, it was towards the Security Service Chiefs that Hermione turned for a visual cue. When they both smiled and nodded, she slowly reached inside her jacket, carefully pulled out a weapon, and said, "I am authorized to carry the exact same handgun."

Surprised, the Home Secretary asked, "Mind if I take a look?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders, then checked the safety, popped open the cartridge, and handed both pieces across the desk. The Home Secretary, who was well versed in military weaponry, took particular interest in the bullets.

"These aren't standard issue, are they Miss Granger?"

"Erm, no Sir," Hermione replied. "Custom-made silver points."

The Home Secretary frowned. "That's quite a weapon, how do you handle the recoil?"

"I lift weights, sir, and the handle has an applied cushioning charm."

"But why not something smaller?"

"Because, sir, lycanthropes have thick hides."

"Lycanthropes?" asked the Home Secretary.

"Werewolves, you idio...erm, Mr. Chisholm," said the MI-5 Chief (remembering that he did, in fact, report to the Home Secretary). He then turned to Hermione and asked, "Agent Granger, what inferences can be made if firearm familiarity was the main factor for the design of Mrs. Hawthorne's play gun?"

Hermione nodded. "That would suggest that the wizard who transfigured the fork didn't know much about Muggle firearms."

"Should we be surprised?"

"Not really, sir, unless it was a Muggleborn witch or wizard who cast the spell."

"And Death Eaters tend not to be Muggleborns, correct?"

"That would be an understatement, Sir," Hermione replied.

The Home Secretary returned the gun and magazine box to Hermione. After reloading the magazine, she slipped the gun back inside her jacket. This action caught the Home Secretary's attention (if forced to confess, he would have admitted that his eyes had been drawn to a hint of Hermione's cleavage).

"Agent Granger, how is it that you can carry that hefty gun under your jacket without giving your tailor fits?"

Hermione (after once again gaining silent permission) opened up her jacket. As if there was a gun-sized cavity within her chest, she reached into the one-eighth inch thick magical holster that lay flat against her shirt and smoothly pulled her weapon.

"Magic," she replied with a smile.

The Prime Minister once again berated the Home Secretary for getting Hermione's story off-track, and asked her to continue. The teen-ager told them that a few minutes after she examined the toy weapon the first team of Aurors arrived at the scene. It only took a few more minutes for her to summarize their actions from that point up to Harry's meeting with Mad-Eye.

"Once Agent Potter explained what had happened to Retired Auror Moody, the three of us made a visual and magical sweep of the area for potential magical threats. Finding none, we returned situational control to the Yard and left to write-up our reports."

The Prime Minister thanked Hermione, then asked for her opinion on what had happened. She told them that, based on the gathered evidence, she believed that a Death Eater had cast an *Imperius* spell on Mrs. Hawthorne, gavin her the fake weapon, and then ordered her to rob the bank, with intentions to have her turn the money over to him. She then linked this to that morning's report that three separate attempts had been made to access frozen Death Eater bank accounts using ATM machines. Finally, she concluded that the Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort were low on funds and needed some cash.

"Why didn't they try to rob a wizard bank?" the Prime Minister asked.

Hermione smiled. "They probably thought their chances were better on our side, as there has never been a successful theft from a wizard bank," she replied.

"Why is that?"

Hermione paused, and decided to risk a little cheekiness. "Probably has something to do with the trolls and dragons that they use as guards, Sir."

When the Prime Minister wondered out loud why more wizards hadn't tried to steal from Muggle banks, Hermione noted that there had been one successful attempt (that, unfortunately, they only had learned about that morning). She also added that Agent Potter was presently meeting with his contacts within the Ministry of Magic, as he had voiced the exact same question.

The new Home Secretary, who had been aware of the wizarding world for all of a day, asked Hermione, "Why do wizards need money in the first place? Can't they conjure up whatever they need?"

Hermione nodded, and replied, "Not exactly, Sir, although magic can do quite a lot towards that end." She used utility bills as the prime example, with wizard households using magic to replace electricity, magic to heat and cool their homes...even for water and sewer service. She told them that transportation costs were minimal; most wizard buildings were connected to the floo network, which only has a small monthly subscription fee, and floo powder was pretty cheap.

"Just how cheap?" asked the Home Secretary.

"Erm...don't know actual costs, since I'm not a homeowner, but I do know that it only costs five sickles to use a public floo."

"Five sickles? How much is that?"

Hermione paused. "Well, the current exchange rate is about five pounds to the galleon, and there are seventeen sickles to a galleon and twenty-nine knuts to a sickle, but then there are also conversion fees based on transaction amounts, and other factors..."

"Maybe it would be easier to compare it to something used in both worlds?" suggested the Prime Minister

"Oh, well, that makes sense," Hermione replied. "Let's see...with five sickles you could either buy a pint of ale at the Leaky Cauldron, or a triple-scoop ice cream cone at Fortescue's."

"Ah, beer," the MI-6 Chief noted, "the universal currency."

"And just how far can you travel for the price of a pint?" asked the Prime Minister.

"It's a flat fee," Hermione replied. "You can travel anywhere within the domestic floo network"

"So you could commute to work from Edinburgh to London for just a few quid?"

Hermione nodded. "Less, actually, if you were using your private connection rather than a public one."

"Amazing," said the Home Secretary.

"So I've found most of what I've learned of the wizarding world to be," noted the Prime Minister. He then said, "Which brings us back to the original question...why do wizards need to work, and why would Death Eaters need to rob banks?"

Hermione paused, then cast her eyes downward as she admitted, "I'm sorry, Mr. Home Secretary, but I'll need to get back to you if you want a definitive answer. Economics isn't an elective at Hogwarts, and not a subject that I have studied."

The Home Secretary frowned. "Seems like a relatively simple question, Agent Granger."

The Prime Minister scowled a bit at his newest Minister before turning to give Hermione a reassuring smile. "My apologies, Dame Hermione. I'm afraid that Mr. Chisholm and the rest of us must take care to remember that you are not just a teen-aged student, but one that has only been part of the wizarding world for, what...five years?"

"Six, Prime Minister." Hermione replied quietly.

"Right, then," the Prime Minister said. "Perhaps you can tell us something about what wizards do spend their money on, besides ice cream and beer."

Hermione looked up and nodded, as she paused just long enough to put together what she hoped was a coherent response. "The shops in Diagon Alley generally sell books, robes, magical objects and animals, and potions ingredients. Only the most powerful witches and wizards can conjure meals that have any nutritional content, so I guess that they also have to buy their own food."

"Let's start with that list, then," the MI-6 Chief said. "What sorts of magical objects would these terrorists be interested in buying?"

Hermione was starting to respond when an idea struck. "Excuse me gentlemen, but I just realized that I know a few people who are much better positioned to answer that question. Would you like me to see if they are available?"

"Who are they, and how long would it take for them to join us?"

"They are rather successful businessmen with a shop in Diagon Alley." Hermione turned to the MI chiefs and added, "It's the Weasley twins... you might have heard about their visit to headquarters?"

Four eyebrows arched up as the MI-5 and MI-6 Chiefs sat back a bit in their chairs. The MI-6 Chief then replied, "So long as they promise not to blow anything up or turn us into canaries..."

The MI-5 Chief added, and turned towards the Prime Minister. "Fred and George Weasley are wizards and Order of Arthur members that have been collaborating with MI-5's Q Branch...quite brilliant, and relatively harmless, so long as Agent Granger keeps them on a short leash."

Hermione smiled. "That I will. They also can be with us presently, if you wish."

The Home Secretary sported a puzzled look. "I thought I read somewhere that this building was protected from wizards popping up out of nowhere."

Hermione nodded, then replied, "Mr. Home Secretary, I designed, installed and control the protective wards. I can change them to allow certain people to apparate in and out." She then unbuttoned her suit jacket to reveal the badge that was fixed to the inside lining. "But to answer more directly, as members of the Order of Arthur, Fred and George can by-pass anti-apparition wards by badge-jumping."

The Prime Minister looked around the table, and seeing no objections gave Hermione a curt nod. After a brief badge-call and assurances that he'd play nice, Fred Weasley badge-jumped into the meeting, wearing dragonhide gloves and an apron that were both covered in a thick green fluid. The noxious cloud of gas coming off of this liquid was sufficient to set off the room's smoke detectors and automatic sprinklers.

"Fred!" Hermione exclaimed as she quickly pulled out her wand. "Get rid of that goo!"

As he was protected by a bubblehead charm, the look of shock on the Weasley Twin's face was readily visible. He immediately badge-jumped back to the shop, leaving Hermione behind to deal with the mess. She cast a bubble-head charm on herself, then banished the visible cloud of gas that was left behind. She then turned to cast bubble-heads on the Prime Minister and others, only to discover that they had taken matters into their own Muggle hands and were all wearing emergency full-face respirators.

At that moment Kingsley Shacklebolt and two Muggle security agents burst into the room with weapons drawn. The Auror quickly assessed the situation, then used a freezing-spell to ice-over the sprinkler system's output. He then told the Muggle agents to see that the sprinklers were shut-down; once they left, he helped Hermione magically dry out the office and its occupants.

After many apologies, reassurances and references made to absent-minded professors, Hermione asked a contrite Order of Arthur member to return to the meeting room, this time wearing regular robes (as much as lime green and yellow checkered robes could be considered "regular"). When the MI-5 Chief asked for an explanation, Fred said that he had been working on an experimental potion that would allow someone to see through glamour charms and disillusionment spells.

The MI-6 Chief thought for a moment, and then asked, "So you are trying to create a magical potion to do what we non-magicals can already do with our camera equipment?"

"Erm, yes, I guess so," said a rather bemused wizard. Fred in turn, asked what the gas masks were for, and was impressed with their utility as "replacements" for magic.

"I dare say this shows just how much there is to know about each other worlds," commented the Prime Minister.

Giving Fred a curt expression, the Home Secretary added, "As well as the dangers involved in moving from one world to the other."

Hermione took this comment as a stinging rebuke and looked down at her folded hands. "Once again, I apologize, Mr. Home Secretary," she said. "But please don't blame Fred for the accident. I was the one who asked him here to help me."

"Dame Hermione, again, you are too self-critical," the Prime Minister gently chided. "I for one, recognize and appreciate the willingness of you and your magical colleagues to provide assistance to Her Majesty's Government. You are trying to chart an unknown course between our two worlds, and there are bound to be bumps along the way."

"Thank you, Prime Minister," Hermione replied.

"It's Tony, right?" he asked, using some of the charm that helped make him such a brilliant politician.

Yes, Si...erm...Tony.”

Fred then was asked to give an off-the-cuff lesson not just on wizard world economics, but on the very nature of magic itself. He explained that potion ingredients couldn't be magically created, and needed to be either grown, caught or gathered. Similarly, most magical objects like wands and brooms could only be created by skilled craftsmen, using proprietary or complex spells developed over lengthy apprenticeships. This dovetailed into a description of the Weasley's business ventures, and in particular their now booming business selling shield-charmed cloaks and hats. Hermione explained that there were large variations in magical skill and power with the wizard population, and that the reasons for the Weasley Twins' financial success lie more in their wizarding skills than their business acumen.

The Home Secretary took all this in, and then asked, “So, Agent Granger, in terms of power and ability, just how would you rank yourself and the other magicals working for us?”

As the young witch stuttered, Fred answered for her. “Hermione here would be way too modest to answer properly, so let me say that she is, far and away, the brightest witch in our generation.”

“Oh, Fred, stop it,” Hermione chided.

“It's true, and you know it, Hermione,” Fred replied. He then turned to the others and asked, “Do any of you have any idea on just how unique the warding is for this building?”

When nobody chose to respond, Fred continued, “They are without a doubt the best you can buy right now, and I should know because we just paid a cauldron full of galleons to have them installed on our shop.”

“Fred?” Hermione asked. “Why did you pay the goblins to...”

“Because we needed to pay them so that they could pay you,” Fred replied with a smile. For the others' benefits he explained that Hermione had invented attenuated wards, and had licensed the goblins to sell and install them within the wizarding world. He then asked Hermione, “Just how much did you charge to ward this building and the Queen's property?”

She shrugged. “Nothing...just part of our jobs.”

Fred nodded. “Thought so,” he said.

The MI-6 Chief asked what the cost would have been. Fred did some mental math, then replied, “Well, I only know about this building, Windsor, Buckingham and Cumberland. Assuming the goblins gave you the preferred customer discount, roughly two-hundred and fifty thousand Galleons.”

“More than a million pounds sterling?” asked a skeptical Home Secretary.

Hermione chewed on her lip for a moment, and then reluctantly nodded.

“And that's just a bit of her brilliance,” Fred claimed. “Let's see, who else...of course there's Harry..the two of them defeated a five-member Auror team all on their own last month.”

“You mean the Queen's Wizard?” asked the Home Secretary.

“Yes, as well as Lord Gryffindor,” added the MI-6 chief.

“And an security service agent,” said the MI-5 chief.

“Not to mention Clan Chief, Patriarch, Tri-Wizard Champion and *Teen Witches Weekly*'s ‘Most Snoggable Wizard’ three years running,” said Fred (causing Hermione to blush a bit).

“So he has a lot of titles,” said the Home Secretary. “Is he a leader? Can he fight?”

Hermione's firm grip on Fred's elbow was needed to keep the rather irate Weasley from drawing his wand. “Can he fight?” Fred bellowed. “Can he fight?” he said again, this time with more amazement in his voice.

“Harry successfully fought and rescued Hermione from an eight-foot tall troll his first year of school. At the time, he was eleven years old, four-foot nothing and five stone in really wet robes. Second year he saved my sister's life by killing a forty-foot basilisk with a sword. Third year he was casting a Patronus spell, fourth year he fought a dragon, dueled the Dark Lord to a draw, fifth year he led Hermione, my brother and sister, and three other teens in a successful fight against a dozen of the most powerful Death Eaters alive, and then Voldemort again, and...Hermione have I missed any Dark Creatures?”

Hermione smiled. “You mean besides Umbridge?”

Fred and Hermione shared a laugh (in spite of themselves), as the Prime Minister spoke up.

“Mr. Chisholm,” he said with a clipped tone of voice. “You should know that this issue was raised by the previous Home Secretary, just a few moments before he was sacked. Both Her Majesty and I have every confidence in Dame Hermione, Lord Gryffindor and their colleagues.” He paused for effect, then snarked, “Although we might have cause to reconsider Mr. Weasley and his green goo.”

As Hermione snorted quietly to herself, the Prime Minister continued. “You have been briefed on the Battle of Ascot, as well as the actions by Treasury yesterday that no doubt led to this morning's events. They have earned their titles and our trust, and if you aren't on board then let me know

now so that I can go shopping for another Home Secretary.”

Home Secretary Chisholm sat back and sucked in a breath. “No need, Mr. Prime Minister, and I apologize...I was only looking for information.” He then apologized to Fred and Hermione and contritely added, “I guess the notion that we have teenagers running this operation shouldn’t be any more surprising than the finding out about the wizarding world itself.”

Hermione replied with a nod and slight smile. “No worries, Sir.”

“Right, we’ve beaten this dead horse enough,” said the Prime Minister. “Dame Hermione, would it be possible for you to look into possible motives for these robberies and report back? I’m also interested in any protective measures that we can use to guard Muggle financial institutions from magical attack.”

“Of course, Sir,” Hermione replied. “Should I start right away, or am I needed for the balance of the meeting?”

The Prime Minister looked down at his agenda. “No, I think that we’ve got things covered here.” He then looked up and gave Hermione a warm smile. “And if something does come up, I do have your mobile number on speed dial.”

Hermione choked down an “eep!” and reminded the Prime Minister to call Wally or Steve if she was “out of range.”

Deciding that Gringott’s might be the best place to conduct her research, she called Harry, asked him to meet her at the Twins’s shop, then badge-jumped with Fred back to Diagon Ally. As soon as they arrived, Fred asked why the Prime Minister rode horses, and what was to be gained by beating dead ones.

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5:00pm

Gringott’s, Diagon Ally

After listening to Clan Chief Potter and his Consort describe the day’s events, Ragnok the Goblin sat back in his office chair and placed his fingertips together in thought.

“These are troubling events,” he decided, “with implications for both of your enemies.”

“Both, Clan Chief?” Harry asked.

The goblin smiled a toothy smile. “Well, perhaps it is more appropriate to identify the current wizard government as your adversary.”

Harry nodded, and then said, “As I consider Head Auror Robards more friend than enemy, I was surprised to find him so reluctant to talk about this morning’s attempted bank robbery.”

“As well he should, my friend,” Ragnok replied. “It might have led to a discussion on why the Ministry of Magic failed to report the somewhat more successful robbery two weeks ago.”

Having gone far past the point where Hermione had to worry about directly addressing the Goblin chief, she asked, “May I ask how you know about that robbery, as well as why and to whom the Ministry needed to report?”

The Goblin replied, “We learned on the day following that bank robbery that an attempt was made to exchange the stolen and soiled pound notes for Galleons at a money changers in Knockturn Ally.”

“Soiled?” asked Harry.

The Goblin nodded. “The bag of money that was handed over to the thieves had an exploding pack of blue ink within it.”

Harry asked, “Why didn’t the Death Eater just *Scourgify* the money?”

Ragnok smiled an even larger and toothier smile. “They no doubt tried, but the ink is derived from a goblin dye that is magically resistant.”

Hermione nodded. “So the Goblin nation helps the Muggle financial industry to protect their assets?”

The Goblin replied, “We help them protect not only their assets, but also our own. We are heavily invested in the Muggle world, as the Ministry of Magic bars goblins from investing in wizard businesses.”

“That makes sense,” Harry replied. “If I might ask, did you act on this information?”

“Indirectly,” Ragnok replied. “Voldemort was sent a message warning him not to make future attempts against Muggle banks.”

“What type of message?”

“A goblin howler, delivered inside the mouth of the severed head of the money changer that the Death Eaters tried to do business with.”

While Hermione was taken aback, Harry whistled, and had to confess just a bit of admiration for the directness of approach. Neither asked how the Goblins delivered the message, respecting their ally’s need to keep certain secrets to himself.

“Guess this morning shows he didn’t think too much about the warning,” Harry noted.

"Indeed," Ragnok replied. "The Grand Goblin Council is currently debating how to send a warning that he will be forced to heed."

Harry nodded, then asked, "And you said that the Ministry is required to report this type of theft?"

Ragnok nodded. "By treaty they must report any attempt by a wizard to steal from a Muggle bank within their borders. It must be made less than three days of its occurrence, whether it is successful or not."

"Whom do they report to?"

"The International Confederation of Wizards," Ragnok replied.

"Because of secrecy concerns?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly," said the goblin. "It is one of the key indicators that a wizard government is failing to police its own citizenry, and to uphold their joint obligation to preserve the magical world's secrets."

Harry thought for a moment, and then asked, "That's because the Muggles would be keen to figure out just how their banks were being robbed, right?"

Hermione nodded. "And there would be enough c-mugs out there to provide answers." She then asked Ragnok, "Are there sanctions involved?"

Ragnok nodded. "More than three attempts within a one-year period is cause for international intervention."

"You mean other wizard governments would take control of the Ministry?" asked Harry.

"Not necessarily," Ragnok replied. "First would come an intensive audit of Ministry practices and personnel. Only if that audit showed more than a tolerable amount of corruption, or if the robbery attempts continued, would the Ministry lose its authority to rule."

"I can see why the Ministry might be tempted to under report, then," said Harry. He then asked, "How often does this sort of intervention happen?"

"Rarely" said the Goblin. "We have Gringott's branches in nearly every wizard country, and our warnings are usually enough to keep the criminal elements in line."

Harry nodded, and then asked "So what do you suggest we do?"

Ragnok paused for a moment, and then replied, "Tell the Muggle Prime Minister that the goblins are working on the problem, and warn them that there may be some changes at the Ministry of Magic in the near future."

Harry and Hermione stood and offered their thanks for Ragnok's valuable time. Just before they left his office, Hermione remembered her assignment from the Prime Minister.

"One last question, Clan Chief?"

"Of course."

"Do you have any idea why Voldemort is so desperate for cash?"

Ragnok smiled. "We understand that since the attack on the Ministry there has been a run on, and resulting extreme shortage of, certain types of potion ingredients."

"Which types of potion ingredients?" Harry asked.

The goblin replied with a toothy grin.

"Those typically required for the healing of battlefield wounds."

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10:30pm, Soho, London

If glamour charms could accurately reflect the underlying condition of the wizard that wore them, then Lucius Malfoy would have looked like a mess as he walked the streets of Muggle London.

The failed robbery attempt was a complete and utter disaster. He thought that he had covered all contingencies, having used a generic black-market wand to ensnare his Muggle accomplice, then sped off in a Muggle taxi before the Ministry could track down his use of the Unforgivable. He knew that Muggles like to rob their own banks, so what was the risk that his involvement would be detected? Apparently more than he had anticipated, as he watched the foiled attempt from a safe distance.

Now, a charitable man might have forgiven Lucius, and blamed his poorly thought-out plans on the lingering effects of too many *Cruciatus* curses that were held too long.

But his Lord was neither a man, nor forgiving.

the best he could hope for was that the Ministry's self-protection skills would kick in, and that it would once again fail to report the robbery attempt. It was too much to hope that the Goblins wouldn't find out, though, which is why he now found need to provide ransom not just for his life, but for those of his wife and son.

In retrospect, he should have raided his emergency funds from the start, and depleted the cache before attempting more risky means of satisfying his Master. But emergency funds were just that...for emergencies, and so long as that infernal money machine was spitting out pound notes he had been fine.

A hundred thousand galleons in gold, fifty thousand pounds sterling, two dozen large uncut diamonds and an assortment of precious jewelry were waiting for him in a place that only he could recall visiting once he left. Lucius sighed, and once more wished that he could sit out the rest of this Second War in the safety of his Patriarchal suite. But the Dark Lord's reach was far, and his mark most insistent when it burned in need of his attendance.

As he approached The Rookery, the elder Malfoy recalled far happier visits, when the streets of Soho were filled with Muggle wenches that were ripe for the taking. He briefly considered seeking more of that kind of company, before realizing that he would be too tired to enjoy a warmer bed. Malfoy was, in fact, too tired to notice that he was being watched as he entered the building and took the lift up to his private floor. Not that he would have cared, having come to rely upon the anonymity of his glamour charm.

A quick lift trip was followed by a quick meal and reassuring check that his stash was still there. Deciding that a good night's sleep in a warm bed was worth the risk of delaying his return to Voldemort, he shed his clothes and crawled under the silk sheets of his four-poster bed.

His sleep was more fitful than good.

His dreams would have been worse, though, had he been aware of the calls that had gone out and the plans that were being made on the city streets below.

Chapter 26 - Stone Cold Harry

***Friday, July 6, 5:45am
87 Shaftesbury Avenue
Soho, London***

It was with great reluctance that Lucius Malfoy rose from bed and prepared for the day. He bathed, shaved and dressed in his finest robes (still confident that his glamour charm would hide his attire under the image of a Muggle business suit). The Malfoy Patriarch then emptied his emergency cache into an ever-expandable bag (that had been left in his safe for just that purpose) and tied it to his belt.

Lucius called for a house-elf to fill the dining room table with a rich assortment of breakfast foods. As he sat there, eating what he hoped was not a last meal, he considered his Muggle transportation options for the trip to Salisbury. It would have been so much easier (and quicker) to apparate, but after the disaster at the Ministry, he could no longer trust that the records of his magical transit would be ignored or lost before acted upon.

The thought of that debacle and its aftermath gave Lucius one more opportunity to curse Mulciber's parents for foregoing the contraceptive charm on the night that the idiot Death Eater was conceived. Couldn't have thought to suggest that the Dark Lord order a few of their spies to maintain cover, just in case his plan to take over the Ministry failed, could he? Mulciber, the smart guy from Ravenclaw, with his brilliant scheme that would have vaulted him to the front of the Inner Circle's pecking order. Of course, the Slytherins he was trying to climb over on the way up the corporate ladder would have been cunning enough to plan for a worst case. Unfortunately, though, those same Slytherins were too busy angling amongst themselves for post-victory power...because there was no reason why their undercover operatives shouldn't have been able to hand them the keys to the Ministry of Magic.

But now they were either gone or exposed...Edgecombe at Floo, Richards and his crew at MSO, Reg in the Minister's office....all of them. For more than two years Death Eaters had apparated, floo'ed and hurled Unforgivables with the confidence that (so long as they weren't too blatant) their undercover colleagues would watch their backs and cover their tracks at the Ministry. But now, the Dark Lord and those who had escaped the battle had to assume that almost every swish of their wands could be detected and tracked down by those who wished them harm.

This was the reason why Voldemort had ordered his minions to go to ground, and to avoid the use of magic at all costs (at least until they could determine just how vulnerable they really were). This was also the reason why so many survivors of the battle were still injured and in pain; as the "no-magic" order included healing spells, magical potions were the only safe recourse. This had made Snape even more pompous and insufferable, and forced the Death Eaters to forage for potion supplies and gather the funds to pay for them.

And sent Malfoy down the path that had led to where he was presently.

Lucius longed for the good old days (i.e. six weeks previous), when healing spells would have been hidden by the unplottable location of their hide-out. But the goblins had (amazingly) decided to cooperate with the Ministry of Magic and their "seized assets" orders. Reasoning that the Ministry couldn't seize Death Eater assets that they couldn't find, Gringott's had gone to great lengths (and great expense) to collapse the wards that made any piece of real estate owned by a sanctioned land owner unplottable. Fortunately, the crash of these wards was a spectacularly loud event, and Voldemort and his followers had been given enough warning time to leave their suddenly plottable location before the MLE came snooping about.

Efforts to find a suitable hideaway owned by an unsanctioned and unmarked pure-blood sympathizer had been unsuccessful; Malfoy was certain that at least one such place existed, but suspected that knowledge of just who owned that place and where it was located was a secret guarded by a *Fidelius* charm. As a result, they had been forced to scatter about the countryside, and to stay in locations where their magic use could be tracked.

About the only silver lining to the sharp downgrade in living conditions was that Voldemort also had to abide by the “no-magic” rule (as best as his own temper would allow). There had only been an occasional lapse into application of the *Cruciatus*, and each time this happened they’d been forced to quickly move their base of operations to less pleasant locations. Given the conditions of the basement Voldemort now inhabited, Malfoy doubted that he’d be cursed again for his failure, or summoned to that cursing by the Dark Mark’s burn....not that there weren’t mundane ways for Voldemort to show his displeasure (particularly with MacNair and his axe still around).

Feeling the heft of the money bag tied to his belt, Malfoy decided that he could afford to hire a taxi for the two-hour trip to his Master’s lair. He rose from the table, used the loo and combed his hair one last time before taking the lift down to the lobby. He brushed by the house-elf concierge and strode out onto the street with a swaggering demeanor bolstered by the cash hanging from his belt.

The sidewalk and street were relatively deserted, but not oddly so given the hour and location. He took note of his surroundings only long enough to determine that there wasn’t a taxi cab within hailing distance, then turned towards Piccadilly Circus, where he would certainly have better success. As luck would have it (or so he thought), a car for hire turned onto the street and made it’s way towards him not fifteen seconds into his brisk walk. When he hailed it down, the elderly male driver rolled down his window, tipped his hat, and asked,

“Where to, Guv’nor?”

“Salisbury.”

“Salisbury as in Salisbury Avenue, Guv’nor?”

“No, you fool...Salisbury as in Wiltshire.”

“Oh, well, where do you want to go in Salisbury?”

“I’ll have more than enough time to tell you along the way.”

“Fair enough, Guv’nor...you do know it will be a steep fare...sure you wouldn’t rather I take you to Waterloo Station?”

“Yes, I am aware of the cost, and no, I’d rather enjoy my own company, thank you.”

The driver paused as “he” made use of her peripheral vision. She then smiled, and said, “Well if it’s solitude you want, Guv’nor, we can help.”

Malfoy had just enough time to wonder about the driver’s choice of pronouns before he was struck in the back by two darts attached to fifteen feet of wire. A split second later, 50,000 volts of electrical energy traveled down that wire and overwhelmed Malfoy’s central nervous system. Dazed, confused, and stripped of all neuro-muscular control, Lucius dropped to the pavement in a heap.

Secret Agent Wally shouted the all-clear once his TASER gun had fully discharged. By that point, Ron and Harry had already leapt from their hiding places and made their way to the taxi. The two teen-aged wizards quickly opened the car’s rear door and stuffed the still-trembling body into the back seat. They then climbed inside and sat on top of Malfoy’s body as a still-disguised Tonks slid over to the passenger seat. Wally jumped behind the wheel and sped away, leaving Hermione and her parents behind to explain away the questions of potential eyewitnesses. Fortunately, their governmental ID’s were enough to avoid the need for memory charms.

As soon as Wally turned the corner, Tonks reached into the glovebox and handed Harry a syringe full of Muggle sedative (which stopped Lucius’s squirming just as well as any magical stunner). She then crouched down in her seat and covered herself with Harry’s invisibility cloak. Five minutes later, Wally pulled the taxi into the delivery bay of an unused warehouse.

Once the garage doors closed, Harry and Ron quickly dragged their prisoner’s body out of the taxi and into the back of a waiting lorry. They stripped Malfoy’s body bare, bound him in Muggle handcuffs and ankle chains and had Tonks cover his body with the invisibility cloak. Ron then stuffed the clothes, the money bag, and Malfoy’s wand into Harry’s expandable rucksack and badge-jumped to Windsor Castle. Meanwhile, Wally and Steve had used their Art Club badges to trade places (Steve had remained at the Palace with the Queen), and Tonks changed her physical appearance from an elderly taxi driver to a gangly teenaged boy. Steve and Tonks then jumped into the lorry’s cab, and drove back out onto the street as Harry held the bay doors open. Harry then closed the garage doors, drew his wand, and shrank the taxicab down to the size of a child’s toy.

Other than the badge-jumps, it was the first bit of detectible magic that they had used all morning.

Harry pocketed the car and, after double-checking the area, used Sir Evan’s anchor point to join Ron within the Round Tower. Thirty minutes later, Steve and Tonks arrived at Windsor Castle in the lorry, carrying with them the first prisoner to be held in the Castle for more than three hundred years.

Thirty minutes later, Emily Granger was washing up after her all-night vigil when she heard her husband enter their ground-floor apartment.

“Honey,” Roger called out, “do you know where my surgery kit is?”

“Erm, it’s in one of those boxes we’ve got stored in the tent...why?”

A minute later Roger entered the bathroom holding his kit in one hand and a large pair of dental pliers in the other. “Thanks dear...the kids need some help with the prisoner.”

“Really?” his wife asked. “What kind of help?”

"They just found another portkey."

"But I thought the plan was for them to do the strip search in town?" Emily asked.

"They did," Roger replied. "But then they decided to get out their magical dowsing rods to do a body cavity search."

Emily squirmed at the thought. "And they needed to use those rods instead of their wands?"

Roger snorted. "Yeah, Harry said he draws the line at sticking his wand up troll's nostrils."

Emily squirmed some more and asked, "So they found something that requires dental tools to extract?"

"Erm, well, actually yes," Roger replied.

"So how would an evil wizard keep a portkey stuck up his...?"

"Relax, Emily... wrong body cavity."

"What?"

"Hermione says Mr. Evil Wizard had one of his molars charmed as a voice-activated portkey."

"Oh, well, then... I guess your kit would come in handy." Emily then glanced into her husband's bag and noticed something missing. "Not planning on using Novocain, Dear?"

Roger gave Emily a hard look. "This Malfoy is good friends with the wizard that tried to cut Hermione down in the Department of Mysteries."

Mrs. Granger nodded. "I didn't think so."

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11:30am
Somewhere Hidden in Wiltshire

Voldemort knew better than to ignore the latest message from Gringott's. Not willing to risk another semi-public dressing down, he ordered his followers (save for Nagini) to leave him alone in his ersatz basement-level chamber.

This new message was wrapped in a manner more boring, but less bloody, than the last. Within the cardboard box was a small red gemstone. Having seen these types of missives before, Voldemort placed the stone down on top of a low table and touched the top facet with his wand tip. A translucent purplish beam of light sprung from the crystal and resolved into a pensieve-like monochromatic image of a dozen goblins, facing him from behind a wide table.

"Hear now, Voldemort, nee Riddle, the recorded words and the ruling of the Grand Goblin Council!" cried out the image sitting at the table's center.

Voldemort scowled at the cheek of these goblins to order him around. Unfortunately, having recently lost half of his wizard minions to death, injury or capture, scowling was about all that he could do to them.

"You and yours have ignored our previous warning, and dared destruction of the veil of secrecy that protects the magical world," said the goblin. "Your minion Lucius Malfoy attempted another robbery of a Muggle bank, this time through use of an Imperius Curse."

"Bugger!" Voldemort muttered to himself, "That insolent idiot!"

"We await word on the extent of damage before passing final judgment," the goblin continued. "In the interim, we require Lucius Malfoy's head on a stake, to be placed in front of Gringott's Diagon Ally branch as warning to those whose actions risk ruin for our world. This must be done before the sun rises on the morrow, or your warning will be made much worse."

The image sputtered out, leaving the Dark Lord alone with his thoughts.

"Rookwood!" he shouted.

The sound of clumping footsteps traveled through the basement as the former Unspeakable climbed down the stairs to attend his Master.

"Yes, My Lord."

"I have need to summon Malfoy."

"Yes, My Lord, you wish me to bring the car around, then?"

Voldemort growled at the inconvenience.

"Yes, Rookwood."

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The area around the village of Avebury had one of the highest ambient magical energy levels within all of Britain. The stone circle had something to do with this; back in its heyday the ancient megalith was almost as effective as a wizard's wand when it came to focus. Avebury's megalith was neither as large nor as powerful as Stonehenge, but it also wasn't as popular with tourists (both Muggle and magical). This made it an ideal location (particularly when the weather was dark and stormy) for the discrete wizard who wished their spell use to be lost in the background.

Augustus Rookwood had been an Auror before being recruited by the Department of Mysteries, and had been trained to drive Muggle automobiles. As one of the few Death Eaters with this skill (and the only one within Voldemort's Inner Circle) he had been pressed into service as the Dark Lord's personal driver once apparition became untenable. It was therefore his job to ferry his Master from their current hide-out to Avebury. It would have been a better job if he'd been able to find a magically-resistant car with more headroom, but such was his current lot in life.

The Death Eater parallel-parked his 1967 Austin Mini Cooper S after a twenty-minute drive, and then scouted the area on foot whilst wearing a "notice-me-not" charmed cloak. Not finding any security threats, he returned to the car and gave his similarly-dressed Master the all-clear. After Voldemort climbed out of the passenger seat of the automobile the two wizards walked through the driving rain into the center of the circle, where Rookwood bared his left arm for the Dark Lord's use. As Voldemort dug the tip of his wand into the Dark Mark, he cast the summoning spell that focused on a single Death Eater, rather a blanket summons that called all who were marked.

Rookwood could tell by the scowl in his Master's voice that Lucius Malfoy wasn't going to be making a social call.

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1:00pm

Round Tower, Windsor Castle

Malfoy's Dark Mark had been burning for more than hour by the time the sedative that Harry had injected wore off. It was by no means a nice way to regain consciousness.

Metal manacles stopped Lucius's attempt to grab his Mark with his right hand, and leg irons kept him from running to find relief. He cried out from the pain that came from both arm and mouth, only to find his cries muffled by bloody cotton gauzing. After another painful cry (this time it was more a cry of alarm), Lucius used his tongue to confirm that his mouth was short a few molars; a quick failed apparition attempt then confirmed his fears that his escape routes were rather limited.

Malfoy collapsed back to the ground, and fought through the painful throbbing in his arm and lower jaw to assess his surroundings. He was dressed in Muggle clothing and held in a windowless stone-walled cell. His Muggle arm and leg manacles were chained to the wall, and a tunic-clad house-elf was carefully watching him with arms crossed over his chest.

"Dobby!" Malfoy mumbled through the gauzing. "Get me out of here."

"Bad Wizard forgets he gave Dobby clothes. Dobby is Free Elf, now," the house-elf replied. Dobby then popped out of the cell, leaving Lucius to consider just how much more pain he could take from his Dark Mark.

A minute later Malfoy heard the jingling of keys, and the door to his cell opened. Harry Potter then confirmed Malfoy's worst fears by entering the cell with a wand in his hand and evil smile on his face.

"Good afternoon, Lucius, did you have a nice little kip?"

Malfoy's cursing was muffled by the cotton.

"Oh, sorry," said Harry, "Let's see if the bleeding has stopped." He aimed his wand at Malfoy's mouth and banished the bloodied gauze. "Is that better?"

Lucius decided on the silent treatment, so that he could focus what energy he had on pain management.

Harry snorted, then asked. "Say, is there a reason why your Dark Mark is all splotchy and purplish?"

Malfoy said nothing in response, other than, "I want to see my solicitor."

"Oh really?" Harry asked. "Do you have a Muggle solicitor?"

"Why would I need one of those?" Malfoy spat out.

"Because you were captured by Muggles, using Muggle means," replied Harry. "And despite the fact that you're being watched over by a house-elf and prevented by wards from apparating away, you are being held at the Muggle Queen's Pleasure."

Malfoy's attempt at witty repartee was hampered by the need to spit out the mouthful of blood that had gathered.

"Oh, sorry about the dentistry," Harry replied. "Wouldn't do any good for you to use that portkey, would it?"

"That would depend on your perspective, Potter."

Harry smiled and gave Malfoy a polite round of applause. "Oh, well done, Lucius, that was almost as snarky as Snape."

Malfoy instinctively knew it would be pointless to try and take a swing at Harry, but made the attempt anyway. He quickly wished that he hadn't moved his left arm.

Harry's smile grew even more evil as he noticed Malfoy's pain. "Quite a predicament you appear to be in, Lucius...your Master wants you to visit him, doesn't he?"

"Of course, you insolent brat," Malfoy spat back.

"How much longer before the burning drives you mad?"

Malfoy stayed silent.

"Oh come, now, Lucius...I might be able to help if you were a little more candid."

Malfoy glared at Harry. "You'll get nothing from me, and the Mark will kill me before I talk."

Harry chuckled. "Oh, that's nothing we didn't already know. Based on what Dobby has told us, we're quite certain that you are resistant to *Veritaserum*, and that we couldn't trust a word that you said." He then cocked his head and asked, "But are you that willing to die for your Master?"

"Doesn't look like you are going to give a choice," Malfoy shot back.

"Ah, but there's where you are wrong," Harry replied. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a long strip of fabric, and, after a *Petrificus Totalus* spell ensured Malfoy's cooperation, wrapped the fabric around his upper left arm. A second reach into Harry's rucksack produced a foot-long piece of wooden dowel, the end of which Harry tied into the knot of fabric.

"I know you don't think too much of Muggles," Harry said during this process, "but you would be amazed at just how smart they are. For instance, did you know that Muggles have discovered a way to remove a Death Eater's dark mark?"

Harry stepped back once he finished wrapping what was now a loose tourniquet and admired his handiwork. He then cancelled the petrification spell, and reached into his rucksack for a hacksaw.

Malfoy drew in his breath at the sight.

"It's rather brutal, I'll admit," said Harry, "but if the choice is death or the sound of one hand clapping...."

"What!" Malfoy shouted. "You're really going to cut my arm off?"

"Oh, no, no, no, Lucius," Harry replied (his smile never having left his face). "You should remember that you are in Muggle custody...Muggles don't do that sort of thing to their prisoners...it would be cruel and unusual punishment."

As a fresh wave of pain shot up from his Dark Mark, Malfoy spat out, "Then what are you going to do with that saw?"

Harry smiled. "Why, give it to you, of course."

He made good on his word and levitated the hacksaw into Malfoy's grip.

Harry then noted, "Just because I can't lop off your arm to save your life doesn't mean that you can't help yourself."

As he used his wand to magically lengthen the chain that held Malfoy's right arm, Harry said, "So what do you think, Malfoy, do you have what it takes? Do you have the same kind of courage that a Muggle would display in your situation?"

"That's ridiculous," Malfoy stammered. "No Muggle would be strong enough to cut off his own arm."

"Ah, but there's where you are wrong," Harry replied with a smile. "A couple of years ago over in the States, a Muggle hiker out on his own in the wilderness got his arm trapped between some rock. Waited days for help, but nobody came. So rather than die of dehydration, the Muggle cut off his own arm."

"Preposterous."

"No, it's the truth," Harry replied. "Of course, all he had was a pocket knife for the job...that hacksaw should cut through bone way faster."

Malfoy looked down at his throbbing Dark Mark, and then over at the saw held in his right hand.

Harry interrupted his decision-making process. "But maybe you need a role-model closer to home?" he asked.

When he caught Malfoy's eye again, Harry simply said, "Pettigrew."

Lucius's eyes went wide at the thought. He asked, "Not planning on giving me any pain potion?"

Harry shook his head and clucked. "Sorry, Lucius, but you might have heard...there's a run on healing potions these days."

He then made his way to the door. Just before leaving, he turned and said slyly, "Besides, Lucius...Wormtail didn't need any pain potion when he cut off his hand in order to summon his Master. Do you really need any to avoid your Master's summons?"

The jail door slammed shut, leaving Malfoy alone with his choices.

Outside, Harry let out a deep sigh and cast a reinforcing *Silencio* on the cell door and walls. He said a silent prayer that Hermione wasn't there to hear his little speech, afraid that she might think he was turning too Slytherin.

Sir Evan came up to the door and asked, "So how long do you think he'll last?"

"I don't know," Harry replied. "Depends on how much pain he's learned to tolerate under his Master's care."

When Harry shuddered at the thought of what he'd just done, a small set of arms appeared and wrapped themselves around his leg. "No worries, Harry Potter, sir," said Dobby. "You are a great wizard. Bad Master doesn't deserve you giving him a choice to live."

"Yes, I know, Dobby, but thanks," Harry replied. He then paused, and asked, "Dobby, thank you so much for coming to help me today."

"Dobby is honored to help the great Harry Potter, sir" the house-elf replied.

Harry smiled and asked, "Dobby, my friend, would you be willing to help me with another task?"

Dobby's eye's went wide. "The great wizard Harry Potter calls Dobby, friend?"

"Oh, of course, Dobby...because you are."

Dobby's eyes watered and he burst out into tears as he once again hugged Harry's leg. "Dobby would do anything for his great friend Harry Potter, sir."

Harry smiled as he crouched down to Dobby's eye-level. "Dobby, there's a couple of very good reasons why we need your former master alive, but the choice is his right now. If he does decide to live, somebody has to watch over him to make sure he doesn't bleed to death. I don't think that I'm strong enough to watch him cut off his own arm...would you be willing?"

While Dobby's command of the Queen's English was limited, his sense of poetic justice was anything but limited. As a Malfoy house-elf, Dobby had lost count of the number of times he had been forced to physically punish himself. He gave Harry a face-splitting smile and nodded his head vigorously. "Dobby would like to help."

Harry smiled and patted Dobby's arm. "I thought you might." He then reached into his rucksack and produced a pair of omnioculars.

"And while you're there, would you also be willing to record the event?" Harry asked as he handed the glasses to the house-elf. "We should make sure that Malfoy's master knows just how truly loyal he is."

Dobby smiled, nodded his head, and then popped to the other side of the cell door.

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1:30pm

10 Downing Street, London

Having spent his lunch hour practicing the use of quill and ink, the Prime Minister was able to manufacture a splotch-free signature upon the official letter that Hermione had written. As she dusted the page and rolled up it up for a wax seal, he asked, "Are we prepared for the consequences should the Ministry not act upon this notification?"

Hermione nodded. "I believe so, sir. The goblins are confident that any intervening international body would be better than what's there now, and we do have the support of quite a few junior staff at the Ministry."

"Are we prepared, then, if the Ministry does act in self-preservation?"

Hermione smiled. "As I noted in my briefing document, Harry and I believe there to be significant gains for the Muggle world in either event."

It was the Prime Minister's turn to smile. "Well let's send this off straight away, then."

Hermione nodded, wrote an address on the outside of the message, then turned her attention to the newest full-time resident at 10 Downing Street.

"Beckham, we've got some work for you."

A large male Great Horned Owl swooped down from his perch in the corner of the Prime Minister's office and silently landed on his desk. Hermione showed the Prime Minister how to attach his message to the owl's outstretched leg, then opened the window.

"We're not expecting an immediate response, Beckham," Hermione said, "so you can fly back straight away from your delivery."

The owl bobbed its head up and down, and then gracefully flew out the window.

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3:30pm, The Round Tower, Windsor Castle

Harry was up in his Round Tower quarters reading an advanced charms textbook when Dobby suddenly appeared with a pop.

“Come quick, Mr. Harry Potter, sir. The Bad Master is all bloody and has fainted dead away.”

Harry quickly called for Roger Granger’s help. Harry ran down the stairs as Roger ran up, and they met in the middle in front of Malfoy’s cell. They entered a blood-splattered cell and found Lucius’s severed arm on the floor, while blood spurted through an opened artery where that arm used to be attached.

“Bloody fool cut above the tourniquet!” Roger yelled, as he pulled the belt from his own trousers and ran towards the prisoner. Harry, thinking that he may have forgotten to show Malfoy how the Muggle first aid device worked, used a freezing spell on the stump to staunch the flow of blood. He then took in the Death Eater’s deathly pale complexion, and yelled for Dobby to retrieve some blood replenishing potions. The house-elf immediately popped away to an adjacent cell, which had been converted into a magical dispensary of sorts. He returned with three bottles of potion, which Harry quickly forced down the Death Eater’s throat.

Not sure whether he had reacted correctly, or in enough time, Harry badge-called for Tonk’s help. The young Auror jumped to Harry’s location, and after a quick assessment cast a spell that fully cauterized Malfoy’s wound.

After ensuring that their prisoner would survive, Tonks asked Harry what had happened. He quickly recapped his conversation with Lucius, then reached down to the floor and retrieved the omnioculars from where Dobby had dropped them.

“Bloody stone cold harsh,” Tonks said, after she reviewed the recorded images. “He was using the saw to try and cut through his manacles, and didn’t switch over until the Dark Mark was actually smoking...want to look?”

Harry and Roger both politely declined. Harry did, however, suggest the name of someone who might be interested in the images, and asked if Tonks would deliver a recording of the image. The metamorph smiled as she used her wand to get an image dump.

Tonks said, “Harry, I can’t decide whether this is the greatest prank you’ve ever pulled, or your most Slytherin stunt...don’t ever let me get on your bad side.” She then badge-jumped to the back of the Weasley Twins’s joke shop, slipped out the back door, and made her way towards the local bank.

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4:30pm, St. George’s Chapel, Windsor Castle

With forty-five minutes to go before Evening Service, the Dean of St. George’s Chapel made his way out beyond the choir screen for a brief scan of the nave. The last of the afternoon public tours had made their way through the area, and he often made it a point to ensure that the worship area wasn’t too heavily trodden upon. There were, of course, chapel staff with these responsibilities, and he did trust them, but...the afternoon sun was lovely this time of year, when its rays filtered through the stained-glass windows above the chapel entrance, and it was a good excuse to escape (if but for a moment) the ever-present financial concerns that came with the upkeep of a six-hundred year old building.

As he made his way up the central aisle he spotted a familiar face that was obviously out of sorts. After a glance at his watch showed he had a few minutes to spare, the clergyman strode down to the last pew, and slid over to take a seat next to the Queen’s Wizard.

“I would ask how you were this fine afternoon, Lord Gryffindor,” the Dean said, “but I’m afraid that the answer to that question is readily apparent.”

Harry snorted. “It has been a rather bad day at the office, Dean Conner, and please, just Harry, alright?”

The vicar nodded. “You seem to be carrying a heavy burden...is there anything you want to share with me, Harry?”

The Queen’s Wizard shook his head. “Thanks for asking, Dean, but I really can’t talk about it.”

The vicar paused for a few moments before replying. “You know, Harry, anything we discussed would be just between us.”

“I know, Sir, but there are, erm...official reasons why I can’t say anything.”

The clergyman nodded. “Perhaps there is somebody else, then, with the proper clearances...Dame Hermione, perhaps?”

Harry shook his head. “No...I mean yes, she is somebody I could talk with, but I’m afraid that it wouldn’t help.”

“Why is that, son?”

“Because I already know what she would say.”

“But she seems so...how can you know for certain what she would say?”

Harry snorted. “Do you know that saying about letting your conscious be your guide?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, when my conscious talks inside my head, it sounds more like Hermione than Jiminy Cricket.”

“I see,” the Dean replied. “So something has happened, something that you obviously feel bad about, and you don’t think that she would approve.”

Harry nodded.

The clergyman sighed. "Harry, when you and Dame Hermione first came to me a few weeks ago, I was struck by just how responsible you both were. Focused and mature beyond your years...when combined with the Queen's confidence I was intrigued enough to make a few polite inquiries."

Harry swiveled his around to give the vicar a look of concern.

"Nothing too insistent, mind you," the dean said, as he placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You see, a good shepherd must know his flock."

"Erm...sure," Harry replied. "And what did you discover from your inquiries?"

"Besides the fact that you and Dame Hermione are deeply committed to both each other and to the Queen's service?"

When Harry smiled, the vicar patted his thigh.

"I learned that you both ride in chariots of fire."

When Harry's blank expression told Dean Conner that he didn't understand the reference, a thought sprung to mind. He stood and said, "Harry, you are welcomed to stay here and reflect, but you should know that our evening service starts in a few minutes."

Harry stood. "Oh, well...don't want to cause a disturbance."

"No worries, Harry," the clergyman said. "I know of a place with a bit more privacy." Looking down the side aisle, he called over one of his acolytes.

"Paul," he asked, "would you please bring my young friend here to the Royal Closet?"

Once the white robed assistant had led Harry off towards the front of the Chapel the vicar moved to an anteroom and made two mobile calls.

The first was to a Castle resident who knew a few things about warrior's guilt.

The second was to his choral director, with a last-minute musical request.

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A few minutes later, Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a question.

"Mind if we join you, Harry?"

Harry looked up and gave Sir Evan and Roger Granger a feint smile as they quietly sat on the ends of the low bench that Harry had been using.

"So you two know the Dean, then?" Harry asked.

Sir Evan nodded. "We've crossed paths a few times...imagine it comes with living and working here now." He then took a look at the immediate surroundings and said, "This has to be the fanciest closet in the world."

Harry nodded once more, as organ music began to play from below.

The "Royal Closet" was a private, inward-facing enclosed balcony that sat just above the Chapel's choir. Built by Henry VIII so that his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, could watch the Order of the Garter ceremonies, its stained glass windows were set in dark wooden frames, and displayed heraldic motifs and coats of arms. The private viewing area provided the three men the opportunity to talk quietly without bothering other worshippers.

Harry asked about their prisoner as the organist began the introit. Roger told Harry that Malfoy's condition was stable, and that he was still unconscious. Dobby was keeping watch. They then sat quietly, until the chapel choir filed in and the organ began to play a familiar hymn...familiar to Harry not because his Aunt and Uncle had taken him to church, but due to the fact that Hermione's dad had shared with Harry his love for classic Muggle comedy.

"Mr. Granger," Harry asked, "why are they playing a *Monty Python* song in church?"

Roger chuckled as Sir Evan looked at Harry with confusion.

"I think the question should be why they played a church song on *Monty Python*."

Harry's follow-up question got nipped by Roger's hand signal, allowing the first lines of the hymn to be heard clearly:

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?*

Sir Even found a hymnal and flipped to the right page as Harry heard the choristers sing about building the city of Jerusalem in England (which Harry considered strange, because knew for certain that that city was located in Israel). But then he heard calls for golden bows and arrows and spears, and then something about a chariot of fire...

And that caught Harry's attention fully:

I will not cease from Mental Fight

*Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant Land.*

Harry looked down into the chapel as Dean Conner broke away from the processional and took his seat across from their vantage point. The vicar quite clearly looked up towards the Royal Closet gave the three men a small smile and nod of recognition.

"So he knows?" Harry asked quietly.

Roger evenly replied, "In general terms, yes."

"Sending me a message, then?"

"Perhaps," Sir Evan replied.

"And what do you think that message is?"

The eldest Art Clubber paused for a moment before replying.

"Probably that war is hell, and that a just war sometimes forces good men to do bad things, and that they aren't any less worthy of being loved for it."

Harry processed the response before chuckling. "Is that today's lesson, then?"

Sir Evan shook his head. "No, Sir Harry, it's what Albus Dumbledore told me some sixty years ago."

"Dumbledore told you that?" Harry asked with surprise.

Sir Evan shrugged his shoulders. "We were behind enemy lines, no real options for taking prisoners..."

"Albus 'Always-give-them-another-chance' Dumbledore didn't give quarter?" Harry asked incredulously.

When Sir Evan shrugged his shoulders again and nodded, Harry pressed for details. He got none, with the war veteran explaining that his exploits with Dumbledore were either too painful to talk about, or something he had promised never to talk about.

Or both.

A few minutes of silence passed while Harry tried to process this new information. He had just started to wonder whether Dumbledore had considered his horrible childhood at the Dursley's one of those "bad things" that he had been forced to do whilst fighting a just war when Hermione's dad tried a different tack.

"You know, you weren't the only one there at the time, Harry," he noted.

"Yes, but it was mostly my idea and I was the ranking officer," Harry replied. "The blood's on my hands."

Sir Evan then said, "After you left Tonks came back with the Ministry's file on Lucius Malfoy."

"Why did she do that?" Harry asked.

"So that we could better understand that Malfoy deserved worse than what you offered him."

Harry shook his head. "The ends don't justify the means."

Sir Evan waited a few seconds before repeating. "War is hell, and a just war sometimes forces good men to do bad things... Harry you gave the man an option to live... that's far more than he would have done if roles had been reversed."

Harry shook his head. "But we're supposed to be better than they are."

Sir Evan shook his head. "But Harry, war is hell, and a just war..."

"Yes, yes, I know," Harry said.

Roger then asked, "So looking back, what would you have done differently? What could you have done differently?"

Having thought about these questions for more than hour, Harry had a quick response.

"We could have given him an anesthetic... we could have had his arm surgically removed... I could have done less taunting, and enjoyed the taunting less..."

"Did you enjoy it, Harry? It doesn't look like you're happy about that now."

Harry thought for a moment, and then replied, "I enjoyed having the upper hand, for once... but I didn't enjoy all that blood."

"And you cared enough to take the quick actions necessary to save his life, correct?"

"Yes but for our own purposes," Harry shot back. "If we didn't need him alive I might have just let him bleed out."

"Really?"

"Well, I... I don't know."

Sir Evan nodded. "Let's say you decided to lop off his arm before the pain got too intense. How exactly would you explain that to a Muggle board of inquiry investigating maltreatment of a prisoner?"

Harry hemmed and hawed. "Well, I guess we didn't have proof that the summons would kill him, even knowing that Voldemort would call for him after the goblins delivered their ultimatum."

"So you gave the prisoner a choice. Could have been a little less painful for him, and a cleaner cut made, but we certainly couldn't provide him with a sharper weapon, could we?"

"Suppose not."

"So then, quit beating yourself up, young man," Sir Evan ordered. "You gave the prisoner the chance to make his own choices. You could have done better with the tourniquet, but you saved his life and now you learn from your mistakes. Carry on, boy."

"Not so simple, I think," Harry replied. "We still have the guinea pig armor issue to deal with."

Roger sighed and nodded his head. "You know, Harry, there was a day when common criminals could reduce their prison sentences by voluntarily serving as test subjects for experimental medicines."

Harry thought for a moment, and then said, "I'm sure that your daughter would tell us that given their status those prisoners couldn't do anything on a truly voluntary basis."

"Rubbish," Sir Evan replied. "Give him a range of options, and so long as not volunteering doesn't make his punishment any more severe than it would have been..."

"And that just gets us to a different problem," Harry replied. "There's no capital punishment in Muggle Britain, and we don't trust the Ministry to keep him locked up if we turned him over."

Sir Evan thought for a moment, and then asked, "Do your goblin friends have any qualms about offing their prisoners?"

Harry's eyes brightened at the thought. "I don't think that they're shy at all about that sort of thing."

Roger then asked, "Is there any way to strip Malfoy of his magic?"

Harry frowned. "I don't think so, at least not with any spell or ritual I'm aware of."

"Okay, so you can't take his magic... can't you make him forget how to use it?"

Harry gave Hermione's dad a wide-eyed look, wondering if he would have been sorted into Slytherin had he been born with magic.

"I never thought of that before," Harry replied. "Sounds brilliant, but I'll have to ask Hermione."

With a nod the two older men stood, and as Roger patted Harry on the shoulder he said, "You do that, then, Harry... but not before you ask her for a good hug, okay?"

Harry nodded. The two older men then told him that they were returning to the Tower. Harry said that he would be along in a bit, as he wanted to wait and ask Dean Conner a question after the service. Roger and Sir Evan nodded, then walked out of the small alcove.

Not five seconds later, Harry felt another familiar presence enter the room, and a moment later the familiar presence was replaced by a familiar set of arms that wrapped themselves tightly around Harry's chest.

"Your dad just give you a call?"

Hermione's vocal confirmation was lost as her lips pressed up against the nape of Harry's neck. Rather than ask again, he reached around and guided her down towards a seat next to him. Harry then wrapped his arm tightly around Hermione's waist. As she rested her head on his shoulder, the two quietly sat for the balance of the service.

Once the service ended, they made their way downstairs, and asked for a few minutes of Dean Conner's time. He quickly agreed, and led him to his office.

Once the confessions were made, and loving affirmations provided, the details of "just war" doctrine were discussed. Particular attention was paid to Augustine directives on the treatment of prisoners and the administration of mercy, especially when the vanquished were no longer a threat to peace.

Harry and Hermione returned to the Round Tower hand in hand, with borrowed treatises by St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and homework assignments to be completed before a scheduled follow-up meeting.

6:30pm, Round Tower

As Fred and George Weasley helped engineers from MI-5 ¾'s Q Branch set up a test fire range in the false-story just below the Round Tower's roof, Harry and Hermione reviewed contract language with their vanquished prisoner.

"So, let's review then, Lucius," said Harry.

"Your first option is a life-sentence to be served in a Muggle detention facility. We'd have to help them keep you incarcerated, so we would necessarily obliviate every single memory you have about the wizarding world, and how to perform magic...including apparition. The Muggles will then send you to a secret military prison on the island of Diego Garcia...it's in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and more than a thousand miles away from land, so you'd have problems leaving even if you did remember how to apparate."

Hermione jumped in, adding, "There would be opportunities for a reduced sentence...down to only ten-years if you voluntarily drop your mental shields and allow us unfettered access to your memories. We also would guarantee you reasonably pleasant living conditions."

"At least when compared to Azkaban," said Harry. "But mind the fact that you would be released from prison into the Muggle world, and without your memories of magic, you'd be somewhere in between an ignorant squib and a Muggle."

Taking note of the prisoner's scowls, Hermione decided keep things moving.

"Under the second option, you start by publicly denouncing Voldemort...we're thinking a press conference on the front steps of Gringott's. We'd announce it in the papers to make sure you get a good-sized crowd to talk to. Several hours before that, though, we'd break your wand and you would swear a wizard's oath to answer any question that we ask of you truthfully, completely, and without intent to deceive. And then you'd talk. After the press conference, we'd turn you over to the Ministry of Magic."

"Without a knut to my name, one-armed and with a death sentence hanging over my head?" asked Malfoy rhetorically.

"Well, the first two for sure, but we wouldn't have any say in how the Ministry dealt with you," Hermione replied.

"Moving on," said Harry, "Option three is simple...we hand you over to the goblins."

"Again," said Malfoy, "I would be without a knut to my name, one-armed and have a death sentence hanging over my head."

"With goblins, I'd have to agree with you on all three points," Harry admitted.

"Let's get to the last option, then," Malfoy snarled.

"Ah, yes, Option four," Harry replied. "You agree to be a test subject for body armour that we believe may be resistant to the killing curse. We get three shots, and will try not to kill you outright. If the armour works, you will be released from our custody tonight and dropped off exactly where we picked you up this morning. Your memories of the entire day's events would be erased by magical means. Your wand stays with us, but you'd get your money bag back, and we'd make no effort to capture you for three days."

"And if the armour doesn't protect me, you'll swear a wizard's oath to send Draco the money bag, along with an extra million galleons thrown into it?"

"Erm, yes...maybe you could give us his delivery address in advance?" Harry asked.

"Not on your life, Potter."

"Ah. Oh well, can't blame me for trying, can you?" Harry asked. "So, what do you think, Lucius?"

Malfoy squinted hard at Harry, but bit off a retort so that he could focus on the options as they were presented to him. Betraying his Master then living as a Muggle for the rest of his life was right out. Under the second option he would likely be AK'ed on the steps of Gringott's before he had the chance to complete his first sentence. Or, if the Ministry did protect him long enough to take him into custody, he probably would be summarily thrown through the Veil.

The third option was right out as well. A painful, humiliating death was a certainty, and the best he could hope was they he'd become a martyr in the next Goblin War.

And martyrdom wasn't something that the Malfoy Family cared to be remembered for.

The final option was the only one that gave him a chance of survival, and it was obvious that his captors wanted him to choose it so as to test their bloody armour. As if anything could block the killing curse. But he had to admit that the Muggles had proven themselves resourceful, at least with the Boy's help...they obviously thought themselves above testing on their own Muggle prisoners.

Then there was the question on whether the boy could even cast the killing curse successfully. He had seen Bellatrix's memories of the night they were captured in the Department of Mysteries, and knew that Potter didn't have it in him to successfully cast a *Cruciatius*, much less an AK. But assuming he did, or they found somebody else...what if their armour worked? He could sit out the rest of the war in his Rookery flat, beyond the reach of the Dark Lord, the Ministry, and Potter. And if the armour didn't work...well he'd be dead, but it would be painless, the Malfoy name wouldn't be tarnished, and his incompetent son stood a chance of living long enough to sire a worthier heir.

He looked up at Harry and Hermione with disgust, and said, "The last option." He then spent ten minutes signing a stack of release forms and "hold harmless" agreements.

"Well, then," Harry said, "anything else we could do to help you enjoy your stay?"

Lucius sent his "scowl scale" to eleven and let loose. "Would it be too much to ask for a decent last meal?" he asked.

Harry smiled as he conjured a table and chair. "Dobby?" he asked.

A moment later his friend arrived.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir, what can I do to help?"

"Would you please prepare your former Master's favorite meal for him?"

Dobby didn't look too happy about the request, but trusted Harry enough to pop away, only to return a few moments later with a bottle of wine and a steak dinner.

"Good-looking filet, there, Dobby," Harry said. As the house-elf swelled with pride, Harry turned towards their prisoner and decided to test-drive a bit of mercy.

"Sorry about the emergency dental work, Lucius," Harry said. "Couldn't have you slip away from us, but given things...sure you don't want something softer to eat?"

"I'll manage," Malfoy shot back.

"You know," Harry said, "with a bit of help we could probably transfigure a partial set of Muggle dentures for you."

"Muggle replacement teeth?" Malfoy asked.

"Erm..yes."

"I'd rather eat soup the rest of my life."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Don't say we didn't offer." He then turned and asked Dobby for one final favor.

"Of course, Harry Potter, sir, what can Dobby do?"

Harry let one of his slightly evil smiles slip out.

"Grab a knife...Lefty is going to need some help cutting his meat."

oo000000oo

11:30pm, Soho, London

They waited until the theater crowds had left the street to push Lucius Malfoy out of the back of an unmarked van right in front of the Rookery. Had his memories not been swiped of the day's events, he would have been wondering how in Merlin's name Muggles had invented body armour that had saved him from Alastor Moody's killing curses.

In between wondering just how he had lost both an arm and a wand.

Malfoy realized that he had been memory charmed, and had lost knowledge of what had happened that day. The knowledge of just how dire his predicament had been the night previous had been retained, however. So it was all he could do not to immediately rush inside the Rookery. Instead, the one-armed wizard took a walk, and used the cover of darkness to get lost within the crowds of Piccadilly Circus, before doubling back to his Rookery flat.

His movements were stealthy enough to have shaken off anyone who might have been following him. The walk did nothing, however, to stop digital and magical cameras from recording his return from their fixed vantage points right across the street.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Officer and Gentleman, Part 1

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

Chapter 27 - Pensieved Longings and Plugged-up Loos

Saturday , July 7, 6:00am
Queen's Wizard's Quarters
Buckingham Palace, London

Harry Potter's internal alarm clock ignored the previous night's decision to turn off its electronic counterpart and pulled the Queen's Wizard into consciousness a good three hours before he wanted. Harry sighed as he glanced at the electronic alarm, careful not to disturb Hermione from her present position (head on his chest, arm and leg draped over his torso). He smiled as she snuggled against him, and pulled the covers up just enough to make the warm cocoon complete.

The Queen's Wizard knew that he ought to try to go back to sleep; they had pulled an all-nighter preparing for Malfoy's capture and relied too much on caffeine and pepper-up the day before. But with Hermione cuddled up against him in their warm safe bed, he found it impossible to push away all of the memories, thoughts and fears that came with having her as his girlfriend/consort. Most of those thoughts were the type that old men cling to and cherish as they look back upon their lives...their first "more-than-just-friends" kiss, their first shared bath, their first snag...

Harry chuckled at the term he had invented. It was wonderfully ambiguous term that aptly described their current physical relationship. Hermione and he still joked about the "three date rule," but neither of them had felt ready to take that final step. At least not just yet. They had tried to talk about "it" and when "it" should occur, but never really reached any conclusions. While neither had any serious moral objections to premarital shagging, they both thought there was something romantic and special about saving that act for a wedding night. Which brought out thoughts of weddings and engagements, and whether they were too young and had been a couple for too short a time to be even thinking about it. That was a related, and no less important, can of worms.

And then there were the Grangers. Living under the same roof as your girlfriend's parents could have been very intimidating, but they had been amazingly supportive and trusting, right from the start. Almost too trusting, Harry thought...her dad had essentially given him permission to share a bed with his daughter on Privet Drive (almost asked Harry to, if you interpreted that conversation a certain way). And once they moved to the Round Tower and stayed either there or at Buckingham? Complete acceptance.

Last night had been a good example. The four of them had ridden in the van that had dumped Malfoy in front of the Rookery just before midnight. After hanging around for an hour to make sure Lucius did not do something unexpected, they called it a night. Rather than drive back to Windsor, or wake Sir Evan for a badge-jump, Hermione's parents asked if they could crash at "his" place at the Palace. It was taken "as read" that the Granger's would stay in the guest bedroom while Hermione and he shared the master. Mrs. Granger even gave them a goodnight kiss and orders to "sleep tight" before they turned in for the night.

Harry sighed, realizing that with Mr. And Mrs. Granger sleeping next door that Hermione would want to be cautious that morning, which was too bad, since he was definitely in the mood for some fun. Not fair really, since her parents didn't seem to always share that concern. He smiled as he recalled the "bedroom wall" incident, and that got him thinking about silencing spells, and their walk-in closet, and Hermione's knickers, and the time she left them behind...

He snorted at the thought of what Ron and his friends would think if he were the type to kiss and tell (or given that he was a teen-aged male, "shag and brag"). Harry doubted that anyone would be surprised that Hermione was still a virgin, but if they knew just how comfortable she'd become around him without clothing, or how randily she romped within her comfort zone, their toes would probably curl.

The day she went commando was a prime example. First day on the job working for the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street and she does that? Worse still, she let Harry know she was doing it? It was all he could do not to jump her as soon as she got back from work. But she resisted, and told him that he needed to wait until after they watched a memory of her first day.

Since that was the day she had arranged for the Death Eater bank accounts to be frozen, Harry had expected that she'd be showing him the pensieved memory of her meeting with the Chief Cashier of the Bank of England. But instead, she surprised him with a string of seemingly random events (for example, her introduction to another staff member, a walk up the stairs, her first sit behind her new desk, and a shared lunch with the Chief-of-Staff). Harry wasn't able to piece together the puzzle once they'd been pulled out of the pensieve, so it was up to Hermione to explain.

Each of the scenes were situations where visual proof of her commando status was available, if only somebody had been properly positioned and had known to look. She then gave Harry a wide smile and asked if he wanted to review the memory again.

Harry never would have thought that almost-shagging could be so much fun. And hot. And satisfying.

The memory of reviewing that memory was enough to distract his full bladder and give him a different reason to be aroused. It was while he was trying to quietly take care of this "problem" that Hermione woke up.

"What are you doing, Harry?" she asked, using her very best sleepy-sexy-coy voice.

He froze.

"Erm...thinking of you," Harry replied with embarrassment. He then recovered quickly enough to ask, "Want to help?"

Hermione groaned. "Oh, I'm sorry, Harry, but now's not...I'm feeling a bit off."

Harry thought for a moment and then nodded. "Sorry, I should have remembered that it wasn't a good time of the month."

That comment caused Hermione to wake up in a hurry. "What?" she asked. "How did you know...I mean...we weren't that intimate a month ago, were we?"

Harry chuckled. "No we weren't."

"Then how?"

"Well, I *could* say it was the only logical reason why you wore a nightgown and the most conservative pair of knickers in your dresser to bed last night."

"You could, but that's not it, huh?"

Harry shook his head. "The fact is, I've, erm...I've known the timing of your monthly cycles for a couple of years now."

"What?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

Looking somewhat aghast, the bushy-haired witch replied, "What reason would you have had for knowing that sort of thing about me...before now?"

Harry chuckled. "Hermione, it wasn't information that I went out searching for, it's just something I came to know over time." He pulled her into a hug, kissed her temple, and added, "Might have something to do with the fact that for the past six years I've shared most of my classes, all of my meals and most of my free time with you."

"And just what did you do with this knowledge, Mr. Potter?"

"Besides knowing when to make extra efforts to keep Ron from annoying you?"

Hermione scowled playfully as she pushed his shoulder away. "Yes, you git."

Harry shook his head and smiled. "Dunno...don't think I ever made a point of it...maybe gave you a bit more room, and bit my tongue a bit more..."

With her face covered with her hands, she sighed, "Merlin, Harry...we are such the old couple."

"Don't say that, Hermione," Harry asked. "It'll mean we can't enjoy our youthful wild sides."

"Why?" his girlfriend asked. "Can't you have wild sides when you get older?"

Harry snickered. "Well I suppose so, if we use your parents as examples." He then made it a point to look towards the guest bedroom. "Which reminds me, did you cast a silencing spell on their walls last night?"

Hermione threw her pillow at Harry's head. "Oh, you are terrible." She then grabbed her wand from the nightstand, threw off the covers and said, "I'm going to take a shower."

The Queen's Wizard gave her a pained look. "What, and leave me here all excited?"

"I thought you were supposed to be the understanding boyfriend sensitive to his girlfriend's condition?"

"I am," Harry protested. "But as you can see, my, erm..." "condition" here..."

Hermione laughed...he really was cute, and thoughtful, and amazing. But that didn't change just how icky she felt right then.

An idea sprung to mind.

"Hold that thought, but don't hold anything else just yet," she ordered.

Not waiting for a response, she left the bedroom, only to return a half-minute later with the pensieve.

"I've got another memory for you," she coyly said, as she set the rune-covered bowl onto the bed.

Harry gave her a confused look.

Hermione smiled and explained, "It's something I didn't show you from commando day."

"Really?" Harry said with interest. "And just what will I see?"

She smiled. "Me, alone in my new office, while I...what were you doing just now, when I woke up?"

Erm... thinking of you?"

"Ah, yes. I was in my office...thinking of you."

Harry's eyes lit up as he rushed to the bathroom for some necessary business. He returned with a rather wanton look of anticipation on his face as Hermione placed the memory thread into the bowl.

Harry was about to dive in when he reached over and grabbed her hand.

"Would you like to join me?"

Hermione tilted her head in thought. "You want me to watch myself?"

Harry shrugged. "You could always watch me while I watch the memory of you."

She raised an eyebrow. "And just what will I see while I watch you?"

Harry grinned. "More thinking, I imagine."

Hermione frowned a bit. "I'm still feeling off, though."

"I know, but maybe...maybe when you leave your body behind and mentally jump into the pensieve, you might not feel so bad?"

The bushy-haired witch furrowed her eyebrows. "I've never thought about that before...are you suggesting that I could project an avatar that would feel different from how I'm feeling right now?"

"One way to find out...why don't you idealize how you would like to be feeling right before you jump?"

"Okay," Hermione replied.

"Oh, and maybe your avatar wouldn't have to be wearing the same clothes?"

Hermione smiled as she raised her night-gown high enough to expose her knickers. "What, you don't like my mollypants?"

Harry's face pruned up and he shivered. "Oi, Hermione, that's not an image I want in my head right now."

"Well, then," she replied. "we best be making sure something better is in its place." And after a clearly formed thought was in her head, she dived into the pensieve.

They emerged fifteen minutes later with proof that avatars didn't need clothing and didn't get cramps.

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Saturday, July 7, 7:30am **Somewhere Hidden in Wiltshire**

Voldemort thought that the goblin council's latest demands were outrageous, but realized that they could have been worse:

"For failure to properly restrain your minions, and to provide us with Lucius Malfoy's head, the Grand Goblin Council has served notice to the leaders of every non-human sentient species that any assistance they or their own provide you and your Death Eaters will be considered an act of war against the Goblin Nation. In addition, with this message we serve notice that you and your minions are prohibited from use of the Morsmorde spell, or the casting of the Dark Mark, within the visible range of Muggles. Should you ignore this edict, the Goblin Nation will openly declare war against you."

Attached to this notice was a second note, informing Voldemort that Malfoy's head might cause the council to rethink their decisions. The goblins were then kind enough to provide Voldemort with the most likely location of Malfoy's head.

The crystal that had encased the holographic goblin edict disintegrated before Voldemort had the opportunity to show it to anyone else. He was therefore forced to give a summary when he called in a few of his inner circle for their opinions on the matter.

The Death Eaters had been much more willing to offer candid assessments now that their Master couldn't hurl unforgivables willy-nilly. Rookwood started by giving the goblins credit for their cunning, noting their actions could be considered justifiable by those worried about preserving the secrets of the wizarding world. Bellatrix disagreed, arguing that the *Morsmorde* spell was the only way that the Ministry idiots knew they had a mess to clean up after some Muggle hunting. Rookwood then suggested that was the whole point, and that the goblins wanted to halt all wizard attacks against Muggles. When Wormtail asked why goblins would want to protect Muggles, the elder Nott explained that goblins were barred from investing in the wizarding world, so they had to invest in Muggle banks and businesses. Unexplained magical attacks on Muggles provoked panic, and panic was bad for business.

They then spent a few minutes arguing over how the Ministry of Magic would respond if the goblins did attack them. The consensus was that the Ministry would reluctantly agree to a temporary truce with the Death Eaters, so that a united wizard front could be presented against the enemy. Nearly all of the Death Eaters had attended Hogwarts, and been taught History of Magic by Binns (in both living and ghostly forms). And if Binns taught you anything, he taught you about the Goblin Wars. There was ample historical precedent for warring wizard factions to cooperate just long enough to beat back assaults by other sentient species.

Finally, MacNair asked how the werewolves would react to the goblin council's edict, and whether it would affect their plans for that night's full moon. Voldemort expressed his confidence that the werewolves would be loyal to him, and would be furious at the thought of being ordered around by the goblins. The Death Eaters actually chuckled when their Master joked about needing to make sure that Greyback and his pack didn't change their minds, and attack Gringott's rather than their primary targets.

Voldemort then dismissed everyone but Rookwood with orders to proceed with their established plans for that night. The Dark Lord then told him what he had withheld from the others...that the goblins still wanted Malfoy dead, and had been kind enough to tell them where he was hiding.

The former Unspeakable wasn't very surprised when his Master gave him the street address of the Rookery. He knew about the building, and knew the names of some of the Patriarchs who owned flats there. The Rookwood Patriarch was one of those owners, and the whispered stories about the games Grandfather played there were closely kept family secrets.

He already knew that Malfoy was a Rookery Patriarch. It also didn't surprise him when his Master changed his assignment for the night's attacks. There'd be one less wizard creating illegal portkeys while the diversions were taking place, but Voldemort had already made Karkaroff's capture, torture, and death a warning to all - nobody can ignore their Master's summons.

And with Malfoy dead...Rookwood pondered the new Inner Circle pecking order as he packed the boot of his Cooper. But as *Legimens* was one of the very few spells that could be cast without being detected, he waited until he was on the road and well away from his Master before daring to ponder far more dangerous thoughts...thoughts about surviving in a world without Voldemort.

9:30am, 19 Pennywell Road, Bristol

As he navigated a roundabout a few blocks away from the Bristol safe house, Augustus Rookwood let out a sigh of relief.. The fuel indicator needle had been hovering dangerously close to "E" for the past thirty kilometers, and he'd not had enough Muggle cash to stop for a refill. Now that he had made it that far, the Death Eaters at the safe house would have more than enough funds to fill his Cooper's petrol tank (so long as they hadn't wasted it on take-away meals and Muggle beer).

The thought of what he would find at the safe house on Pennywell Road was enough to raise his stress levels all on its own. The somewhat shabby row house was one of the four Death Eater hide-outs within the Muggle world that was under his control and command. While Rookwood would have liked to think that this responsibility was a reflection of the Dark Lord's trust, he was smart enough to know that it had more to do with his automobile, and the fact that he understood the Muggle world better than any other Death Eater.

Few knew his dirty little secret, and fewer still could reconcile that knowledge with his pure-blooded bigotry and disdain for the Muggle world. As an Auror during the start of the First War, he had volunteered for "Muggle training" at his Master's command, and quickly moved up the ranks within the Oblivator Squads responsible for mopping-up after Death Eater attacks. Rookwood's cunning and expertise when it came to sanitizing Muggle incidents led to his recruitment by the Unspeakable Department. They had their own ideas on Muggle training, and it involved throwing its recruits off the deep end and seeing if they could swim.

For the first six months as an Unspeakable he lived without using his wand. He held a job as a low-level bureaucrat within the Muggle government, inhabited a Muggle flat, and lived as Muggles lived. It was horrible, but instructive, and good preparation for his Unspeakable Department assignment as an intelligence agent, responsible for following the actions of the Muggle government and its military. He held this post through the end of the First War, and even managed to hold on to it when it became necessary to use the *Imperius* Curse defense to keep him from Azkaban Prison.

Rookwood's relative ease within the Muggle world had proven itself vital to Voldemort in the days immediately after their defeat at the Ministry of Magic. It was his knowledge that kept the four Muggle safe houses secret, and at least semi-inhabitable. This was no small feat, given that the thirty to forty Death Eaters that were hiding in these locations started with almost no clues on how Muggle things worked. He had been forced to become an instructor of "Remedial Muggle Studies," with practical lessons on everything from train schedules to the proper use of soap. Learn quick or starve was proper motivation for most, and three of the four safe houses were now able to operate mostly on their own. But then there was Bristol... the house where all of the stupid ones stayed.

It seemed like he was there every other day fixing one crisis or another. And still they hadn't learned. It was that very reason why he was driving there that day...while the other Death Eaters could be trusted to use Muggle trains and buses to get to their assigned posts by nightfall, Rookwood would be ferrying this crew to their spots by himself, traveling three at a time in his Cooper.

The former Unspeakable got his hopes up as he drove past the safe house, for its exterior displayed no obvious signs of something being off. But then he turned into the alleyway behind the house, and came upon a wizard in Death Eater robes who was relieving himself against the back of the building.

He swore, quickly parked the car, and looked up and down the street to see if there was any immediate threats. Seeing none, he leapt out and began to berate *He-who-Had-no-Brains*.

"Oy, Carrow, what in Merlin's name are you doing?"

Amycus Carrow jerked his head in surprise, throwing his aim off enough to get his left shoe wet. "Sorry, guv'nor," the Death Eater replied, "I'll be right there."

"Put it away, you idiot, and get inside!"

“Right, guv’nor, almost done, guv’nor.”

Rookwood grabbed Amycus by the hood (at least the fool had left his mask inside), and pulled him up the back stairs as he tried to fasten his fly. A slight, but noticeable odor of excrement greeted him as he crossed the threshold into the house’s kitchen. He slammed the younger Carrow down onto a kitchen chair and continued his dressing down.

“You sorry excuse for a wizard, what made you think it was okay to empty your bladder in a public alleyway?”

“I checked nobody was looking first,” Amycus explained.

“And the chance that somebody would come upon you with your wand out...somebody, like say, erm...me?”

“Didn’t have a choice, guv’nor,” the Death Eater explained. “That Muggle toilet isn’t working.”

Rookwood rolled his eyes and let out a deep sigh. Two minutes and he already had a headache on his hands. Reflexively, he opened a kitchen cabinet door and pulled out a bottle of aspirin. It was his own special stash, protected by the “childproof” cap that worked just as well against wizards. After popping a couple of pills into his hand, he pulled the least-dirty glass off of the shelf and filled it with water. The hand-written signs that he had posted on the sink and basin stood as silent testament to his plight...one sign distinguished between hot and cold faucets, a second sign gave instructions on how to turn each faucet on and off, and a third stated “*To get water that is neither hot nor cold, open both faucets at the same time.*”

Rookwood swallowed the Muggle medicine, turned back to Amycus Carrow, and asked, “So what is wrong with the toilet?”

“Dunno’, guv’nor,” the Death Eater replied. “We push the handle, just like you showed us, but the water just overflows and the turds don’t disappear.”

Augustus shook his head, and wondered whether there was time enough to hold a lesson on the proper use of a Muggle plunger.

“And just what did you try and flush down the toilet, then?”

“Dunno, guv’nor,” Carrow replied. “Nobody will admit to having stuffed it up.”

“Of course not,” Rookwood replied. He wondered whether this was the sort of thing that would justify a *Cruciatus* had they not been so easily tracked.

“And wearing your robes, what’s that about?”

“Erm...only thing I’ve got that has cleaning charms applied to ‘em. Me sis says me Muggle clothes are a bit too ripe to be worn in public.”

“So you figured that you’d draw less attention to yourself by wearing your Death Eater robes?” Rookwood shouted. “Didn’t I show you how to use the washing machine?”

“Erm, yeah, you did, gov’nor, but that stopped working a couple of days ago as well.”

The former Unspeakable rubbed his temples, trying to ease the throbbing pain within his head. He then said (almost too quiet for Carrow’s liking), “Gather up the others, I’ve come to take you to your posts for tonight’s attacks.”

Amycus nodded. “Erm, any chance you can look to the toilet, guv’nor?”

Rookwood shook his head. “We’ll have to leave it. It’ll take me all morning to make the rounds, and then I have my own places to be.”

“Right, guv’nor.”

“Oh, and Amycus,” the former Unspeakable said, “Slight change of plans. You and your dear sister will be with me tonight.”

“Why’s that, guv’nor?” Carrow asked.

“Because,” Rookwood replied coldly, “we need to be making a social call in London.”

Chapter 28 - The Basilisk Harvest

Saturday, July 7, 10:00am

Three Broomsticks, Hogsmeade

Ron’s anchor point caught Harry and Hermione by surprise. Hermione badge-called Remus to inform him that they had arrived safely while Harry caught his friend’s attention.

“Ron?”

“Yes Harry.”

"Any particular reason why you picked this spot for our jump?"

"Oh, well...it was empty, and I, erm... I wanted to prank Hermione for anchoring that jump into the women's lav at that Muggle restaurant a few weeks back."

"Erm...okay," Harry replied tentatively.

"Ron?"

"Yes Hermione."

"Wouldn't the prank have been more effective if this were the Wizard's lav, rather than the Witch's?"

"Well...sure...it's just that the wizard's loo was a little smelly, and so..."

"Ron?"

"Yes Harry."

"When have you ever worried about smells in a loo?"

A toilet flushed before Ron could reply. A stall door opened and Luna walked out with a smile on her face.

"Good morning, Harry, Hermione," she said brightly. She then leaned over and gave Ron a peck on the cheek as she made her way to the wash basin.

"Thanks for waiting, Ronnikins," she chirped. "Anyone else need to go?"

"Erm, I'm good," Harry said with a smirk and a sidelong glance towards Ron.

"Me too," added Hermione, with a shake of her head.

"Right, then...we're off?" Ron asked, hoping to get out of this embarrassing situation as quickly as possible.

"Sure," Harry said. "Oh...wait." He reached into his knapsack and retrieved two packages. Handing them to Ron and Luna, he explained that they were the latest style of Clan Potter robes.

Luna smiled as she opened the package and held the dark maroon robe out in front of her. "They're lovely," she said, as she unfastened her old robes and let them drop to the ground. This left Luna clad in nothing more than sandals and a pair of bright red knickers that were emblazoned in the front with a gold crown, below which in big gold letters and all-caps was "WEASLEY."

"Bloody hell!" Ron exclaimed, as he stepped forward to cover his girlfriend in an embrace.

Harry dropped his eyes and began to inspect the lavatory floor. "Hey Ron, looks like you picked the right place to anchor our jump after all," he snarked.

"Erm, Luna...you do know that you can apply cooling charms to your robes, right?" Hermione asked.

Luna shrugged her shoulders as she pushed Ron away and casually pulled the new robes over her head. "Of course," she replied, as she ran her hands down the front of her new outfit. When her fingers got caught within a hidden seam Luna squealed in delight.

"You remembered!" she exclaimed. Luna ripped open the Velcro fastenings of a horizontal flap, exposing both her belly button and a fair bit of surrounding skin.

Harry looked up at the blonde-haired witch and smiled. "Well, we can't allow for any nargle nesting within Clan Potter, can we?"

Luna shook her head and turned to her boyfriend, who had just pulled his new robe over his Muggle t-shirt and jeans.

"Oh, good, you did the same bit of tailoring for Ronald," she observed. Luna then reached out and ripped open his robe's stomach flap. Without warning she pulled out her wand and exposed his belly with a bit of magical cropping.

"What'cha do that for, Luna?" Ron asked.

Luna paid no mind as she bent down and stuck her tongue into Ron's navel. She twirled it around for a few seconds (causing Ron to flinch and complain about being ticklish), then announced that she had completed her nargle inspection.

"Are we good to go, then?" Hermione asked.

Luna nodded. "Unless we have time for me to manually check for ants in his pants."

"Erm, how about later, Luv?" Ron asked meekly.

His girlfriend looked up at him and smiled. "Okay, but only if you promise to inspect me as well."

Ron's face grew even redder as Harry declared, "To much information!" He then showed the couple how to activate the mild notice-me-not charms that had been applied to the new robes. This allowed Ron to exit the woman's lavatory without becoming any more embarrassed than he already was.

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Luna had expressed an interest in the basilisk harvest, so they had met at the Three Broomsticks so that she (and Ron) could use the floo connection. Harry and Hermione could have just jumped directly into Hogwarts using Remus as an anchor, but there was safety in numbers, and the fifteen minute walk gave the two couples time to catch up. Luna spent most of that time talking about her Ministry internship. Her reward for being Harry's friend (and Slug Club party date) had been a menial posting within the centralized mailroom.

For ten hours a day, five days a week, Luna's job was to date spell incoming mail and route it to the correct Ministry department. The only other spell she was permitted to use was the flying memo incantation. Over the past few days, she had been successfully exploring just how much intent could influence this charm. As a result, rather than sending out simple airplanes, Luna was now creating flying origami swans, owls, and hippogriffs. Harry cheekily suggested that she turn the messages into paper thestrals, which would only be visible if the recipient had seen someone using common sense.

They found Horace Slughorn waiting for them at the gates of Hogwarts, intent on maximizing opportunities for fawning and face time with the Queen's Wizard and Potter Clan Chief. While Harry really wanted to turn the "notice-me-not" charm on high, he followed Hermione's lead and deactivated his robe warding. The Potions professor greeted everyone warmly, then proceeded to virtually ignore the others as he bent Harry's ear on the way to the second floor lavatory.

Remus was waiting for them with a small wooden cage in his hand and a large snake coiled at his feet.

"Good morning, Remus," Harry said cheerfully as he shook the werewolf's hand. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit wolfish around the edges," Remus admitted.

"I take it that the potion will be ready by tonight?" Harry asked, as he turned an eye towards Slughorn.

"Oh, of course, Clan Chief Potter," the potions master replied quickly. "I've got the cauldron on its final simmer."

"Good," Harry replied. He then squatted down and hissed a Parseltongue greeting towards the reptile.

While the two were conversing, Ron asked Hermione why there was a large snake in the lavatory.

"Harry got tired of jumping back and forth just to open the Chamber for them," Hermione explained. "So he summoned the snake and struck a deal for its services."

"What kind of services?"

Harry looked back over his shoulders towards Ron. "Horace and his buddy on the other side of the entrance can use snake speak to open and close the Chamber when I'm not here."

"How does the snake know when to open the door?"

Remus held up the small cage, displaying a unusually large rat inside the bars.

"The toll is one rodent per entrance."

Ron frowned. "Isn't that a bit too easy for just anyone who wants to go in?"

Harry chuckled. "It's only easy if the bad guys know Horace's unusual tastes." He nodded towards the cage that Remus was holding and explained, "We imported prairie dogs from Latin America...turns out Horace and his mate have a thing for Mexican food."

The snake bobbed its head up and down, flicked his forked tongue towards the cage and announced, "f'ssss likesss itsss sss-spicy."

Harry laughed as he translated the snake's comments to the others. He then politely asked Horace to open the Chamber entrance. The snake complied, then coiled under one of the adjacent wash basins with his early lunch.

The goblins had modified the sloped pipe that connected the lavatory to the Chamber with an eye towards comfort. The pipe interior was charmed to glow luminescent green, and alcoves had been dug into either side of the pipehead. Small carpets were piled on one side of the pipe, facing an ersatz toll booth from which a now sleeping snake could be enticed to open the entrance from the inside.

Remus showed the others how to lie down on one of the carpets and gave them the code phrase to start the ride. He said that the carpets were linked somehow, so as to avoid head-on collisions. Hermione smiled, and commented just how much it resembled a Muggle water park's tube slide. Remus then excused himself, citing the need to rest before nightfall.

The trip down the pipe was uneventful, save for Luna's impromptu decision to jump on top of her boyfriend and demonstrate that two could ride at the same time. The carpets took them well beyond the base of the pipe and ferried them laterally through the tunnels. They cruised past the cleared rock slide and stopped directly in front of the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. The head of the goblin engineering team was there, waiting to give them a tour.

Irongrip," Harry said, as he reached for the goblin's hand. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us this morning."

"No thanks are necessary, Clan Chief Potter," the goblin replied, "as we have business to complete now that our exploration efforts are complete."

Harry shook his head. "You know that I trust you to equitably divide the findings, Irongrip."

The goblin smiled. "Yes, Clan Chief, yet we must still pay respect to certain protocols, true?"

"If you say so."

The goblin engineer smiled, and then led the small group into the Chamber proper. The cavernous area looked the same to Harry as it had during his first trip, save for a ladder propped up against the statue's opened mouth and the wire fencing that surrounded the basilisk carcass. Slughorn's eyes fell immediately upon the dead basilisk, while the others took just a few moments to admire the architecture.

"Blimey, Harry," Ron exclaimed, as he walked up towards the fence. "This is what I missed tangling with Second Year?"

Harry snorted. "Doesn't look as big now that I've grown a bit myself."

The others chided Harry for his modesty as they marveled at the size of the giant serpent. Hermione buried her face into her boyfriend's chest, expressing words of wonder and regret that she hadn't been by his side during that fight. He reassured her that he wouldn't have had any idea what he was up against had it not been for the parchment message in her petrified hand.

When Ron commented that the basilisk didn't smell, and was amazingly well-preserved given the amount of time since its death, Slughorn informed them that basilisk flesh was so poisonous that maggots and other microscopic carrion wouldn't go near it. Hermione then noted that the basilisk flesh should have dried out even if nothing chose to eat it. When Slughorn nodded in agreement, the goblin jumped in and told Hermione that they had found some magic that might explain the preservation. They acknowledged Irongrip somewhat absently, their minds distracted by the potential price and horcrux-killing potency of fresh basilisk venom.

Harry suggested that they continue the tour and begin the harvest after lunch. The goblin engineer then led the group to one side of the statue, where a secret door had been discovered and unsealed. This doorway led into a small apartment that housed a small library filled with ancient works on Dark Magic. Hermione let out a predictable squeal as she ran to the bookshelves and began reading the titles. When Harry warned her to be careful, Irongrip reassured them that each book had been checked for wards and curses. The only charm that they had found on the books was one that prevented them from being taken from the room. The goblin told Harry that there a chance that this charm could be removed, but at serious risk to destroying the books in the process. Hermione's head jerked back towards Harry when she heard this, and gave him a look that reinforced his opinion that the books could be left well enough alone until she had taken a closer look.

Once the living area was fully explored the goblin took them up the ladder, through the statue's mouth, and into the basilisk's lair. The rough-hewn area was surprisingly clean and sparsely appointed. As the witches and wizards lit their wand tips they spied two large bowls...one filled with water, the other filled with bleached animal skeletons.

Hermione smiled. "I wondered how a forty-foot basilisk could survive for a thousand years with only a few mice to eat." Irongrip nodded, not surprised that the Clan Chief's Consort had identified the bowls' purposes.

"These bowls have strong ever-full charms applied to them so that Slytherin's pet would always have something to eat and drink."

Ron furrowed his eyebrows as he looked more closely at the skeletons. "What are those...dogs?"

"We believe that they are non-magical deer," the goblin replied.

"So whenever the basilisk pulled some dinner out of this bowl another deer was magically summoned?"

"Correct, Clan Champion."

"Would love to have a smaller one of these filled with mum's cooking," he replied with awe.

Slughorn asked about the ever-full bowl of water, speculating that it could have provided enough humidity within the Chamber to keep the basilisk carcass fresh. The goblin agreed with that idea.

At that point Ron took another look around the lair and asked, "So if the basilisk ate deer for dinner, where are all of the table scraps?"

The goblin gestured towards a small pit in a corner of the room. "That hole in the floor has a banishing charm applied to its base."

"Really?" Ron asked. "I suppose that the basilisk was potty-trained as well, and used that pit as a loo?"

The goblin showed his teeth in a broad smile when Hermione snarked, "Ronald, not all sentients are slobs."

Taking a glance down at his watch, Harry politely asked Irongrip if this was the extent of the tour. The goblin nodded, reached into his pocket, and pulled out the gemstones that they had pried from the Chamber's door.

"The two bowls and these stones are all of the treasure that we found, Clan Chief, unless you care to argue that the bowls are Slytherin relics."

Harry snorted in response. "Unless they're autographed by the wizard himself, their yours for the taking, Irongrip, and I'm sorry that your efforts failed to yield more than this."

It was the goblin's turn to snort. "Do not worry, Clan Chief...these bowls are rare, and more valuable than you might think."

"What, somebody has another basilisk that they need to feed?" Ron asked.

The goblin shook his head. "No, but Gringott's does employ protective devices with rather large appetites."

"The dragons down in the caverns," Harry concluded.

Irongrip nodded. "Right now they dine from ever-full bowls of beef and mutton...they will be very happy to have an expanded menu."

After agreeing to a fair-market value to the gemstones and bowls for the purposes of Harry's finder's fee, the goblin led them back down to the hidden quarters where they ate a picnic lunch prepared by the Palace. Irongrip then gathered the bowls and left for Gringott's while the others headed back towards the basilisk. After donning protective clothing from head to toe and getting a stern safety lecture from Slughorn, the five witches and wizards got on with the messy task at hand.

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1:30pm, The Rookery, London

Augustus Rookwood turned onto Shaftesbury Avenue and smiled. He could finally give a different answer to the one of the two questions that had been asked a dozen different times from the back seat.

"Are we there, yet?"

The former Unspeakable sighed. "Yes, Amycus, we are here."

"Can we eat, now?"

"No, business first," the Death Eater said firmly.

"But there's a pub right over there...take but a minute to pop in for a pint and some pie..."

"He said shut it!" Alecto screeched from the front passenger seat.

"Fine," the younger Carrow sibling mumbled.

Rookwood slowed down just a bit as they passed the front entrance to The Rookery. There wasn't anyone in front of the building. With the blare of a car horn from behind encouraging the Death Eater to move on, he then spent close to thirty minutes to find a parking space within a mile of their target.

The former Unspeakable sported a near-continuous scowl as they made their way back towards The Rookery by foot. The younger Carrow's hunger complaints were building on what had already been a horrid day. It had taken all morning to shuttle the safe house's other occupants to their assigned starting points for the night's attack, followed by a long drive into London with the Carrows. The only stop they had made was at a discount clothing store to replace their Muggle clothing. The original mismatched outfits had reeked to the point of gagging (which was saying something given the noisome tortures that Rookwood had participated in over the years). Without sufficient time or funds to dress them properly, Rookwood had been forced to purchase brightly colored casual wear for the two. They were quite a contrast to Rookwood's smartly tailored three-piece suit, but at least they were clean and internally consistent.

The senior Death Eater finally gave in to his companion's badgering and found a place to eat lunch. He wasn't surprised when the Carrows confidently stepped up to the counter and rattled off their orders; given the amount of fast-food wrappings that had littered the Bristol safe house it was clearly one part of the Muggle world that the two had embraced. The only hurdle to overcome was Amycus's outrage at finding the same toy in his Happy Meal that he'd collected the week before.

The Rookery was only a few minutes walk from the restaurant. As soon as they were within sight of the building, Rookwood pulled the other two to the side of the walkway, surreptitiously removed a rune stone from his pocket, and traced the runic character with his wand tip. He gripped the stone tightly and whispered an incantation. A sharp pain erupted inside Rookwood's head that spread out like twin daggers cutting out towards his eyes. He silently endured a few moments of excruciating torture before the pain subsided and he reopened his eyes.

The vision stone was one of the artifacts that Rookwood had managed to liberate from the Department of Mysteries before being outed as a Death Eater. It provided a limited form of mage sight that revealed and identified the more common types of protective wards. While Rookwood knew several diagnostic spells that could provide the same kind of information far less painfully, the stone's magic didn't trip the Ministry's magical sensors, and was therefore much more useful when one wanted to do a bit of quiet surveillance.

With this rune sight active the former Unspeakable paid close notice as they walked towards the Rookery. The anti-apparition charm was slightly off color, indicating that it was the variant that allowed certain people keyed into the ward to bypass it. There was a portkey suppression ward in place that appeared to be similarly modified, as well as standard Muggle repelling charms. Within the repelling ward, though, was something that Rookwood had never seen before.

His curiosity piqued, he stopped a half-block short of the front entrance and ordered Amycus to walk inside. It took a bit of arm-twisting from his sister, but the Death Eater finally agreed and made his way up to the front steps of the building. With Rookwood's rune sight active he watched as a separate repelling ward that he had earlier missed enveloped Amycus, only to magically push him away from the entrance. The Death Eater spun on his heels, and with a look of confusion on his face started to walk down the street away from the other two.

Rookwood swore quietly, then sent Carrow's sister off to retrieve him. He followed behind at a slower pace. As he passed by a building that was under repair Rookwood stopped by a bin of construction debris and picked up a hand-sized fragment of brick. He held the stone close to his side, trying to draw as little attention as possible as he tossed it up the stairs and into Rookery's front entrance.

The wards didn't bother to spit the brick fragment back out.

With a nod of recognition and an idea formed in his head, the former Unspeakable continued his stroll down the street. While it wouldn't have taken much effort to catch the Carrows, Rookwood maintained his rather sedate pace. So long as he could keep the other two Death Eaters within his sight, he was going to enjoy this bit of idiot-free solitude.

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Harry Potter was busy magically scraping off bits of flesh from the underside of the basilisk hide when he felt his Art Club badge vibrate. Not wanting to say too much in front of Slughorn, he turned towards Hermione, who was elbow deep in basilisk gizzard, and gave her a questioning look with a finger pointed towards his chest. She shook her head, indicating that her badge hadn't been activated. Harry nodded, and announced that he needed to take a break. It took a good five minutes for his protective clothing to be *Scourgified* and decontaminated to the point where he could strip down and gain access to his badge.

Making his way to the hidden living area, Harry took note that it was Mrs. Granger calling him.

"Harry," she said after their greetings, "we've got something you should take a look at down here at the Rookery."

"Lucius decide to go on a walk-about?" Harry asked.

"No, we had somebody trying to make an unauthorized entrance into the building, and then a minute later somebody decided to throw a brick up the stairs as they walked by."

"Really?" Harry asked. "Were they glamoured?"

"No, but the first bloke was wearing a cap low on his face, and the second one was sporting a rather nasty hairpiece."

"So maybe Muggle disguises...anything else you notice about them?"

"Just that a woman went chasing after the first guy once he left the front entrance, yelling out the name Amycus."

Harry covered his badge so that his swearing wouldn't reach Mrs. Granger's ears. He then told Emily that he'd join her in a few minutes, and made his way back into the Chamber.

"Got some Queen's Wizardry to attend to, I'm afraid," he announced. Ron and Hermione looked up with alarm. "Nothing immediate...just checking up on a few new visitors on Shaftesbury."

"Sure you don't need our help?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "Not right now...how much longer before we're done here?"

Slughorn looked up from his work and said that it would only be a few more hours. Harry nodded, and asked Hermione to ring him up once they were finished. Giving wide berth to the basilisk body hot zone, Harry made his way out of the Chamber and badge-jumped to London.

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3:30pm, Smithfield Market, Central London

Severus Snape stepped onto the curb with a thin wallet and thick scowl. Hiring the taxi had been an expensive but necessary luxury, given the lack of meeting place directions and his unfamiliarity with the area. His Death Eater comrades hadn't been any help, not that he was surprised...whether Light or Dark, wizards and witches had avoided this part of Central London for centuries. This was perhaps due to the fact that Smithfield had been, over the years, a favorite spot for Muggles to burn witches, behead heretics, and boil counterfeiters in oil.

The Potions Master looked up and down the street for before walking into the "Stake and Ale," a working-man's pub whose signage played up local history with an image of a pointy-hat witch within flames. The strong contrast between sunny street and darkened interior forced Snape to squint. As his eyes adjusted his nose took in strong scents of tobacco, beer, and raw meat, which he soon attributed to the burly patrons...meatpackers whose clothing still bore the stains and smells that came from working just down the street within the largest wholesale meat market in the world.

Snape scanned the room, then walked up to the bar in front of a portly, ham-fisted barmaid who was filling stout into a marginally clean glass.

"Right with you, Luv," she said with a smile.

The barmaid dropped the full pint glass in front of a patron and deflected a ribald comment as she took a few coins from the pile in front of him. After ringing up the sale, she returned to the wizard and asked, "What can I get you?"

Calling upon the self-restraint typically reserved for Dark Lords and First Years, Severus grimaced as he stated the pre-arranged recognition code.

"Do you serve warm milk?"

The request brought jeers up and down the bar. The barmaid waited for Snape before leaning over the bar towards Snape. Almost nose-to-nose with him she reached up and cupped her ample bosom with both hands.

“Aye, I do...will it be the left teat, or right?”

The approving roar of laughter from the other patrons drowned out Snape’s response, so that only the barmaid heard his reply.

“Madame,” he drawled, “won’t there be more of a selection tonight?”

The cheeky reply caught the barmaid by surprise. She couldn’t help but laugh as she nodded towards a small table at the back of the pub, then told her co-worker that she was going on break for a bit. There being little concern for hired help drinking on the job, the woman brought two pints of ale with her as she walked out from behind the bar and took a seat across from the Potions Master.

“Sorry for the bit of fun...this one’s on the house,” she said, placing the two glasses side-by-side in the center of the table. Snape looked at the glasses with suspicion, selected one, and placed his nose to the thin head.

“A bit cautious, eh wizard?” the woman asked, as she grabbed the other pint glass and brought it to her lips.

“Madame, it is the only way to live these days,” Snape replied, before taking a draw from his own glass.

“The name’s Maggie,” the woman replied. “Though most around here call me Mother.”

“I see little need for informality,” the Potions Master stated. He looked back towards the bar and asked, “Are you certain this is a secure location?”

“Of course,” the barmaid replied. “You’re likely the only wizard within a mile of this place, and a few of those blokes at the bar are my boys.”

Snape stared at the woman for a minute, before gazing back towards the bar. “Will they be in any condition to run with you tonight?”

Mother Maggie chuckled. “They’d need to be swimming in beer for them to notice once they transform. No worries, wizard...they’ll follow the Pack’s Alpha bitch.”

Severus frowned as he pulled a stoppered vial out from an inside coat pocket. “And with this wolfsbane, there’ll be no reason for you not to follow our Lord’s, lead, correct?”

The barmaid snorted as she pocketed the vial. “I’d follow my Pack-leader to my death, if he asked me. So long as Fenrir follows your wizard master, you can count on me.”

Snape sneered. “Were it my decision all of your Pack would be on wolfsbane and keeping their wits about them.”

“What makes you think they’d be so willing to kill were that the case?” Maggie asked. “Few within the Pack are as aggressive during the rest of the month.”

The Potions Master cast an appraising eye across the table. The woman before him struck him as closer in kind to Molly Weasley than Greyback. “I take it that you lack that...reticence?”

Maggie leered. “Wouldn’t be Fenrir’s Alpha if I didn’t.”

“And just how was it that Greyback chose a Muggle for his Alpha?”

The barmaid laughed. “Made the choice easy for him, wizard. I either killed or covered every other witch and bitch in the Pack.”

“Indeed?”

“Wasn’t all that hard,” Maggie said sarcastically. “Their magic’s no help when the moon is full...it’s the muscle that carries over into the night, and the lot of ‘em are weak-kneed daisies when their wolf isn’t with ‘em.”

Snape paused, then retorted, “Yes, well...just remember that others and I will be in the Alley as well...we won’t hesitate to cut you down if you or yours stray from your assigned tasks.”

The woman gave a Snape-worthy scowl as she rose from the table. “Don’t tempt me, wizard.”

Snape snarled. “You are certain of your target, then?”

Maggie snorted. “Yes, yes...look for the Diagon Alley shop with three big W’s over the entrance...”

“...and focus on anyone with red hair,” Snape added. “You have a secure entry point, I assume?”

Fenrir’s Alpha nodded. “We’ll be there,” she replied. “Did you drop enough breadcrumbs to ensure you’ll find the way back yourself, wizard?”

Snape nodded. Considering his mission accomplished, and the need to continue the banter diminished, he took a long sip from his glass. “The potion must be consumed no more than thirty minutes before tonight’s sunset.” He left before allowing the werewolf to reply.

It took a minute for his eyes to readjust to the daylight, and for him to get his bearings. Not that he really needed to...he’d be apparating into Diagon Alley that night. And if the werewolves did their jobs right, the Ministry would be too busy to care.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Officer and Gentleman, Part 2 (part 1)

Chapter 29 - Bad Moon Rising

*Saturday, July 7, 4:00pm
Thames House, Millbank, London*

Harry Potter badge-jumped from a hastily arranged meeting at Gringott's to a hastily arranged meeting at MI-5 headquarters. Having arrived in an otherwise empty conference room, he pulled his anchor point into an embrace.

"Time and place, Mr. Potter," Hermione chided, as she grabbed the front of his Clan Potter robe. "We need to get you changed and through the checkpoint."

"What, this isn't where we're meeting?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, we're just outside the first security point."

Harry muttered to himself as shed his wizard attire and rummaged through his rucksack for his suit jacket.

"And don't forget your Muggle holster," said Hermione. "We'll have to show them our handguns at the barrier."

"So why couldn't I just jump into the meeting room?"

"The Home Secretary claimed it might mess with the electronics."

Harry sighed as he looped his arms through his leather shoulder harness and switched his pistol from its magical holster to its Muggle counterpart. "More like the time-wasting idiot doesn't like the idea of us popping past all of his security layers."

"Harry, you can't call the Home Secretary an idiot."

"How about 'Right Honorable Idiot,' then?"

"Stop it," Hermione chided. She then noticed his rucksack and said, "Merlin, your bag is going to raise havoc with the x-ray machine."

The Queen's Wizard rolled his eyes. "Well, we can't have that....Dobby?"

The house elf appeared near-instantly. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir?"

"Will you hold my rucksack for a few minutes?"

Dobby nodded vigorously. "Of course Dobby can do that for the great Harry Potter, sir."

The two teen-agers emptied their pockets of magical metallic objects and placed them into Harry's sack, along with his sword and their wands (just to be safe). Dobby popped away as Harry buttoned his coat.

"I hate these Muggle holsters," Harry commented, as he fiddled with the straps. "They break the line of this jacket something terrible."

Hermione chuckled and grabbed his hand. "Let's go, Agent Clotheshound."

One of the Home Secretary's aides was waiting for them on the other side of the security barrier, which kept Harry from immediately retrieving his rucksack.

Hermione whispered as they walked down the hall behind the aide, "Don't you need to use the Men's before we get there?"

Harry shook his head.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked, as she mimed some wand movement.

Harry's eyes lit up, then narrowed as a devious-looking expression came over his face.

"We don't want to keep the Home Secretary waiting, do we?"

His girlfriend's eyes grew wide as she quietly said, "But I really think...."

The off-key tune that Harry began to softly whistle made it clear that he had other thoughts in mind.

They were shown into a conference room with floor-to-ceiling windows on one wall, a bank of video displays on the other, and laptops stationed in front of each conference room chair. The MI-5 chief and Home Secretary were there, while the Prime Minister and MI-6 chief were patched in from remote locations.

Hermione gave Harry a quick primer as he took a seat. "There's cameras built into the top of each computer screen," she said quietly. "Just talk to

the laptop as if you were talking to the P.M. and MI-6 chief.”

Harry nodded, then stood back up. “Excuse me, gentlemen.”

“What is it?” the irritated Home Secretary asked.

“Just need to retrieve our.....”

“Harry, no!” Hermione exclaimed, but not before he had called for his favorite House-Elf.

Dobby popped onto the conference room table directly in front of Harry. The Home Secretary cried out in shock at his first sight of a non-human sentient.

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir?” the House-Elf asked timidly, as he looked around the room.

“Don’t worry, Dobby, they all know about magic,” Harry said with reassurance.

“Oh, Dobby knows all about that, Harry Potter, sir,” the House-Elf replied. “They wouldn’t be able to see me if they didn’t....I have your bag right here, Harry Potter, sir.”

“Thanks, Dobby, you’re the best.”

“Agent Potter, exactly what is going on?” the Home Secretary demanded.

Harry gave Hermione a wink as he looked up and smiled. “Oh, I’m sorry, where are my manners?” He reached out and said, “Here, Dobby, have a seat.”

The Queen’s Wizard lifted the House-Elf off the table and set him down onto a chair. With Harry’s encouragement, Dobby sat up on his knees so that he could peer over the table’s edge and into the laptop’s camera. The black-haired wizard grinned as the image of his wide-eyed, pointy-eared devotee joined the Prime Minister’s on the video display. Dobby ducked down at the sight of his own face.

“Everyone, I’d like to introduce you to my good friend Dobby,” Harry announced, as he pulled the House-Elf back up. “Dobby, this is the Muggle Prime Minister, Home Secretary Chisholm, and Director Generals Hibbing and Eveleth.”

“Harry,” Hermione said, with a bit of admonishment in her voice. She grabbed the House-Elf’s arm in reassurance. “Don’t worry, Dobby,” she said, “you’re safe here.”

“Oh, I’m always safe next to the great wizard Harry Potter, Miss ‘Mione,” Dobby replied. Having noticed that his chair moved when he shifted his weight, he spun his chair around in a circle and cried out in delight.

“Harry Potter, Sir, the portraits, and this chair... I can’t see the magic within them?”

Harry laughed at the comparison between portraits and video displays and leaned down to whisper into Dobby’s ear. “It’s hard for me to see Muggle magic too.”

Hermione gave an impromptu primer on House-Elves and their role within wizarding society whilst Harry retrieved their wands and other objects from his rucksack. The Home Secretary and MI-5 chief found it difficult to divide their attention between Dobby and the seemingly bottomless pack, particularly when Harry withdrew his sword.

The Q&A on House-Elf slavery was interrupted when Hermione caught Harry pulling a candy out of his bag.

“Fancy a toffee, Mr. Home Secretary?”

“Harry...behave.”

“Yes, Dear, erm...I mean...yes, Agent Granger,” Harry replied. Taking this cue, Harry thanked Dobby for his help and the House-Elf popped away.

Hermione had already briefed the Prime Minister on the Death Eater sighting in front of the Rookery, as well as Lucius Malfoy and the nature of The Rookery itself. Harry’s job, then, was to report on his just completed meeting with Ragnok. The goblin had informed him that the Grand Council had told Voldemort where Malfoy was hiding. This had come as a surprise to Harry, although it explained why Rookwood and the Carrows had been seen scouting out the site.

“Sending messages to the enemy?” the Home Secretary muttered. “Making unilateral decisions without bothering to consult...are you sure that these goblins are your allies Potter?”

Harry tried to hide his contempt as Hermione diplomatically asked, “Mr. Home Secretary, is Her Majesty’s government unfamiliar with close allies that act unilaterally, or are less than forthright on certain matters that affect key bilateral relationships?”

The Prime Minister chuckled. “She’s got you there, Chisholm...Agent Potter, if you would continue?”

The Queen’s Wizard nodded, then noted that Ragnok was convinced that no harm could come to Muggles, as the building was warded against magical attack or entry, and had fire suppression charms applied to the exterior. When he mentioned that Rookwood had thrown a rock through the front entrance, Ragnok had replied that the wards protected any magically-aided physical attacks.

Harry spent fifteen minutes answering questions following his report. They were split between clarifications and confrontations; most of the rancor would have gone away had the Home Secretary bothered to read the reports provided to him.

With the Prime Minister insisting that proactive actions were more important than after action assessments, they moved on to their options.

“Just because we spied three of these wizard terrorists walking down the street...where’s the need to do anything, particularly if they’re hell-bent on killing one of their own?” asked the Home Secretary.

“With due respect, Home Secretary,” answered the MI-5 Chief, “they may have been a scouting party for a much larger force, and there’s more than a half-dozen theatres on Shaftesbury alone. With Piccadilly just down the road, and it being a Saturday night...”

“Exactly my point,” argued the Home Secretary. “They’ll have to cancel performances if we clear out the area. Think of the revenue they’ll lose.”

“They’d lose far more if Sir Harry is right and there’s an attack that kills off a few dozen tourists,” argued the MI-6 Chief.

“And what if he’s wrong?”

The Prime Minister stated, “Chisholm, after Ascot the Queen’s Wizard could issue a dozen false alarms and still be on the positive side of the ledger.”

“So you say.”

“Exactly,” the Prime Minister replied. “And as I’m the one spending my weekend at Chequers and not you, I dare say that’s good enough.”

With that decision quite emphatically made, a plausible mechanism was quickly developed to evacuate the area surrounding the Rookery, both to limit injuries and minimize the need for obliviator squads. They then argued over cooperating with the Auror Department. The initial position was for no Ministry of Magic involvement, before Harry and Hermione convinced the others that going it alone would likely reveal the extent of MI-5’s knowledge and operations both to the Death Eaters and the Ministry of Magic.

“You trust the Head Auror, don’t you Agent Potter?” the Prime Minister asked. “Why don’t you arrange for a meeting, and set something up with him?”

“Yes Sir,” Harry replied. He scribbled out a quick message, then turned to the tinted exterior windows and scowled.

“Don’t suppose you can open these?” he asked.

When the MI-5 chief shook his head, Harry sighed and rummaged through his rucksack. Finding his portable hole, he tossed it up against the floor-to-ceiling windows. A rush of air came through the opening, upsetting the piles of paper stacked on the table.

“Now see here, Agent Potter!” the Home Secretary yelled.

Harry ignored him as he called out for his familiar. A few seconds later Hedwig glided gracefully through the hole and took a perch on top of Harry’s laptop display.

“What in blazes?” the Home Secretary demanded.

No mind was paid to this ranting as Harry ran his fingers through Hedwig’s feathers, then carefully tied his message to her leg.

“Another good friend of yours?” the MI-5 chief asked.

Harry nodded. “Hedwig was my first real friend, weren’t you girl?”

His familiar bobbed her head up and down.

“Take this to Head Auror Robards straight away,” he instructed. “You know the safe place, right?”

His familiar bobbed her head again, then turned and launched herself back through the window hole. As Harry walked over to retrieve his portable hole with a touch of his wand, the Home Secretary snarked, “So do you have any other creatures at your beck and call, Potter?”

Harry fumed, wanting desperately to hex the nitwit politician, but managed to hold his tongue with the support of Hermione’s comforting grasp of his arm.

Unfortunately, he didn’t think to return the favor.

“Dobby is a sentient magical being, and no more of a creature than you are...Sir,” Hermione scolded.

“Agent Granger, I’ll have you mind your impertinence!” he yelled.

“And I’ll have you mind your boorish bigotry, Chisholm,” the Prime Minister demanded. He then calmly added, “Agent Potter, once this immediate crisis is past I think we would all enjoy an opportunity to spend some more time with your magical friends...wouldn’t we Chisholm?”

The Home Secretary managed a curt nod in reply.

Harry smiled. “Dobby will be thrilled, though we’ll be hard pressed not to have him cook for the occasion.”

“Wonderful,” the Prime Minister replied. “I’ll be returning presently to 10 Downing Street. Agent Potter, would it be possible to secure the services of one of your Order of Arthur members this evening? I dare say that we would benefit from Dame Hermione’s input as a member of my crisis committee.”

Harry smiled as Hermione let out a surprised “Eeep!”

“Hermione need not gain my permission, sir,” Harry replied. “And as our employer and Prime Minister, we are all at your command.”

“Brilliant,” the Prime Minister replied.

“But Harry...who will be watching your back?” Hermione whispered.

“No worries, Hermione, you and all the others are just a badge-jump away.”

“Are you sure?”

Harry forgot where he was and kissed Hermione’s forehead.

“Absolutely.”

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5:30pm, Soho, London

Rookwood had run out of ways to unobtrusively kill time before the attack. It had to be fate’s payback for not doing his pure-blooded duty to procreate.

Riding up the escalators at Marks and Spencers had held the siblings’ interest before Amycus got caught trying to peek up of the skirt of a woman riding down. Lasted almost an hour at Trafalgar Square feeding pigeons, before Alecto caused a stir arguing with a birdseed-selling hag. And then there was the cinema, where he had failed miserably in his attempts to keep the Carrows from yelling at the screen as if the characters could hear them. Running out of options and money, the senior Death Eater had resorted to driving around London; while it didn’t make his colleagues any less annoying, it minimized the amount of attention that they drew to themselves.

Traffic was rather heavy as the former Unspeakable made his way back towards the Rookery, and came to a complete stop about a quarter-mile away from the spot he’d selected as a staging ground for their assault. Rookwood began to worry when he heard sirens up ahead, and reached over to change the radio station for the news.

“Oy, I was listening to that show,” Alecto complained.

“Like you plan on gardening any time soon,” her brother snapped.

Just then Rookwood dialed into an ongoing radio newscast.

“...details provided as soon as practical. To repeat the hour’s top story, Metropolitan Police have evacuated a portion of London’s West End after an unattended motorcar was discovered loaded with cans of petrol. The shut down of Shaftesbury Avenue from Piccadilly Circus to Charing Cross Road has led to the cancellation of the night’s theatrical performances at venues within the affected area...”

The former Unspeakable swore loudly.

“What’s the matter, Rookwood?” Amycus asked from the back seat. “You were planning on taking us to a show as well?”

“No, fool,” Rookwood snarled. “The Muggles have blocked off the streets around Malfoy’s building... somebody might have tipped off the Aurors.” He didn’t vocalize his opinion that the goblins were no doubt playing both sides.

“So what do we do now?” Alecto demanded.

Augustus let out a deep sigh as he pulled his small vehicle in a tight U-turn. Pulling away from the stalled traffic, he replied, “We move on to Plan B.”

“What’s Plan B?”

“The other plan, of course.”

“Oh. So what does ‘B’ stand for?”

Rookwood sighed. He was tempted to say “Im-B-cile”, but doubted that the idiots would get the joke. And so he went with a coincidental truth.

“B stands for broomsticks.”

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While Augustus Rookwood searched for a parking garage, Harry and Wally walked into the Muggle street entrance of the Leaky Cauldron with a wheeled trunk in tow. An Auror was stationed just inside the door next to a sign announcing that the street entrance was closed until further notice. The Queen’s Wizard gave the Auror the proper password, then walked up to the bar.

"Afternoon, Tom, I'd like to introduce you to Wally. He's a friend of mine."

"Nice to meet you, Tom."

"Nice to meet you Wally," the bartender replied. "You two share Muggle tailors or something?"

Harry snorted as he looked down at his bright yellow jacket, bullet-proof vest (the AK-resistant variety was still in its production stage), and dark combat fatigues.

"It's all part of the problems that the Muggles are having down the street...sorry that we had to shut down that entrance."

"No matter, Harry... hardly anyone's come through that side all summer."

Harry nodded as he placed a small bag of galleons onto the bar. "Well, here's enough to cover any business that you might be losing." When Tom raised an eyebrow and tried to push the pile back he added, "Consider it an advance on food and drink for the Aurors who might pass by here tonight."

"Might not be enough, then, if you want to give Mad-Eye an open tab," the toothless bartender replied. "Speakin' of which...he's waiting for you in the back room."

"Thanks Tom," Harry replied. He shook the bartender's hand and wheeled his trunk to one of the Leaky Cauldron's private rooms. The door opened just as Harry tried to knock, and a wand tip was jammed up close to his face.

"Where were you when I was stuffed inside a box?"

"Which time?" Harry asked with smirk. "My fourth year, when Barty Crouch Jr. passed as your double, or last month, when we fought Dementors on the infield of Ascot?"

Mad-Eye squinted at Harry with his one good eye, then turned his attention to Wally.

"You!" he exclaimed. "What in Merlin's name can I ask you?"

Wally looked at the reinstated Auror and winked. "Well, you could ask me out for a drink...The Stag's got two-for-one appetizers after nine tonight."

Mad-Eye sputtered and took a couple of steps back, allowing the two Secret Agents to enter the room.

"Don't think you need to challenge me, Potter?" Moody asked.

Harry shook his head and quipped, "Only the real Mad-Eye Moody would get all flustered at the thought of drinks with Wally at The Stag."

The reinstated Auror accepted Harry's logic with a scowl, then introduced his four-person Auror team, who were sitting around a table dressed in battle robes.

"Potter?" one asked incredulously. "And a Muggle? What are they doing here?"

"Pipe down," Mad-Eye barked, as he added a couple more layers of sound-proof spell work to the door and walls. "He's here because the Head Auror asked him to be here. The Muggles have spotted some Death Eaters, and Wally, here...for better or worse...is their go-between with the Auror Department."

"Erm...thanks for that kind introduction," said Wally. He opened the trunk and helped Harry pass out briefing documents and maps.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Wally said, as he fished a card from his wallet. "In case you have any concerns, I am a card-carrying Muggle employed by Her Majesty's Government. At approximately 1:45pm this afternoon, Muggle police officers used these pictures to identify Augustus Rookwood, Alecto Carrow and her brother Amycus on a street located a few blocks away from here."

"Really?" someone asked. "And how would Muggles know what they looked like?"

Harry replied, "One of things I've done as Queen's Wizard is make sure that the Muggle police have photographs of all wanted Death Eaters." He then added, "It's not the first time that the Muggles have been asked to help the Auror Department."

"Sure it's them, then?"

Harry nodded. "You can see in the Muggle photographs that they tried to disguise themselves a bit, but the witch called out to her brother, and Amycus is a pretty rare given name in the Muggle world."

"So they were spotted walking down the street," said another Auror. "Are they still there?"

Harry shook his head. "They seemed to be paying attention to one of the addresses on this street. It's a wizard building with active wards, so the Muggles don't know anything about what's inside."

Mad-Eye jumped in. "Those three will be back sometime, and they've spooked the Muggles enough for them to create a fake emergency and clear out all of the Muggle neighbors."

Wally nodded, and pointed to the established perimeter on the map. He told the group that the only people that should be within the zone were Muggle security forces. He then passed out some garishly-colored clothing that would paradoxically allow the wizards to blend in.

"Might as well paint a target on your back," Mad-Eye muttered, as he held a neon-yellow sleeveless jacket up for closer inspection.

"These tabards will identify you as authorized private security personnel," Wally explained. "Your presence within the secured zone won't be questioned with these on."

"What do you mean private security forces?" an Auror asked.

"Certain shops and buildings have their own security forces independent of the government," Wally explained.

"Like the trolls inside Gringott's?"

Mad-Eye said, "That's right, you lot are trolls tonight... explains why I picked you ugly bastards."

Harry thought the laughter that followed this slur was a good sign that these Aurors had worked together before, and trusted Moody to lead them.

"What's with the heraldry?" another Auror asked, as he inspected the Queen's arms emblazoned on one breast and a red griffon on the other.

Wally pointed to the griffon on one of the vests and replied, "The Muggle governmental program that has private security forces supporting the Yard during suspected terrorist activity is called Project Griffin."

"Muggles know about griffins, then?"

Harry shook his head. "Just as imaginary story tale creatures. As for the other side, well that's where each of private businesses puts their logo."

"And since nobody knows any better, you gentlemen will be inserted within the evacuated area as security guards for the target building, saying that it belongs to the Muggle Queen."

One of the Aurors nodded, then asked, "Rules of engagement?"

"Kill'em before they kill you," Moody replied simply.

Wally added, "We'll do our best to keep the area free of Muggle spectators. The streets are barricaded, and we've even built three-story tall screens to keep the gawkers from getting an eyeful. That said, the less fireworks you cause, and the less you wave your wands about, the easier it will be for us to preserve the wizarding world's secrets."

"Speaking of which," Harry said, "I understand that there might be other card-carrying Muggles working in the area, so I don't want anyone to be obliterated without first asking for identification and clearing it with Mad-Eye or me, understood?"

There were head nods all around. Harry inspected the jackets and Wally offered fashion tips as the Aurors transfigured their robes. The combined group then left the pub to scout out observation posts with views of the Rookery. They didn't notice (or at least didn't make mention of) the Armored Personnel Vehicle that pulled up behind them as they turned onto Shaftesbury Avenue, or the MI-5 ¾ agents that piled out to establish an armed guard post directly across from the entrance to the wizarding world.

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10:00pm
Broadstreet Pedestrian Mall
Reading, Berkshire

Marcus Flint let out a little cheer when he heard Big Ben chime the hour on the radio station. That he heard the bells rather than a BBC report that the clock had been damaged meant that the attack was still on. It also meant that he could take the annoyingly uncomfortable ear buds out and ditch the Muggle electronic device.

Flint drew his wand and with little concern for witnesses yelled "*Imperio!*" The curse hit an attractive Muggle woman in the back, and she fell completely under his control. At Marcus's suggestion, she pulled her wallet out her purse and handed it over with a smile, a grope, and an open-mouthed kiss.

Cursing the fact that he didn't have time to offer her more "suggestions," the Death Eater direct-sight apparated down the street to an outdoor restaurant. His "*Accio* billfolds" and "*Accio* wallets" spells were powerful enough to rip through the trouser pockets and handbags of the bistro's dinner patrons; a quickly conjured shield kept Marcus from being pelted by the leather goods. He gathered the wallets and billfolds into an empty rucksack, then fired a *Reducto* at an enraged diner. Flint apparated away before the dead man's body hit the ground.

The Death Eater reappeared two blocks further down the street, where moviegoers were exiting a cinema and flooding onto the sidewalk. He cast repeated clothes banishing and knee-reversal hexes, thinking it quite funny when the same Muggle was afflicted by both spells. Wishing to leave the scene with a bang, *Incendio* spells were sent towards two different parked cars, setting them aflame.

Two and one-half minutes after hurling his first spell, the Death Eater left the chaos he had created and disappeared to a preplanned rally point.

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News of the attacks in Reading and several other cities reached Harry and Mad-Eye at the same time (by mobile phone and Patronus respectively).

"We've been called back to base," Mad-Eye told Harry, as they conferred within their observation post. "Expect we'll be chasing down Death Eaters and their damage all night."

Harry nodded. "You realize that it could just be a diversion."

The reinstated Auror replied, "Aye, but I also realize that you've got armed Muggles watching us watch that building...think that you can handle yourselves if Rookwood does show?"

Harry nodded, thinking about where the other Art Club members were and whether they could be called on in a pitch.

"Take care, then, Mad-Eye, and..."

"Constant Vigilance!" they shouted at each other, before Moody disappeared.

Harry called for his MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ colleagues to return to the forward locations that they'd vacated in advance of the Aurors. He then badge-called Hermione, who was with the Prime Minister, and asked her to mobilize the Clan Air Force. Checking in with the other Art Clubbers, he worried about Hermione's mum and dad, who were guarding the Leaky Cauldron exit. He then looked towards the Rookery, and the setting sun behind it. All too soon he'd need to break out his night vision goggles, and worry about those creatures that roamed only at night.

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Men and women entered the small blind alleyway within Knockturn Alley in ones and twos, all linked by fate and choice to the Pack, and to the Alpha bitch that emerged from a hidden passageway to the Muggle world.

Maggie smiled as she surveyed the small crowd. The wolf within each person was strong enough to acknowledge her dominance, and their eyes were all cast downward. The Alpha took particular joy at the sight of the former Alpha, whose neck still bore the scratch marks from her previous efforts to regain dominance.

The buxom Were lifted the witch's chin with her hand and said, "Hello there, luv, fancy another go?"

The Beta shook her head.

"Sure, then?" Maggie asked. "You see, it's just that we've a busy night...no time for me to cover you." A nasty idea came into Molly's head, and she added, "Unless we do it now?"

The Alpha suddenly twisted the Beta's head around and violently threw her down onto all fours. Molly then jumped down onto the witch's back and ground her skirt-covered crotch into the witch's backside. The others joined her in a bit of raucous laughter, but Molly didn't belabor the point. After only a few seconds she stood and pulled the other woman back up to her feet.

"Tonight," Molly announced, "we run in two packs. Our Alpha is in Devonshire with the others. You will be following my lead. As you can see from our starting point, we have a rather target-rich environment."

Maggie waited for a few laughs and comments to pass before continuing. "Our Alpha and I have wolfsbane in our blood, so that our Pack can run where the Dark Lord wishes us to roam. Don't even think of straying from my tail, or I'll hamstring you myself. Any questions?"

When nobody replied, Maggie nodded and began to unbutton her blouse. "Right then, time for 'Kibbles 'n Bits'."

The others followed her lead and stripped off their clothing, showing little concern for modesty. The clothes, wands, and other possessions were stuffed into satchels and quietly gathered by a few unafflicted friends and spouses...a Pack auxiliary, of sorts, that would watch over these personal effects and redistribute them in the morning.

The sight of a dozen naked men and women casually chatting and comparing scars and body art was unnerving to the witches and wizards that passed by the darkened side-alley. Smart enough to put two and two together, they quickly spread the word and cleared off the streets. While a few trusted the security of spell-reinforced doorways, the vast majority of Knockturn Alley's residents decided that there were better places to be that night, and utilized the floo network for an uncoordinated mass exodus. In doing so, they unwittingly aided the coordinated efforts of dozens of Death Eater sympathizers, who began flooding *en masse* from one location to another just as the sun set.

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Rookwood welcomed nightfall on the top level of a South Bank car park. The former Unspeakable grinned as he drew his wand and casually cast a stinging hex towards Amycus Carrow.

"Bloody Hell!" the Death Eater cried. "What was that for?"

"Been wanting to do that all day," the former Unspeakable said with a smile. "Now draw your wands and get to work."

They used shrinking and featherlight charms to convert their Mini and three other parked cars down into pocket-sized toys. Each grabbed a miniature car (with Rookwood also grabbing the Cooper) and disappeared.

The three Death Eaters reappeared in Diagon Alley, just outside of Quality Quidditch Supplies. The scene was chaotic...people were running

about, stray spells were cast, and the air was thick with smoke. Looking down the street, Rookwood could just barely make out the Apothecary and Potions Supply where Snape's team of Death Eaters were busy looting and terrorizing. They walked inside the shop, where Death Eaters were busy bundling brooms while the shop owner was held at wand point.

The former Unspeakable was forced to duck as a green-colored spell shot towards him. "Hold your fire, you Muggle-loving fools!" he cried out.

"Rookwood?" the crew chief asked.

"Of course I'm Rookwood."

"Sorry," the Death Eater said. "I didn't recognize you without your mask on."

Augustus began wondering whether it was his lot in life to babysit all of the stupid Dark Wizards as he approached the crew chief.

"Report!"

"Mission going according to plan," the Death Eater replied. "Except that the owner here won't deactivate the anti-theft wards on his brooms."

Rookwood rolled his eyes. "And so, what's the Death Eater standard operating procedure for this situation?"

"Erm..."

"Merlin, are you a Dark wizard or not?" Rookwood walked up to the shop owner, pointed his wand and said *Imperio* !

"Oh, right, forgot we could do that now."

Rookwood didn't have time to snark back at the idiot. He commanded the shop owner to remove the anti-theft charms on three of his fastest brooms while he gave further instructions to his colleagues.

"You've got your portkey maker working?"

The crew chief nodded and pointed towards a corner of the store where a single wizard was busy creating portkeys to various destinations from a stack of quidditch gloves.

"Don't bother bringing the shop owner along if you need to leave before he's finished," Augustus said. "We can't have him casting his spells once we've arrived at the safe houses."

The crew chief nodded. "Where are you off to then?"

Rookwood lost his patience and cast a *Crucio* on the crew chief. He only held it for a few seconds before encouraging the Death Eater to remember his place and worry about his own mission. He then took the three brooms and looked for his colleagues.

"Amycus, what in Merlin's name are you doing?"

"Always wanted some of these," the Death Eater replied sheepishly, a box of snitches in his hand.

"Leave the bloody things, take these brooms, grab your useless sister, and follow my lead...we've got to move on."

The younger Carrow reluctantly dropped the box, picked up the brooms and threw one towards his sister. The three then flew out of the front entrance and up into the night.

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Fred and George were monitoring the Death Eater attacks from the rooftop of their shop when their Art Club badges lit up.

"Emergency Alert," Wally cried out. "Visual contact with werewolves running in Diagon Alley, heading towards the Twin's Shop...Fred, George, do you copy?"

The Twins froze, and briefly traded looks of panic before their training kicked in. Fred ran towards the stairs while George leaned out over the roof and replied, "Copy that Wally, we've got ten or twelve heading up the street."

"What's your status?" Wally asked.

"I'm on the rooftop. George just ran downstairs to set out our welcome mat. Katie and Alicia have been trying to mobilize with the CAF, but someone's cast an anti-app ward and the floo network is down."

"Understood," said Harry. "Fred, get everybody up on the roof, and don't be afraid to call for help."

George cut in. "Roger that, Clan Chief, we're..."

The rest of her response was lost as the building shook with a loud "BANG!"

"Upstairs, now!" George cried out to the girls, as he barreled up the stairs and into the first floor apartment.

Fred called down from the roof hatch, "Oi...grab the brooms on the way up."

George yelled back his acknowledgment as he pointed his wand towards the apartment door. With the sound of howls and crashes traveling up the stairwell, he quickly threw up a few sealing wards, then ran down the hallway and into the apartment's two bedrooms.

"So, brother, where's your broomstick?" George yelled.

"Check under my bed," Fred yelled back.

"Found it," George replied, as he stepped back into the hallway. He ran towards the base of the stairs, then noticed that it had gone quiet below him.

"Reckon our traps got them all?" he asked, as he walked up the stairs.

"Would be nice to think so," Fred replied. They then heard a series of loud howls.

"Then again..." George yelled, as he rushed up towards his twin and helped him secure the roof hatch.

"I guess it's too much to hope that they stay down there and finish off our dinner?" Fred asked.

George nodded. "Don't think we cooked the steaks rare enough."

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The Beta had hung well back within the pack as the Alpha led them down the Alley and into Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. She had watched with reluctant admiration as the Alpha broke down the doorway, only to turn on a sickle and gloat when some sort of trap was sprung and the floors transformed into alligator-infested swamps. She and three others stopped short of the entrance and watched as their brothers and sisters battled the muddy reptiles, and was beginning to think about jumping into the fray for her share of dinner when a silvery mist appeared within the shop that caused her to cough violently and back away from the door.

The werewolf's nostrils burned from inhaling the colloidal silver solution that had been sprayed from ceiling-mounted sprinkler heads as a light mist... to the point where she could no longer pick up the Alpha's scent. Sensing her chance, she turned to the other three pack-members and quickly asserted her dominance (as they too had experienced an impaired sense of smell). Deciding that there were better places to hunt, the Beta led the other three werewolves on a dead run down Diagon Alley.

The Auror that had been guarding the Muggle entrance to the Leaky Cauldron chose a particularly bad time to poke his head into the Alley. The Beta werewolf smelled him through the thick clouds of smoke and struck with a leap of more than twenty feet. She viciously ripped out the Auror's throat, then scampered inside the abandoned pub.

The Beta ferreted out the Muggle exit by the faint smell of prey and she crashed the door with her Pack mates close behind. Her momentum carried the werewolf not just through the door, but across the sidewalk and into the street, where she slid into the side of a vehicle. Almost instantly the werewolf felt the sting of a bullet as it struck her thigh. With a snarl and surge of energy she bolted down the street, somehow managing to avoid a hail of bullets.

Her Pack-mates weren't as lucky. Roger and Emma Granger's high-velocity silver bullets struck their canine skulls in precise groups of three, and they fell before they could cross the street.

Hermione's parents kept their semi-automatic rifles trained on the carcasses, though if truth be told it was due more to their shock than training. A cry from the site commander shook them out of the moment, and they followed his orders to climb into the car and chase after the escaped werewolf.

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Harry Potter struggled to maintain his composure as the reports of Death Eater attacks came in from both his Art Club badge and MI-5 ¾ earpiece. It seemed as if the only place that had yet to be hit was the Rookery – the one location where they had anticipated a strike that evening.

Tonks had reported that the Death Eaters were busy in Hogsmeade, St. Mungo's and at least three different places within Diagon Alley. She had been ordered by the Auror Department to hold at Hogwarts in case the Hogsmeade attack was expanded. Fred and George were, at the moment, trapped within their shop with Katie and Alicia. Ron and his family had used his mum's medical emergency portkey to escape from the Burrow just before it was overrun by werewolves.

Like Fred and George, Ron had chosen not to badge-jump and leave behind those with less viable means of escape. Not that his wand wasn't needed where he was now...the portkey had dumped Ron, Ginny, their parents, Bill and Fleur right into the middle of a fire fight at the wizarding hospital's admittance desk. Harry hadn't heard from them in the last couple of minutes, and was beginning to worry.

Hermione rang his badge-phone. "Harry," she said, "we've got a report of possible Dementor activity in Inverness from one of our Muggleborns," she said.

"Blast!" he exclaimed. They got hold of Tonks, who reported that the Aurors had gotten a similar report, but were stretched too thinly to respond.

"Stretched too thinly?" Harry snorted. "Let me guess, half the force is out obliterating Muggles while the other half is guarding the Ministry, which is presently *not* under attack."

Actually, it sounds like a bit more than half are still at the Ministry," Tonks replied.

"Right, I've got to go," Harry concluded. He called Wally, arranged to have Sir Evan badge-jump to the Rookery as a potential anchor, then apparated up to the Scottish Highlands (ignoring his lack of license and conventional wisdom regarding distance limitations for wizard apparition).

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In the stairwell below the Twins' defensive positions, Fenrir's Alpha gathered what strength she had left, and considered both her options and her sorry state of health.

The alligators had been an annoyance. While not a threat, the reptiles had taken time to dispatch, and then to digest (as her Pack found them to be rather tasty). But then the room began to fill with a cloud of poisonous gas. She had managed to hold her breath long enough to find a stairwell filled with sweet air.

The werewolf then vomited up a bit of alligator meat.

Once she was done retching, she look back into the room and howled in dismay. Those that had followed her into the shop had all fallen prey to the gas cloud.

The Alpha's lament was quickly followed by an angry howl for revenge, and she bounded up the stairs. The door at the head of the stairs resisted her initial attack, but splintered on the second and smashed opened on the third. She lept into the apartment above the shop and took a moment to seek out her prey. The werewolf reflexively sniffed for human scents, only to wince as air rushed into her silver-damaged nasal passages. Although the apartment was empty, there were recent scent trails everywhere, with one leading up another set of stairs.

The werewolf howled in recognition, dashed up the stairs and slammed into the closed roof hatch. The barrier held, and she bounced backwards halfway down the stairs. She gathered herself, and prepared for a second assault.

On the other side, Fred and George looked at each other with alarm.

"Think it's time to ask for help?" asked George.

"I think it's time we learn how to create portkeys," Fred replied.

George nodded, activated his badge, and yelled the Order of Arthur's ancient rallying cry.

"CLARENCE!"

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Hermione Granger heard the cry from her station within the Emergency Command Centre deep underneath 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister and his senior security ministers heard it as well, as she was presently huddled with them in front of video displays showing the carnage at different attack points.

"Mr. Prime Minister?" she said anxiously as she drew both pistol and wand.

The leader of Great Britain turned towards her and gave a curt nod.

"Go!"

She disappeared almost before the permission had left the Prime Minister's lips.

She reappeared just in time to fire her handgun at a werewolf.

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The Alpha fell into a pool of her own blood. Lacking the strength to raise her head, the last blurry images registered by her lupine brain came through cock-eyed:

A woman holding a smoking gun in her trembling hand...

Four others trying to console the woman....

An old man who appeared out of thin air and cautiously walked towards the Alpha with a gun in his hand...

That gun being raised towards her head....

A trigger being pulled.

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Sir Evan of Eastleigh didn't need to look down as he reloaded his handgun with a clip of silver slugs. This allowed him to keep his eyes on the beast as he cautiously walked backwards towards the group of teen-agers.

"Alright, there Dame Hermione?" he asked.

The trembling witch only sniffed as she followed Sir Evan's lead and loaded a full clip into her handgun.

"How many shots?" he asked.

Hermione dumped the old clip out into her hand.

"Five left, seven fired," she replied, half wondering why he had asked.

"Hermione?" Fred asked. "What do we do now?"

The Weasley Twin's question brought the bushy-haired teen back to reality.

"One of you should badge-jump to Tonks...she's still at Hogwarts. Sir Evan and I will stay back in case..."

"Is Hogwarts under attack?" Fred asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Ask the Headmistress to make a portkey. Once you get one, use me as an anchor and return. Then Alicia and Katie can portkey to Hogwarts and apparate out from there."

"What about us, then?" asked George.

Hermione softly replied. "Harry is off hunting Dementors by himself in Inverness."

"Right, then, Fred you get the portkey and I'll go help Harry now."

Fred disagreed, which forced a quick game of rock-parchment-wand. George got his way, so it was Fred that called Tonks to arrange badge-transit to Hogwarts.

The elderly Muggle wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulder as the Twins kissed the girls and disappeared into the night.

"Sir Evan," she said, "thanks for finishing the job."

The gray-haired warrior nodded. "We'll have a talk over tea when this is done, right?"

Hermione looked at Sir Evan with an empty stare and nodded.

"You should get back to Prime Minister," he said.

Hermione looked around.

"Sure you'd be okay here by yourself?"

Sir Evan grinned as he pulled a hip flask from a jacket pocket and nodded his head towards Alicia and Katie. "But I wouldn't be by myself, would I? Me and two lovely ladies, up on a roof with a bit of whisky..."

Hermione snorted. "Always the frisky one, aren't you Sir Evan?"

The elderly knight smiled "'Tis the secret to a long and happy life."

Secret Agent Granger pursed her lips into an almost-smile as she thought about her boyfriend's morning trip into her naughty memories. "Well if that's the case, then Harry will live to be 300."

"There you go," Sir Evan said, glad to see that she had begun to break out of her shock. "Now go give the Prime Minister my regards."

Hermione nodded, thanked him again for his help, then disappeared into the night, using Wally's badge as a bridge back to 10 Downing Street.

As soon as he was gone, Sir Evan turned serious. "We need to clean up the site," he told Katie and Alicia. "Eight shell casings and eight slugs. I don't want any evidence lying about that anyone used a gun here tonight, right?"

The two witches nodded, understanding the implications of Hermione firing a Muggle gun, even if it was against a werewolf. They used *Accio* spells to retrieve the bullet fragments, going so far as to magically extract the bloody slugs from the werewolf's body. Katie then lightened the corpse and refigured it into a small book, which Sir Evan placed inside his coat pocket. Alicia then followed up by banishing the blood and repairing the roof hatch.

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Sir Evan's actions within Diagon Alley kept him from spotting broomstick-riding Death Eaters as they hovered in a small group above The Rookery.

"So what floor is it, Guv'nor?" Amycus called out.

Rookwood replied. "I don't know, but I'd guess it's one of the two flats that are still lit up."

"So which one do we hit?" Alecto cackled.

The former Unspeakable paused, then said, "We go after the top one first. If Malfoy's not there, we'll just use *Reducto*'s to smash our way through the floors, layer by layer."

That decision made, the three enacted the next stage of Plan B. The Death Eaters flew at top speed towards the target flat's balcony, threw the miniaturized cars towards it, then canceled the shrinking and featherlight charms. Tightly banked turns kept the three out of harm's way, as the full-sized vehicles, now propelled only by inertia and gravity, struck the building at close to 150 km/hr.

Were it not for the fact that they were Muggle-hating wizards, Harry would later imagine they had been inspired by Arnold Schwarzenegger and *Terminator 1*.

The impacts blew large portions of the structure inward, and left the three cars with their boots hanging free and unsupported. Rookwood circled back around, then led the other two through the widest opening and into the flat. They dismounted their brooms and picked their way through the different rooms, looking to see if they'd gotten lucky and killed Malfoy in the crash. The only sign of life (or former life) was in a bedroom, where the ceiling had collapsed and buried someone in their bed. As only a foot was visible underneath the pile of rubble, the former Unspeakable ordered the other two to help him levitate debris off of the pile.

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"I don't care what you think about what you are seeing," Wally barked into the radio. "Just tell me, in plain terms, what's happening inside that building."

The spotter shook his head as he lifted his binoculars back up to his eyes.

"The three people who were flying around on...well they look like old broomsticks...anyway they are now inside the apartment, pointing sticks at a pile of rubble. Big chunks are floating up off to the side. It's like the people are telling the debris where to go with their sticks."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Wally calmly replied. "Do the three people match our profiles?"

Both the spotter and his gun-wielding partner looked down at the photographs fixed to the wall of their rooftop perch. They checked their glasses and scope and nodded.

"Affirmative," the spotter announced.

"Target acquisition?"

This time it was the sniper that replied. "Spotty...I'd have clear head shots at two hundred metres, were it not for the bits and pieces of building floating about."

"Roger that," Wally replied. "Hold for instructions."

The MI-5 ¾ agent pulled out his earpiece and activated his Art Club badge.

"Hermione...you back there with the Prime Minister yet?"

"Yes Wally, go ahead."

"It looks like Rookwood and the others flew to the Rookery on broomsticks and hurled three cars into the side of the building. They're presently within the twentieth floor apartment, moving debris from a pile. I've got a sniper team in position with an occasional clear shot. What do we do?"

"Hold on, Wally."

Agent Granger turned off her Art Club badge and looked around the table.

"Are you even contemplating assassination?" the Home Secretary asked.

"No," the Prime Minister calmly replied, "but only because authorizing lethal force is anything but an assassination in this instance." He turned towards his MI-5 Chief and asked, "What's the latest casualty estimate?"

"Still coming in, Sir...attacks in a dozen locations across the country, at least eighty-seven dead, more than four-hundred wounded..."

The Prime Minister turned to Hermione.

"Death Eater attacks for certain, based on the reports. No robes, no Death Marks, but there's magic involved. Also attacks within the wizarding community as well."

"Any of our wizards on the scene?"

Hermione shook her head.

The Prime Minister nodded. "Get Agent Jackson back on the phone, erm...badge."

Hermione opened a line, then placed her badge on the table in front of the Prime Minister.

Agent Jackson," he said, "Take out anything or someone in that flat that's using a wand."

As Wally acknowledged the order the Prime Minister called his personal secretary into the room.

"Shacklebolt, I assume that you can send confidential messages to the Minister of Magic?"

Kingsley nodded, as he took in the sight of Hermione Granger sitting at the Muggle Prime Minister's side.

"Then Auror Shacklebolt, would you please inform the Minister Scrimgeour that Her Majesty's Government will have a card-carrying incident commander in charge of each of the areas where Muggles were attacked tonight?" the Prime Minister asked. "And that a State of Emergency exists, such that any witch or wizard caught using a magical wand on our side of the fence will be arrested? You also might want to mention that those who resist arrest or point a wand towards a police officer will be shot."

Shacklebolt grew as pale as his skin tone allowed. "Erm, does that include the Aurors, Sir? I mean...some of the Muggle casualties will likely involve hexes that need reversing."

The Prime Minister pursed his lips and nodded. "Tell them, then, that their Aurors will be expected to work under our site commanders. They'll get to keep their wands and can help out if they present their badges and use the proper recognition phrase."

"Yes sir...and what should I tell them the recognition phrase is?"

The Prime Minister snorted. "Any suggestions, Agent Granger?"

Hermione bit her lower lip. "How about 'I love Muggles'?"

The Prime Minister smiled. "Yes...that will do nicely."

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Rookwood had just determined that the wizard that had been crushed to death in his bed was not Lucius Malfoy when he heard a loud "CRACK!" A fraction of a second later, a head shot splattered Alecto Carrows' blood and brains. The former Unspeakable immediately fell to the floor and scanned the area for threats. A second shot that would have pierced Amycus' forehead instead smashed into a piece of plaster that he'd been levitating. A cloud of white dust settled down upon the two Death Eaters, creating a pinkish paste where it mixed with the blood.

Alecto's brother cried out her name as Rookwood crawled over to inspect her body. There was a quarter-inch diameter hole just above her right eye and a six-inch diameter crater on the back of her skull.

"Muggles!" the former Unspeakable hissed, as if it were a curse word.

This changed everything, in his opinion. Not just that they had killed a Death Eater, but that they set the trap themselves or collaborated with the Aurors. He didn't know which was worse, but did know that this vital information had to be shared with his Master. He shouted to Amycus. "We've got to get to the rally point now!"

"But my sister!"

"I've got hold of Alecto...I'll side-along her."

But nothing happened when they tried to disappear.

"Wards against that," Augustus stated. He looked around and decided that they'd need to fly out of the anti-apparition zone. Figuring that the shot had been fired through the broken windows, he crawled out of the room with a distraught Carrow right behind.

"What about my sister, though?"

Rookwood shouted, "We can't carry her out on our brooms...we'll come back full force and get our revenge then."

The former Unspeakable dragged the other Death Eater along the ground to a window on the far side of the apartment. An *Evansco* spell took care of the glass and their broomsticks carried them out into the night...and into the sightlines of a second Muggle sniper.

The shock of the Rookery's wards stripping away Amycus Carrow's memories was strong enough for him to lose his balance and fall from his broomstick. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing, as a rifle bullet passed through the air space formally occupied by his left temple.

Amycus's cries as he fell from the sky were enough to clear Rookwood's mind, and to focus on the immediate situation. He had no idea where he was, or why he was on a broomstick, but he did know that if he didn't help Amycus that he'd be dead very soon. He pulled the broom into a steep dive and an intercepting course. But Amycus didn't realize that help was on the way and decided to risk an emergency apparition just as Rookwood reached out from his broom and grabbed his shoulder.

There was a loud crack and most of Amycus Carrow disappeared, along with Rookwood's left hand. The former Unspeakable howled in pain and at the stupidity of his underling, whose splinched right buttock was still free-falling towards the ground.

Rookwood pulled out of his dive, struggling to maintain control of the broom with one hand, and quickly considered where Amycus might have gone off too.

Expecting the worst and hoping for the least worst, Rookwood concentrated on a destination and disappeared.

He reappeared in the still-smelly living room of the Bristol safe house.

“Amycus?” he bellowed.

While there was no verbal reply, the sound of moaning from upstairs suggested that he had guessed right. He ran up the stairs, pushed open a bedroom door and threw a whimpering Death Eater off of a bed.

“Where’s my bloody hand, you fool?” he demanded.

Amycus sobbed loudly as he pointed towards the bed.

Rookwood scowled as he spotted his splinched appendage within the soiled sheets. He grabbed it with his good hand and carried it over to a chest of drawers that was merely dusty. After placing it on the top of the chest and positioning his stump, he drew his wand and began to swish its tip over the breach.

After a complex incantation and a bit of time, his hand was unsplinched.

The former Unspeakable strode back to the bed and yelled, “Get up you whimpering fool, we need to go now.”

“But why?” Amycus asked. “This is the safe house.”

“It’s no longer a safe house now that you’ve splinched yourself trying to apparate here.”

“But my bum!”

“You left it behind for the Muggless to munch on, and there’s no going back.”

“But my sister!”

“Dunno where’s she’s gone to.”

Carrow paused, then lamented once more, “But my bum!”

“Oh, quit whining,” said Rookwood, as he turned a Muggle alarm clock into a portkey. He grabbed Amycus’s hand and placed it on the clock, adding,

“Maybe if you ask nicely the Dark Lord will fashion you a new arse cheek made of silver.”

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Sunday, July 8, 2:30am
33 Sq. Briefing Room
RAF Benson, Oxfordshire

Harry badge-jumped from the battlefield directly into Hermione’s arms. It was rather crowded, as Fred and George had followed Harry’s lead, but there were no admonishments about time or place. Hermione mentioned that Katie and Alicia were in the next room, then buried her face into Harry’s chest as the Twins dashed off to their own reunions.

After furtive physical reassurances that each was alive (if not completely well), Hermione pushed some Belgian chocolate into his hands and helped him slip off his fatigues.

“What’s with the beret and these insignias?” Harry asked, as he fingered the patches on his new clothing.

“The Clan Air Force was drummed into the British Army a few hours ago,” Hermione explained. “The P.M. was initially thinking RAF, but then somebody pulled rank and had you placed within The Parachute Regiment. This is their uniform.”

“Who could pull rank on the Prime Minister?” Harry asked.

“That would be my mum,” said a voice from behind Harry. He turned to see a smiling Prince of Wales, who was standing in the doorway dressed in a drab olive military uniform. He entered the room and extended his hand to Harry.

“Glad to see you that you pulled through tonight, Lord Gryffindor,” he said warmly.

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“In this case, I think that ‘Sir’ would be more appropriate.”

“Why is that...Sir?”

“Ah, you see...Her Royal Majesty asked that your group be assigned to The Parachute Regiment as a favor to me, as I am its Colonel-in-Chief.”

Harry nodded, then asked, “Does that mean I now have a military commission?”

The Prince nodded. "Consider it a field appointment until the paper work comes through, Major Potter."

"Major Potter?" Harry asked, as he inspected the rank slide affixed to his jacket. "Merlin, that's another title."

"You do seem to be outpacing me, don't you," the Prince replied with a smirk. "In this case, though, it is entirely appropriate for the leader of the Queen's magical forces to hold that rank."

"But there's no need, is there...?"

"Perhaps not for you," the Prince stated, "but some within your group don't have any formal ties to either government, correct? A military enlistment protects them from charges of vigilantism, and provides Her Majesty's Government with the opportunity to sanction your efforts."

Before Harry could protest any further Ron walked into the room, snapped to attention and gave a crisp military salute.

"Squadron's assembled and ready for their mission brief, Sir," he said sharply.

The Prince chuckled. "Well done, Captain Weasley...wherever did a wizard such as yourself learn about Muggle military traditions?"

Ron shifted his eyes towards Hermione, then returned his eyes forward and replied, "Muggle video games, Sir!"

Hermione snorted as Harry walked over and gave Ron a manly hug.

"Geroff," Ron whined. "My ribs are still knitting back together."

"Good to see you too, mate...everyone else alright, then?"

"Yeah, everyone pulled through somehow."

"Sorry about your house," said Harry.

"Yes, well, bricks and magic mortar can be replaced, right?" Ron asked.

"That's for certain," Hermione said, as she gave Ron's shoulder a squeeze.

"Yes, well...shall we?" the Prince asked, as he held his arm out towards the door. Ron led them out into a small hallway, then into a briefing room filled men and women dressed in combat fatigues and maroon berets. At his call for attention everyone stood and saluted (some displaying that skill better than others).

"I don't think I'm up for giving any speeches," Harry quietly admitted to the Prince.

"Allow me, then, Major Potter," the Prince replied. He then strode up to the podium and said, "Take your seats, Phoenix Teams...I dare say that after tonight's action many of you deserve to be off your feet."

As the audience sat Harry got a clear look at who was there. He was thrilled to see that every Phoenix Team member from Privet Drive was present (except, of course, for Brian, who was still convalescing).

"Just a quick word, as I know you have a hunt to attend to," the Prince said. "Earlier tonight Tom Riddle and his Death Eater terrorists launched a well-coordinated and widespread attack against Muggle Britain. For reasons that we will surely learn of in the days ahead, the Ministry of Magic provided a pitifully inadequate defense for our people, and in many ways acted counterproductively. We now know that hundreds have died or been kissed."

"You are all well aware that Her Majesty's Government has become increasingly active in the defense of its peoples from magical attacks, but after tonight it is clear that we need to step up to a whole new level. And any part of any good defense is a good offense. I therefore wish The Prince's Own First Magical Squadron of The Parachute Regiment Godspeed on striking a blow against the Dark Lord and his minions."

"And with that, I'll turn it over to Captain Weasley."

The Prince stepped to the side as Ron walked up to the podium and began to outline their mission.

Chapter 30 - Cabinet Office Briefing Room A

Sunday, July 8, 3:00am

Brixton Metropolitan Police Station

Brixton Hill, London

Having yet again reached the bottom of her cup, Police Inspector Kathryn Miller decided that it was time to stretch her legs and visit the station's lunch room. The Community Support Officer who had been assigned the task of keeping water on the boil greeted her with a smile and a full pot of coffee.

"What's this, then, Kate...number four?" she asked, as she filled the officer's mug.

"It's five, Helen...but on a night like this who's counting?" she replied. "Cheers."

The CSO nodded. "Heard rumors of terrible things...makes me wish I had something more useful to do."

Inspector Miller smiled as she gave the elderly woman's elbow a light squeeze. "With a full house of constables and the rest of the night ahead, I dare say you've got the most vital task in the station."

Just then one of the inspector's colleagues entered the room.

"Excuse me, Kathryn, but the Super wants to see you."

Kate acknowledged the message, offered her thanks to the CSO, and walked down the hall to her boss's office. She found him at his desk, reading an e-mail message on his computer display.

"You wished to see me, Sir?"

Superintendent Dale Cartwright glanced up and nodded. "Close the door behind you and have a seat, Kate."

"Yes, Sir."

The superintendent grabbed some output from a laser printer and pushed it across the desk for the Kathryn's review.

"New orders, Inspector," the station chief stated simply. "Or should I say, Chief Inspector?"

Kate looked down at the message and was shocked to see that she'd been given a full grade promotion and posted to the Home Secretary's Office.

"Know of any reasons why my most junior police inspector has been promoted and ordered to immediately report to 10 Downing Street?"

There was a likely reason, based on the reports and notices that had crossed her desk that evening, but Kate chose not to share it.

"No logical reason, Sir," she replied. "This is to take effect immediately, then?"

"Apparently so, Chief Inspector," he replied sardonically. "Have one of your former staffers drive you ...you've got a meeting to attend to, and I need all of my cars down here where the little people still work and live."

"Yes, Sir," Kate replied. "Sir...I hope you don't think that I've done something untoward to..."

The Superintendent shook his head. "No, no, Kate...I've got no reasons at all to think that. You're a fine officer. It's just rather...unprecedented." He paused then added, "Although...after tonight what's topsy and what's turvey is anyone's guess, eh?"

"Erm...yes, Sir."

"Right...off you go, then, Chief Inspector...the Commissioner is expecting you."

"Right, Sir."

"Oh, and Kate," her former chief said with a smile. "Do let me know when the promotion ceremony is to be held."

"Of course, Sir, thank you, Sir," Kate said absently, as she reread her orders. With her dismissal in hand, she grabbed her suit jacket from the back of her office chair and called out to one of her former colleagues for a ride across the Thames.

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**3:30am, RAF Benson
Oxfordshire**

Once Captain Ron Weasley had completed his mission brief and dismissed the Phoenix Teams, Hermione and the Prince announced their need to return to London and Windsor, respectively. A RAF officer attached to the Prince led him towards his waiting helicopter, while Hermione gave Harry another strong hug and some tender kisses before disappearing back to 10 Downing Street.

Not having any other immediate battles to fight, Harry climbed into a transport vehicle that was to carry the others out to the two SA 330 Puma helicopters primed to carry them into battle. He made a point of sitting next to Hermione's parents, whom he noted had carried rather grim expressions during the meeting.

"Alright, there, Mr. and Mrs. Granger?"

Emily, who was sitting to Harry's left, started to put her arm around his shoulder. She stopped short, though, and asked, "Will I get in trouble if I give my commanding officer a hug?"

Harry shook his head dismissively and wrapped his own arm around her waist. "I'll hex the person that tells me you would, Mrs. Granger." He gave her a squeeze and said, "I heard about the werewolf attacks, and...I'm sorry that you've both been brought into all of this."

Roger Granger, who was on his wife's other side, leaned over and said, "Don't worry about us, son...we were just glad we were in the right place at the right time with that silver ammunition."

"Still," Harry said, "I know how hard it is to deal with the first time you..."

"And we are sorry that someone as young as you has necessarily faced that situation as well," said Emily. "How are you holding up, Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard shrugged. "So far all I've tangled with tonight are Dementors, and there's no bad feelings watching my Patronus take them on. Quite the opposite, actually. Now Hermione, on the other hand..."

Roger nodded. "We know...we had a chance to talk with her before you arrived. Afraid that she's on automatic pilot, and that it might all fall apart once she has a chance to catch her breath."

"At least she didn't see her werewolf transform back to human form," added Emily, as she shuddered. "Makes me think about Remus, and how it could have been him."

Harry nodded in understanding, even as he disagreed with her fears. "You two both need to realize that even though those werewolves weren't in their right mind at the time...they did have a choice. Remus made sure he was tucked away safe before the sun set tonight, and they could have done the same."

Roger and Emily replied with silence, as they thought about Harry's words.

"Not that it makes it any easier," he added.

By that time their transport vehicle had come to a full stop, and the Phoenix Team members jumped out of the back of the truck. The two helicopters were parked next to a hanger, within which were tables stacked with personal gear and various mission supplies. Harry shook his head in disbelief at the sight of his own pile of goodies, topped off with a aviator's flight helmet with the nickname "Seeker" scripted across the top. As he swapped out his beret for the helmet, a Muggle supply sergeant handed him a helmet customized for Hermione. Thanking the corpsman, Harry stuffed it into his never-full rucksack.

As the rest of the group donned their own flight helmets and stocked up on ammunition, Seamus Finnigan pulled Harry aside and asked for a moment of his time.

"What's up, mate?" Harry asked

Seamus looked down at the insignias on his flight suit, then back to Harry. "Why did it have to be the bloody First Paras?" he asked quietly.

"What?"

"This army unit, Harry," Seamus explained, waving towards the others. "Why did they put us in the First Battalion of The Parachute Regiment?"

"Erm, because the Prince is the Colonel-in-Chief of the regiment and I'm Queen's Wizard, I suppose... what's the problem?"

"Bloody Sunday," Seamus said quietly. "They were the ones that killed the thirteen unarmed protesters in Derry on Bloody Sunday!"

"Northern Ireland?"

"Yeah...my Republican Muggle dad would think it the same as me signing up with the Death Eaters."

Harry nodded, finally understanding Seamus's concerns. "Look," he said quietly, "I don't know much at all about Muggle politics, but I don't want to force anyone to do something they're uncomfortable doing. Right now, I'm worried about getting to the werewolf pack that tried to kill the Weasleys tonight, and we could really use your wand out there."

"Yeah, I know that Harry, it's just..."

"They didn't swear you into the Army while you were waiting for me, did they?"

Finnigan shook his head. "They said it was a field appointment, and that all the other official stuff would come later."

"So you aren't too far gone just yet," Harry concluded. "Would it help if, before we go to much further down this road, I arranged a little chat with you and the Prince? Or maybe we all sit down with your mum and dad and explain things?"

Seamus looked appraisingly at Harry. "You could arrange a visit between the Prince of Wales and my parents?"

Harry shook his shoulders. "Don't see why not, particularly if that's what it would take to keep you with us."

The Irish-born half-blood sighed, looked down again at the First Battalion insignia on his jacket, and nodded. "Thanks, Harry...dunno if it will help, but it means the world to me that you are making the effort." He then pressed his hands down the length of his jacket, stood up straight, and gave the hanging edge of his beret a tug. "Let's do this, then."

Harry smiled and slapped his friend on the shoulder. "Thanks, mate, and be careful."

"Be careful about what?"

"About showing your mature side too often. You're scaring me."

Finnigan laughed, and gave Harry a cheeky salute. "Yes sir, Major Queen's Wizard, sir!"

The Queen's Wizard mobile phone chirped, interrupting the retort that had been gelling in Harry's mind. With a nod towards Seamus, he stepped away and took the call. After a terse conversation, he turned and scanned the group with a concerned expression.

"Ron and Fred, front and center," he called out.

The two Weasley brothers broke off a conversation with George and his Muggle co-pilot and strode with a purpose towards Harry. They shouted out "Sir!" and snapped their fingers in salute against their helmets (labeled "*Keeper*" and "*Freater*".)

"Knock it off, you two," Harry admonished. "A few stray Dementors are causing trouble again up North. Fred, you and I are off to Fort George."

"Sure you wouldn't rather have George go to Fort Fred?" Ron snarked.

"Very funny, '*Keeper*' ...just for that, you're in charge."

Ron nodded, then asked, "I'll be flying solo, then?"

"Yeah," replied Harry. He paused for a moment, then added, "You might want to go with one attack squadron of five, and put PT2 and PT3 in a scouting role. '*Driller*' and '*Painless*' are still a little shaken, and they have had the least time to train with the rest."

"Makes sense," said Ron. "Might take a bit longer, but that would allow me to fly topside and keep track of things."

After exchanges hugs and crisp salutes made only partly in jest, Fred and Harry disappeared into the night, while Ron let the others in on the change in battle plans.

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10 Downing Street, London

Scotland Yard's newest Chief Inspector was having a devil of a time getting past what were obviously SAS troopers guarding the Prime Minister's residence.

"Yes, I know my badge says that I'm only an Inspector, but I assure you that I am the very same Kathryn Miller whose name is on your admittance list."

"Sorry, Ma'am, but you need to step away from the gate..."

"It's alright boys, she's with us," said a voice from over the guards' shoulders. The harried looking constable who made that statement pushed her way through the line of troops waving a plastic identification card in front of her. Once explanations were made about the very recent promotion, and the Prime Minister's need to meet with the Chief Inspector straight away, Kathryn was allowed to pass through the gate.

"Constable Jenkins, Mum...pleased to meet you."

"Kate Miller, and thanks for the help...it's been a nightmare getting through all of the security."

"No worries, Chief Inspector," the aide explained, as she handed Kate the identification card that bore her image and new rank. "I'll need your old ID, Ma'am."

Kate nodded as she unclipped her old badge and offered it to the aide. She was then led unchallenged into the Prime Minister's residence, nodding at the Met Police guards who saluted as she walked past them and down into the bowels of the building. Sir Robin Babbitt, the head of the Metropolitan Police Department, was waiting for her outside of a conference room whose opened doors were labeled "Cabinet Office Briefing Room A."

"Ah, there you are Chief Inspector," the man said. "Thank you for joining us on such short notice."

"It is an honor, Commissioner Babbitt," Kate replied, as she shook the offered hand. "I must say, a bit of a surprise, though."

"That's understandable, Chief Inspector," the man replied with a smile. He waved inside the room and noted, "The meeting will start in a few minutes...you'll be sitting between the Home Secretary and myself."

"Thank you...Sir," Kate replied absently, as she gaped at the jaw-dropping array of titles printed on the name cards scattered around the table.

The Commissioner took note of the CI's expression. "They're all just like you and me, CI Miller...trousers and legs one at a time, and all that." Retrieving a small box from his pocket, he added, "Before I forget..."

Inside this box were two diamond-shaped pins, which he fixed to the shoulder straps on Kate's jacket. He gave her a salute, shook her hand, and said, "Congratulations, Chief Inspector."

"Thank you, Sir," Kate replied, as she turned her head to look at the sets of three diamonds on each shoulder that indicated her new rank. "Don't know that I deserve the honor..."

"Oh, you do," Sir Robin replied. "And you will by the time we've sorted through this mess, I'm sure of it."

Kate nodded stiffly as her stomach decided to twist another knot. "Is there time for me to straighten my tie?"

The Met Commissioner smiled. "Down the hall, second door on the left, I think."

"Thank you, Sir."

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The Chief Inspector was in front of a washbasin splashing cold water on her face when she heard a loo flush behind her. A few moments later a stall door opened and someone stepped out wearing black combat fatigues and a gun strapped to her hip. The young woman (still a teenager, perhaps?) was struggling a bit as she adjusted her black leather equipment belt and thigh packs. She was armed to the hilt, and would have fit right in with the SAS guards on the fence line. Except, the Chief Inspector noted, for a few accessories that were decidedly not standard military issue – a wooden wand strapped to a black leather arm holster, a silver dagger strapped to her leg, and a starburst-shaped brooch fixed above her left breast.

The woman looked up, and after a moment's pause said, "Chief Inspector Miller, I presume?" She started to extend a hand, but thought better of it and made her way to the washbasin. "My name is Hermione Granger...I'm a Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister."

The police inspector nodded. "Kate Miller," she replied, as Hermione washed her hands. "Metropolitan Police Force, and now, apparently, the Home Office."

"Yes, I know," Hermione replied, as she dried her hands with a towel. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

Kate nodded. The teenager was so serious, with her hair tied back severely and her eyes red and tired-looking. "You're friends with Harry Potter, the Queen's Wizard, right?" she blurted out.

When Hermione squinted her eyes Kate added, "Sorry for asking, but my daughter subscribes to a few magazines and, well...I'm trying to make sense out of my sudden promotion and summons to this meeting."

Hermione seemed to accept the explanation. "No worries...and to answer your questions, Harry Potter is my boyfriend, and the fact that you are the Met's senior-most card-carrying Muggle officer outside of SO14 did have much to do with your summons. Not so much with the promotion, mind you...from what Sir Robin says, he's had his eye on you as you've moved up the ranks for some time."

"Thank you, erm...Senior Advisor Granger."

"Oh, please call me Hermione...at least in private," the Senior Advisor asked. "Or Agent Granger, if need be...that's what I've been using with this crowd."

The Chief Inspector caught Hermione in a quick yawn.

"It's been a very long night, hasn't it?" she asked.

Hermione nodded, looking rather blankly at the mirror in front of her. Kate took in that expression, combined it with a sidearm that was sitting a bit off in its holster, and reached a conclusion.

"You've been in the thick of it tonight, haven't you?" she ventured.

Hermione's eyes darted towards Kate's. "Do I look that bad, or have you been chatting with someone?"

Kate snorted. "Sorry, you don't look bad at all, it's just...well, I thought I recognized the look of someone who has just come under fire."

Hermione let out a small sigh. "I had the chance to skim through your resume, Chief Inspector...you've been there as well, right?"

Kate nodded. "Six years ago." She took a step closer to Hermione and said, "If you need someone to talk to about, you know...unless you've already made arrangements..."

Hermione's lips pursed into a tight smile. "Thanks for the offer...right now, it's all I can do to keep things straight that are straight ahead of me, but maybe we can sit down for tea later on?"

The Chief Inspector smiled. "I'd like that, Agent Granger." She then turned back towards the mirror and as she straightened her tie, asked, "As for what's straight ahead, any hints on what I'll be doing?"

Hermione snorted as she looked at the Chief Inspector's holster. "Let's just say that we'll need to check on our stock of nine-millimeter silver bullets before you go back out into the night."

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**Fort George, Moray Firth
Ardersier, Scotland**

Harry and Fred apparated into a casement-turned-command post within what had, up until a few hours previous, been the mightiest stone fortification in the world never to have come under attack. Ernie MacMillian was there doling out broomsticks and assignments to a small queue of witches and wizards.

"Can't cast a Patronus, eh?" they heard him ask a elderly wizard at the front of the line. He looked down at his map and said, "Well then, take a broom and cross the firth, aiming for the Muggle lighthouse. Just past there are two campgrounds. Make sure they're still clear of Muggles, and check on the repelling wards set along the road to Fortrose. You see any Dementors, use your wand to cast red sparks up into the sky, then fly away from'em."

"But what if the Muggles see it?" the wizard asked.

"That's the idea," Ernie barked with annoyance. "The Muggle Aurors will be looking to see where they need to evacuate. Now off with you!"

As the wizard headed towards an open window the soon-to-be Seventh Year Hufflepuff spied Fred and Harry.

"Found time to visit a tailor, eh?" he asked.

Harry looked down at his military fatigues and shook his head. "We got drafted into the British Army."

"Well good," Ernie replied. "Might make it easier for us to deal with the Muggle soldiers upstairs."

"So where's the fire, Ernie?" Fred asked.

The Hufflepuff pointed at a spot on the map in front of him. "The town's called Cromarty... northside of Black Isle, about seven miles north of here."

"And there were three, you said?" asked Harry.

Ernie looked down at his wrist watch. "Yeah, as of ten minutes ago...there's two 'silver-misters' keeping them at bay, but..."

"Understood," Harry replied. He reached into a jacket pocket and retrieved a miniaturized Firebolt. Fred was just a heartbeat behind as he enlarged his own broom and yelled, "Up!"

"Rank before beauty, Lord G," Fred said with a grin.

Harry snorted as he mounted his broom and flew out a window. Fred followed close behind, as they took a moment to orient themselves over the open water.

Fort George was a massive 18th Century fort built on a spit of land about eleven miles up the coast from the city of Inverness. The fort had been built on the east side of Moray Firth, at the point where the inlet broadened into what was essentially open sea.

Harry and George flew their broomsticks across the firth then turned north, following the cliff edges that formed the southern shore of a peninsula known as "Black Isle" After a few minutes of 80 mph flying they climbed up above the cliff face and turned west. As this part of the "isle" was less than two miles wide, it took almost no time for them to reach the opposite shoreline of Cromarty Firth. A cold sense of despair beckoning to the north was clear sign that they were on the right track.

They came upon two broom-riding wizards who were nervously patrolling the coast just outside of the town of Cromarty. These two "silver-misters," as Ernie had called them, had been able to cast weak Patronus spells, generating just enough silver mist to keep the small group of Dementors away from the inhabited parts of the Isle. The wizards directed Harry and Fred farther north towards the Isle's end.

A mess was waiting for them.

The group of three Dementors had come upon a merchant tanker that had been bound for Inverness with a half-million barrels of fuel oil. Five minutes and a kissed-crew later, the now unmanned single-hulled ship had run aground and ruptured, spilling its cargo out into the sea.

A large oil slick was threatening the coastline by the time Fred and Harry had arrived on scene. The Dementors were still there, perhaps waiting for fresh souls to arrive on salvage and rescue ships. The two wizards cast *Patronus* spells on the fly...Harry's stag and Fred's hawk used the brooms' forward momentum to fly towards their targets at unheard of rates of speed.

Harry and Fred pulled up short of the ship with wands drawn, ready to conjur additional Patronuses as need be. But there was no need ...after a brief battle the stag and hawk returned to the spell casters, with Prongs seemingly prancing atop the thick mat of oil. The conjurations bowed to the two wizards before dissolving into the darkness.

As they cautiously approached the ship, Fred asked, "So what's all this then?"

"Oil," Harry replied. "It's what the Muggle burn to heat their homes, and as fuel for their cars and airplanes."

"Nasty black mess, isn't it?"

Harry nodded as he looked down towards the see. "Strange thing, though...it's as if you can see Prongs' hoof prints on top of the slick."

Fred took a look and said, "Kind of a strange orange color, isn't it?"

"Yeah...I'll have to ask Hermione about it when we get back."

A quick inspection of the ship revealed the smoking black cloaks of three “dead” Dementors and the soul-less shells of the entire ship’s crew. They tried to magically seal the breeched hull, only to watch it rupture again as the tide carried the ship back against the rocks. Without the magical strength required to push the tanker off of the rocks and back out to sea, the two found that the best they could do was banish the oil as it leaked from the ship. They called for both Muggle and magical help managing the situation, then went back to the task of keeping the potential environmental threat from getting any worse.

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**Cabinet Office Briefing Room A
10 Downing Street, London**

The Prime Minister of Great Britain reconvened the latest incarnation of the civil contingencies committee (better know the British public as COBRA) and made introductions for the few who, like Chief Inspector Miller, had just joined the group. The principal parties included the Home Secretary, the Defense Minister, both intelligence department chiefs, the Met Commissioner, Kate Miller and Secret Agents Wally and Hermione. Various aides and secretaries were seated behind their bosses, which made the fact that she was sitting at the big boys’ table seem all the more surreal for Kate. Both Kate and Wally were introduced as lead Investigators for the terrorist activity that had caused so much chaos across the country.

The Prime Minister then said, “I’m afraid that we’ve put Chief Inspector Miller at a severe disadvantage, as she has no doubt had little opportunity to review the tasks ahead of her. Am I right?”

“Yes, Prime Minister,” Kate replied.

“Right, so perhaps a quick review is in order,” he replied. “Chief Inspector Miller you should know two things. First, everything discussed here in this room is covered under the Official Secrets Act.”

“I understand, Mr. Prime Minister.”

“Yes, well as for the second key point...that fact that everyone in this room is cognizant of the existence of magic and the wizarding world is, in and of itself, covered under the Act.”

Chief Inspector Miller sucked in a shallow breath as she glanced around the room. “Yes, Sir, understood, Sir,” she replied.

“Wonderful,” said the Prime Minister. “Now, Wally, if you would...”

“Yes, Sir,” the agent replied, as he stood up and walked towards a large video display screen that displayed relevant graphics and photographic images.

“Early yesterday afternoon three Inner Circle members of the Death Eater wizard terrorist organization, were spotted milling about an apartment building on Shaftesbury Avenue in the West End. Intelligence reports indicated that the three were likely looking for a rogue Death Eater named Lucius Malfoy, who has taken up residence inside the building. Given the likelihood for a magical attack upon Mr. Malfoy, a decision was made to evacuate the area under pretense of a fake car bomb. This extreme measure was undertaken in a desire to limit both civilian casualties and the need for wizarding police forces to attempt memory erasures on a massive scale.”

“Excuse me, Agent Jackson...am I to understand that Aurors were notified and were on the scene?” Kate asked.

“Yes, Chief Inspector Miller,” Wally replied. “Unfortunately, the team of five Aurors were ordered away from the evacuation zone in response to the coordinated attacks at 2200 hours across the country.”

“They were all magical attacks, then?” Kate asked.

Wally nodded, showing a map with dots over the affected cities. “Twelve separate cities, including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Reading, Bath, Southampton and Norwich. All of these incidents appear to have been the work of lone attackers.” He then proceeded to provide updated causality statistics, and noted that Aurors at each of the scenes had completed their work reversing the magical injuries and repairing, to the extent practicable, the associated property damage.

“Has the issue of memory modification been resolved?” the Home Secretary asked.

Wally turned to Hermione, who replied, “Not as such, Mr. Home Secretary. Our incident commanders are still negotiating with the Obliviator Squads on the necessity and feasibility of preserving wizarding world secrets through mass memory erasures.”

“Do these oblivators have any authority to mess with the minds...of the injured parties?” the Defense Minister asked.

“As a matter of practice, I’d have to say yes, Sir,” Hermione replied. “It has been standard practice for hundreds of years, and justified under the home-rule authority provided the wizarding world by treaty.”

“But aside from the questionable ethics involved, does this memory erasure work?”

“If you’re asking whether memories can be magically erased or modified, the answer is yes,” Hermione replied. “As for whether the process is effective in keeping knowledge of the wizarding world away from the non-magical citizenry...well, that’s clearly a separate issue.”

“I’d say that based on the video coverage these events have already received the answer to that question is an emphatic no,” stated the MI-6 chief.

“It is doubtful that we’ll successfully resolve the issue until our wizarding world counterparts are engaged,” stated the Prime Minister. He turned to Hermione and asked, “Still no word from the Ministry of Magic?”

“None officially, Prime Minister,” Hermione replied. “We have, though, heard from reliable source inside the Minister’s office that they plan on stalling for as much time as possible before they reply to your inquiries.”

“For what purpose, do you think?”

“So that can make up a story, and endeavor to get said story straight,” the Home Secretary opined.

“Moving on, then., any new attacks or counterattacks to report on, Agent Granger?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hermione replied. “TPOMS-1 is in transit to Dartmoor to address the werewolf attacks in Devon, and there are still sporadic Dementor attacks outside of Inverness.”

“Which the Queen’s Wizard is handling in his elegantly efficient manner, I presume?” the Prime Minister asked with a smile.

“Yes, Prime Minister,” Hermione replied. “Agent Weasley and he are presently on Black Isle, containing a oil spill associated with an oil tanker that ran aground after an attack incapacitated its crew.”

“Which Weasley, Agent Granger...the one that tried to gas us?”

Hermione shared a smile with the MI-5 and MI-6 chiefs, despite the pressures they were all facing. “The very one, Mr. Home Secretary.”

“Better there than here, then.”

“Moving right along,” interrupted the Prime Minister, “what’s the latest on the flying cars?”

“I can answer that, Prime Minister,” the Met Commissioner replied. “Over the last hour we have learned that the three motor vehicles involved in the Shaftesbury building assault were stolen from a South London parking garage at 2205 hours. We have secured the CCTV images from the facility, and I have the relevant few seconds of tape available for your review.”

The Met Commissioner nodded to Wally, who opened up a new MS-Powerpoint presentation on the laptop computer linked to the display. While Wally was doing this, the head of Scotland Yard stated, “Interviews with the vehicle owners established that they had parked adjacent to each other on the uppermost level of the facility. The last of the three vehicle owners to enter the garage positively identified the three Death Eaters suspects, placing them loitering on the rooftop at approximately 2018 hours. Here’s a rather grainy CCTV clip with that date stamp.”

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Officer and Gentleman, Part 2 (part 2)

Wally clicked on the flash presentation embedded within the slide, showing Rookwood and the two Carrows leaning on the rooftop railing of the garage, looking north towards Big Ben and Westminster. Once that clip ended, he moved on to a second bit of video.

“This next clip comes from a few minutes past ten. From what Agent Granger tells me, it is somewhat miraculous that the camera remained operative with all of the magic being cast about.”

The next video clip played out, showing (from a distance) Rookwood hexing Amycus, then all three of them shrinking down four vehicles and pocketing them before disappearing from the rooftop.

“So they did that disappearing trick that Agent Granger’s been doing all night?” the Home Secretary asked.

Hermione sighed almost inaudibly then answered affirmatively.

“So four cars were stolen, but only three were used in the assault?”

“Yes Prime Minister,” the Met Commissioner replied. “The fourth vehicle appears to have owned by the suspects.” Wally clicked on the next slide, showing a static image of the Mini Cooper as it entered the garage. “The suspects drove the vehicle into the facility at 1745 hours.”

“It was a getaway car that they kept shrunk in their pockets, then?”

“That scenario is consistent with available facts, sir. We’re running the license plate number now.”

“Good work, Sir Robin,” the Prime Minister stated. “Do keep us updated.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“On to the werewolf investigation, and Chief Inspector Miller’s assignment?”

“Yes, Prime Minister,” Hermione said. She stood, gave Kate a reassuring glance, than dove in.

“Apart from the already discussed attacks there were multiple incidents involving two small packs of werewolves. The timing is synchronous, suggesting that they were linked in some way. One group of approximately fifteen werewolves attacked a wizarding household in Devon, just outside of Ottery St. Catchpole.”

“It was the family home of Sir Ronald and the Weasley Twins, correct?” asked the Prime Minister.

“Yes, Sir,” Hermione replied. “Ron and five family members were successfully evacuated from the home before it was overrun by the pack. The werewolf pack then appears to have run towards Dartmoor National Park, stopping along the way to attack two Muggle households. Three Muggle civilians were killed in these two attacks.”

“So they are in Dartmoor’s woods, Agent Granger?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hermione replied. “But perhaps the Defense Minister should...”

“Quite right, Agent Granger,” the Defense Minister replied. “A MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ agent apparently tracked the progress of the werewolf pack from the Weasley residence to the forest.”

“Excuse my interruption, Sir,” said Hermione, “but we should note that Luna Lovegood, the witch who tracked the werewolf pack by broomstick, is not employed by the government in any capacity that I am aware of.”

“At least not until we can get our hands on her,” the MI-5 chief noted, as he shared a wink with his MI-6 counterpart and Hermione.

“Merlin help Her Majesty’s Government,” Hermione muttered under her breath.

“Yes, well, as I was saying, this Ms. Lovegood reported the position of the pack to Agent Granger, who passed it along to the Defense forces. Surveillance and Apache attack helicopters were deployed to the area, and have managed to constrain the pack’s location to a one-square kilometer area. It is to this location that TPOMS-1 is transiting, via 33 Squadron Puma helicopters.” He looked at his watch, then added, “Their ETA is approximately fifteen minutes from now.”

CI Miller had worked hard at keeping quiet, but couldn’t help but ask, “I’m sorry, sir but what is TPOMS-1?”

“The Prince’s Own First Magical Squadron,” the Defense Minister said with a smile. “A mixed wizard-Muggle broomstick-flying cavalry unit attached to The Parachute Regiment.”

Kate shook her head slightly as she tried to contain the chagrin on her face.

“You find that funny, Chief Inspector Miller?” the Home Secretary asked.

“No Sir,” Kate quickly replied. “It’s just that...well, as you all seem to know, I’ve known about the wizarding world almost all of my life, but thought that

I had to guard that secret *with* my life for fear of hurting my Muggle-born wizard brother. Now, I find out that this wall of secrecy between the Muggle and wizard worlds isn't as strong as I've been told."

"Quite all right," the Prime Minister replied. "Many of us have had to deal with drastically changed perceptions of our world as well...Hermione, we need to move on to CI Miller's assignment."

"Right, Sir," Hermione replied, not as confident as she otherwise had been. "The second werewolf attack originated in Diagon Alley, the wizard quarter of London hidden behind Charing Cross Road. The primary target again appears to have been wizard-related, but sometime during the attack four of the werewolves split off and made it out onto Charing Cross. Security forces guarding the Muggle side of this exit killed three of the werewolves and injured the fourth. They then proceeded to track down the fourth werewolf to a location four blocks away, and killed it before it could escape into the Muggle population. Fortunately, and perhaps not coincidentally, the werewolf attack occurred within the evacuation zone created in response to the Shaftesbury Death Eater sightings."

There was a pause, and then Kate asked, "How were our Muggle security forces able to kill these werewolves?"

"Silver bullets," Hermione replied. "Two of the agents involved in the incident were card-carrying Muggles who knew that it was a full moon."

Kate nodded. "So we have silver bullets and four dead werewolves...transformed back into human form, I presume?"

"Five actually," Hermione said softly. "One of the werewolves that remained within Diagon Alley was shot dead and its body recovered as well."

The MI-6 Chief piped in, "Agent Granger, you are far too modest." He turned to Chief Inspector Miller and proudly stated, "She put seven slugs into the creature's skull as it approached her at a dead run."

Hermione looked down at her briefing papers. "Yes, Sir."

Sensing Hermione's discomfort, the Met Commissioner said, "Chief Inspector, we've brought you on as lead investigator into the werewolf attacks both in London and Devon. We want to know who these people were, why they attacked, and who ordered them to do so. Your status as a card-carrying Muggle will make it possible for you to liaison with the wizarding police forces that will no doubt also be involved."

"Yes, Sir," Kate replied. "I should say straight out, Sir, that I know nothing about werewolves, other than that they really exist."

"Quite all right, Chief Inspector," her boss replied. "I'm told that we have some excellent tutors available to get you up to speed, and you'll be working with someone that has, shall we say, first hand knowledge of the condition?"

Kate's eyes went wide at the implications of this statement.

"No worries," Wally quickly said, having taken in her concerns. "Remus Lupin might be a tad furry, but he's on our side."

"Time for a break, I think," the Prime Minister concluded. "Some of us have another oversight meeting to attend to...we'll reconvene in one hour."

The committee members and their support staff all stood, with many scurrying off to get updates from their own departments. This gave Wally an opportunity to wrap Hermione into a one-armed hug, and offer words of support. It also gave the Prime Minister the opportunity to walk halfway around the table and quietly cut into his MI-6 Chief.

"Rather bad form calling attention to Agent Granger's first kill, don't you think?" he whispered.

The Director General cast a nervous glance towards Wally and Hermione before replying, "Yes, Sir...sorry, Sir."

"I don't think that I'm the one you should be apologizing to," the Prime Minister said. "You seem to forget that for all of her brilliance and competence, Agent Granger is still a seventeen year old school girl whose parents are about to go into battle for the second time tonight."

The MI-6 chief nodded and let out a deep sigh.

"I do hope that you have counselors on hand that can offer her more than a teaspoon's worth of empathy," the Prime Minister stated.

"Yes, Sir...should I bring them in now?"

The Prime Minister let out his own sigh as he shook his head. "Unfortunately, Agent Jackson's sympathetic shoulder will have to do until we've got Dartmoor and Inverness under con..."

The sudden and unexpected appearance of a broom-borne Queen's Wizard above the conference room table kept the Prime Minister from finishing his statement.

"Bloody Hell," the Home Secretary shouted, as Harry inched the broom forward and down, so that he could pull Hermione into an embrace.

"Ah, I see Wally has called in reinforcements," said the Prime Minister. He paused, and then added, "Not that it should keep you from begging forgiveness in the meantime."

"I'll get right on it, Sir."

The Prime Minister nodded, as Hermione whispered something into Harry's ear. The Queen's Wizard smiled, looked over his shoulder, and said, "Sorry for the interruption, Prime Minister."

"Not a problem, Major," the Prime Minister replied. "Here to offer an update on the Dementor situation, then?"

"Erm, yes Sir," Harry replied, a bit sheepishly. "No contact in the past few minutes, and my old Quidditch captain has shown up with his teammates from Puddlemere United with their brooms. So we've got broom patrols covering eighty miles of coastline...and Fred's still up there in case we need to tangle with them again."

"Good show, Major Potter," the Defense Chief said.

"Yes indeed, *Agent Potter*," chimed in the MI-5 chief, not wishing to be left out of the loop.

"Thank you, Sirs," Harry replied.

"Harry, you can get off of your broomstick, now," Hermione chided gently.

"Well, actually..." Harry replied. He turned back towards the Prime Minister and asked. "Would you mind if I borrow your Senior Advisor for a few minutes?"

The Prime Minister smiled. "Not at all, Harry."

"Are you sure, Sir?" Hermione asked, shifted glances between Harry and her boss.

"Get some fresh air, Hermione," the Prime Minister said. "Agent Jackson can provide both a communications channel and a secure travel link, right?"

Hermione was still hesitant, prompting Harry to ask, "You're not afraid of the broom, are you Hermione? Because if you are, I've got just the thing..." He then opened his magical rucksack, and retrieved her personalized flight helmet.

Hermione frowned when she took the helmet into her hands. "And just who was it that decided on my nickname?"

Harry turned sheepishly towards the Prime Minister, who smiled and said, "It was a group decision, although I must confess to having originally suggested it."

A curl came to Hermione's lips as she loosened her ponytail holder just enough to allow the personalized helmet to fit on her head. "Well, I guess I can't complain too much, then," she said. "Thank you for the compliment."

And with that issue decided upon, "Seeker" pulled "Chequers" up onto his broom, and the two badge-jumped into thin air.

Chapter 31 - Wolf Hunt

Sunday, July 8, 4:30am
Moray Firth, Scotland

Harry and Hermione badge-jumped to the Scottish coastline, where Fred was still busy banishing crude oil as it flowed from the wrecked tanker's hold. Hermione used a satellite phone to confirm that Muggle salvage and clean-up vessels were on their way. Knowing that there'd be little that the Muggles could do to quickly contain the oil slick, she suggested that they disillusion themselves and remain on clean-up duty even after the Muggle ships arrived.

Harry agreed in part, noting that they still had a few minutes until the Phoenix Teams would arrive at Dartmoor. But he also observed that Fred was managing well enough on his own, and told Hermione that there were a couple of other reasons why he had rescued her from the Prime Minister's war room.

His first stop was a few hundred yards off the tanker's port bow, where a bit of crude oil had escaped Fred's notice. After hearing a description of the mysterious glowing footprints that had been left upon the petroleum, Hermione suggested an experimental reenactment. Sure enough, the Patronus that sprang from Harry's wand left dull-orange marks behind as it pranced along the slickened surf.

As Harry swooped down for a closer look, Hermione lifted up her legs and cried, "Mind the boots...it's not like we're wearing surfsocks!"

The Queen's Wizard looked over his shoulder and smiled. "As Ron might ask," he replied, "are you not a witch?" He then pointed his wand towards his passenger and cast a head-to-toe *Impervious* charm.

Hermione let out a deep sigh as she leaned down to get a closer look at the orange goo that was drifting along with the waves. "Look Harry," she said. "The color is fading once Prongs moves on."

Her boyfriend looked farther up the trail and agreed. "The footprints also look to be bigger than his actual hooves," he added.

Drawing her wand out from a rubber sleeve, Hermione reached down and poked the glowing material.

"Doesn't physically act any different than the other oil," she noted. "We should grab samples and let Q-branch take a look."

Conjuring a couple of capped plastic bottles, Harry made the gallant gesture of getting his own hands dirty and skimmed both orange and black versions of the oil slick. He loaded the containers into his rucksack (which Harry always transfigured into a saddle bag when he flew), and asked, "So we're good to go, then?"

"I think so," Hermione replied.

"Good," said Harry. "Because we've got one more spot to visit."

"Where's that, Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard smiled. "To a place where moonlight is still a good thing."

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The pod of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins was only a mile or so from where Harry had first come upon them earlier in the night. They weren't at all difficult to spot as they jumped into the air under the full moon, and slapped their tail fins down on the sea's surface. It was as if they were unaware (or, if Douglas Adams was correct, uncaring) of the night's troubles for their land-bound mammalian cousins.

"They're beautiful," Hermione sighed, as Harry marked the pod's speed and bearing from a respectful height.

"Want to join them?" Harry asked with a grin.

Hermione shook her head. "Oh, we can't...it's against the law."

"Really?"

"Yeah...funny bit of law...it's illegal to approach wild dolphins by boat, but it's not illegal for them to approach you."

"Don't imagine the dolphins would care too much even if it were," Harry replied. "Like a boat, eh?" he added, as he drew his wand and cast a shield spell against his lower legs.

"Harry?" Hermione asked. "What are you doing?"

"No worries," he replied. A slight shift of his weight altered their position, until they were about thirty feet to the right of the lead dolphin.

"Far enough distance?" Harry asked, as he once again matched the pod's speed and bearing. When Hermione nodded, Harry dropped the broom tip down until he could drag his toes in the water. The magical shield of air anchored to his legs cut through the water, creating a noticeable wake and no small amount of spray.

"What are you doing?" Hermione cried out, as she squinted over Harry's shoulder.

"Pretending to be a boat," Harry replied, as he conjured two pair of swim goggles.

With a burst of acceleration Harry raced ahead of the lead dolphin, as if they were riding a magical jet ski. The dolphin didn't fail to notice. Thrilled to find a new way to play, she changed course and led the pod into the wake formed on either side of Harry's feet.

Hermione let out an unabashed cry of glee. "I've seen this on vacation!" she shouted. "They can swim faster when the wake helps carry them along."

Harry shared his Consort's delight. He really hadn't expected the dolphin's reactions (as the Dursleys left him at home whenever they made their day trips to the shore). He got even more excited as some of the dolphins began to leap into the air as they followed along.

"Wow, look at that, Hermione!" he exclaimed. "They're almost jumping high enough for me to..."

"Harry, don't you....aaahhh!"

A sudden burst of speed ate the balance of Hermione's warning, as Harry timed a nearby dolphin's jump and zig-zagged straight under it. As a different dolphin jumped to their left Harry veered course and shot the gap under that one as well.

Hermione's anger over Harry's recklessness was quickly squashed by her respect for cetacean intelligence (not to mention her own unabashed pleasure).

The dolphins weren't afraid of Harry's flying...in fact, they seemed to encourage it, with five or six offering him multiple targets as they played a form of leap-frog along the Scottish coastline.

"If they're having fun," she thought to herself, "then why can't I?"

Harry had hoped that this brief escape from the night's stress and strife might boost Hermione's spirits. He worried when it seemed as though he was enjoying things more than she was, and didn't relax until he felt her squeeze tight up against his back, reach her hands down between his legs to grab the broomstick, and begin to nibble on his left ear.

"Am I distracting you, Harry?" she shouted into his ear.

He laughed as he leaned into a corkscrew roll.

Harr-eeee!”

oo00000oo

***Aboard “Phoenix 2”
En route to Dartmoor National Park***

The “thump-thump-thump” of the rotors rang in Lee Jordan’s ears as he made the return trip from the helicopter’s loo. A bit of turbulence caused the aircraft to lurch and he fell into Katie Bell’s lap.

“Sorry about that *Cupid*,” he said with a weak smile.

“No worries, *Rasta*,” she replied.

The dreadlocked wizard righted himself and headed back towards his seat, not catching the glare that Katie sent across the cabin towards her friend. Alicia responded with a “Who, me?” grin that might have provoked a minor jinxing, had there not been the risk of frying their transport’s electronics.

When the Clan Air Force’s Muggle co-pilots had announced that all of the squadron’s witches and wizards needed proper nicknames, Alicia claimed “Comet” before anyone else could, using her first broom for inspiration. Once Seamus’s Phoenix Team partner “Blade” heard that, Katie’s nickname was set in stone.

Her only consolation was that the nickname “Prancer” had been reserved for Angelina, should she ever join the squadron.

Lee’s broom-buddy, “Stout” Downey, offered up an opened barf bag as the queasy-looking wizard strapped himself back into his seat.

“Here you go, *Rasta*...wouldn’t do to get puke on any of that lovely hair of yours.”

Lee scowled at Stout. “That’s *Rasta*, *Sir*, now isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, *Sir*, sorry, *Sir*, won’t happen again, *Sir*!” the Muggle replied with a smile.

That all of the teen-aged Phoenix Team witches and wizards now outranked their Muggle counterparts had been something they all laughed about when the announcement was made. It was established tradition that only commissioned officers could pilot British military aircraft, and the Clan Air Force’s brooms were obviously aircraft. Fortunately there were no hard feelings; they had already flown and trained together, and come to respect each other’s skills and capabilities.

“You do realize, *Sir*, that now that you’re official Army you’ll need a proper haircut?”

Lee smiled. “Got that cleared up straightaway, Stout,” he replied. “Since my work with you Muggles is classified, I’m a secret agent wizard, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So if I followed your example and shaved my head to look just like my arse, everyone would want to know why and I’d blow my cover!”

Neville laughed at the banter, appreciating the joke a bit more than the others. The boys had been especially proud of selecting “Buzz” as his nickname, playing on the irony so often used in these situations. Just as a short soldier was nicknamed “Legs,” or a bald airman, “Curly,” someone with the surname “Longbottom,” needed to be called some variant of “Short-top.” The consensus choice, “Buzz,” reflected not only the preferred military hairstyle (short back and sides), but also Neville’s job as a pilot. And that “Buzz Longbottom,” wasn’t all that far off from the *Toy Story* character’s name....well, that put the nickname in the running for “moniker of the year.”

“Alright there, *Rasta*?” Neville asked.

“Been better,” Lee muttered. “Blasted bouncing about.”

Neville tried to lighten the mood with a self-deprecating story.

“Hey Lee, I’d ever tell you how we got from Hogwarts to the Department of Mysteries?”

Lee shrugged as he leaned back into his seat. “You flew, right?”

Neville nodded. “That’s right, but not on a broom.”

“What did you use, then?” asked Scott “Andy” Anderson, Neville’s partner.

“Thestrals.”

Lee’s eyes went wide. “No bloody way...thestrals?”

Neville nodded as his partner asked, “What’s a thestral?”

“It’s a kind of flying horse,” he replied. “Ugly as sin...skin feels like a snake’s...I couldn’t see ’em, but Harry says they look like a ‘goth pegasus,’ if

that makes any sense to you.”

“What, they pull a carriage, or something?” Lee asked.

Neville shook his head. ““No, we flew bareback...so anyway, I don't know if was the flying bit or the fact that we knew we might be heading straight into a trap, but I was sicker than a kneazle the whole trip.” Nodding towards the barf bag that Lee still held, he added, “Those things would have been right handy that night.”

“Why is that? Couldn't you just lean over to the side and let the puke fall to the ground?”

“Yeah, I tried that...but half ended up on Ginny flying next to me and the other half hit my thestral's wing and snapped back to hit me in the face.”

Lee laughed at the image. “Clumsy git...no wonder you never had a chance chasing that witch last year!”

Neville got a bit chuffed. “Hey, I'd like to see how much control you'd have when you're hurling vomit off a thestral's back at ninety miles an hour.”

Andy jumped in. “Wait a minute...I'd like to think I've gotten used to the idea of your world, but...you're saying that you rode on the back of an invisible flying snake-skinned horse from Scotland all the way to London?”

“Yeah.”

“And that once you got there you still had enough in you to knock off a pack of Death Eaters?”

“Well,” Neville replied modestly, “it wouldn't have turned out nearly as well if we hadn't gotten some help once there.”

The Muggle warrior shook his head in disbelief, and chided himself once again for forgetting that at least some of the kids he'd been assigned to work with were battle-hardened veterans.

Momentarily forgetting his ill-ease, Lee looked over at Katie's snoring broom-buddy.

“Oy, Stout,” he asked, “How in Merlin's name can ‘New Six’ fall asleep with all the noise?”

His partner wryly replied, “Better now than in the middle of it, eh?”

“Rather noisy, though, isn't it?”

The Muggle shrugged his shoulders. “Me, Andy and New Six have had a few years of practice.”

Neville squinted at his partner; for all of the training that they'd undertaken over the past few weeks, he knew precious little about Sergeant Major Anderson's background.

“So, Andy, that's why your maroon caps don't look like they came right out the box like the rest of ours?”

The wizened warrior grinned. “Noticed that, did you?” he asked. “Good spot, lad...we were Paras before The Regiment came calling...still are, depending on who is asking.”

Having received a crash course on Muggle military and counter-terrorist unit organizations, Neville was able to make sense of this response.

“So you three were in The Parachute Regiment when the SAS recruited you, which was where MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ found you and asked you to join the Clan Air Force, but now that the Phoenix Teams are regular army attached to The Parachute Regiment, you're back where you started?”

“Bit of a boondoggle, eh, Buzz?” his partner asked. “When ‘Sport and Social’ invites you to visit Hell and back, it's all Official Secrets-like, so on the books it's like you never left your old unit.”

“That means...your undercover assignment is to act like you're assigned to your official unit?”

The army man laughed. “Gotta give the REMFs some paperwork to push across their desks, now, don't we?”

The helicopter started to drop and banked to starboard. Katie's Phoenix Team partner woke instantly, as if the directional change was an alarm clock. He immediately checked his gear and began searching his jumpsuit for more places to stuff silver bullets.

“Oy, New Six, sure you've got enough spares?” asked Katie.

Sergeant Beemer looked up at his partner and smiled. “You know what they say, Cupid...you can never have enough ammo, beer or sex.”

“Hey, New Six,” Andy called out, “Mind their tender ears.”

“Oh, sorry, forgot,” the Para replied with a grin. “Never have enough ammo, fizzy drinks and feel-ups.”

In response to his partner's fish-eyed glare, New Six muttered an unapologetic apology. “Sorry, Cupid.”

Katie chuckled. “No worries, New Six...just take care to remember what my boyfriend can do with his wand.”

“Didn't think you the type to kiss and tell, Luv...erm, sorry...Ma'am,” her partner replied sheepishly.

As Katie and her Muggle partner were bantering, Sergeant Major Anderson looked out the cabin window and spotted a green flare shoot sparks up into the darkened sky. A quick radio exchange with Ron, who was in the other helicopter, confirmed that they'd arrived at their destination. He stood up in the aisle and grabbed a chair back for balance.

"Alright Ladies and...Ladies," he growled (acknowledging Katie and Alicia's presence within the cabin), "we've got the go to land...make sure your food trays are up and seats locked in an upright position."

Three Apache attack helicopters hovered as protective guards as the two 33 Sq transport helicopters discharged its passengers onto the top of a large hill that overlooked the hamlet of Bellever. As the rock outcrops that sat atop this tor were too uneven for a hard landing, the Phoenix Team members had to load all of their gear onto their backs and jump down a few feet whilst their helicopters hovered just above the surface.

Sergeant Major Anderson took point and headed for the hilltop, with Ron and the others close behind with wands and rifles drawn. They were met by Luna and the squadron leader of a Royal Marine commando unit (deployed from their nearby barracks in Plymouth). Captain Ronald Weasley found it hard to salute to the marine commando and hug his girlfriend at the same time. That he chose to kiss Luna before acknowledging the squadron leader didn't do much to improve on the Muggle military man's first impressions of the teen-aged Deputy Commanding Officer.

"Suh!" he shouted. "Lieutenant Nightsong, Four Two Commandos, Suh!"

Ron shrunk back a bit from the shouted greeting, then recovered just well enough to approximate a responding salute.

"Erm...Ron... Captain Ron Weasley, First Paras...nice to meet you."

"Suh, the landing zone perimeter is secure...ready for your additional orders, Suh!"

Ron thought for a moment as he scanned the horizon and took in the positions of the helicopter gunships. "Are the tingos still down there in the woods?"

"Suh, yes suh!"

Luna interrupted while Ron was looking over the potential field of battle. "Danny, why don't you be a good little color and go back inside your tent before the pixies come back?"

The burly Royal Marine gave the witch a frightened look. "Yes, Ma'am," he replied. He then turned towards Ron.

"Dismissed, Lieutenant," said Neville's broom-buddy.

Too scared at the thought another "pixie attack," the commando ran off without realizing that an NCO had dismissed him.

Sergeant Major Anderson, who had come to enjoy Luna's eccentricities over the few times that they'd met, turned to her and asked "Good little colour?"

The witch nodded. "He did say he was a royal marine, didn't he?" she asked. "Although I can't see how a Muggle could be two shades of blue at the same time."

"Where did you send him off to, then?" Ron asked.

"Oh, he has a tent set up on the other side of the hill," Luna replied. "He called it an 'empty-tent,' which was weird since there seemed to be plenty of things inside of it."

Anderson grinned at the reference to the "EMP-tent," a mobile structure designed to protect electronic communication equipment against pulses of strong electro-magnetic radiation. Whilst originally designed for the nuclear battlefield, the same principles were involved when it came to screening sensitive electronic gear from disabling magical energy.

"The tent's where they've got the Muggle communication gear set up," he explained to the witches and wizards. He then asked, "Is there a reason why he's worried about the pixies?"

Luna smiled, "Not really...the werewolves have scared them off of the moors, at least for tonight."

Ron nodded as he activated his Art Club badge. "Time to bring in the others," he said. Fred, Harry and Hermione popped in a few moments later. Once Hermione arrived she immediately sought out her parents for a group hug.

"So what have you got for us?" Harry asked.

Luna smiled as she led them to a large wooden box. "Your goblin friend dropped this off about a half-hour ago...it was the funniest thing when Danny the Muggle thought the goblin was a Cornish pixie." She then added, "Well, I thought it funny, even if Earchewer didn't."

Ron laughed as he opened the lid of the container. "Okay the goodie bags are here, one per team," he announced.

The Muggle members of each Phoenix Team stepped up to the box, swapped out their cow-leather gloves for dragonhide, and threw a dragonhide bag over their shoulder. Within each bag were quaffle-sized silver balls, each covered with sharp barbed hooks.

"What do you think, Andy...something you guys can work with?" asked Harry, as Neville's partner hefted one of the balls in his hand.

Bit heavier than our frags, but we should be able to manage...any flash when we go off?"

"Don't think so," Harry replied. "They activate on contact, but there's no explosion."

"Well that's good," Andy replied. "Won't have to worry about the thermal's blinding us."

"Don't have to worry about the shrapnel this way, either," Ron added. He then turned towards Fred, who was still flying solo with Brian in hospital.

"Think you can fly and bomb at the same time, Lieutenant?"

Fred snorted at his younger brother's cheek. Fishing out a beater's bat from the equipment cache, he replied, "Like a day on the pitch, Captain Ickle Ronnikins."

Harry smiled as he looked towards the lightening eastern horizon and then down to his watch. "Right, we've got forty minutes at best before daybreak. Hermione...any chance we can get anti-app wards over the forest in time?"

The bushy-haired witch looked over towards the woods and shook her head. "Need a good hour and a half, and that's with us getting some help from the goblins."

"Fair enough," said Harry. He turned towards Ron, and gave him a tight-lipped grin. "Let's go, Captain."

Ron returned the smile and saluted. "Yes, Sir!" He then turned towards the others. "Oy, you heard the Major, grab your brooms and mount up!"

The Phoenix Team pilots, who had already spread their gear out in preparation for this order, all stepped over to their modified Bluebottles and yelled, "Up!"

The brooms that would carry them into battle that night were a bit different from the Firebolts that Harry had provided the Phoenix Teams for their first mission. While the racing brooms could accommodate two riders, they were really designed for solo flights above a Quidditch pitch. Having found it difficult to maintain turns and near impossible to provide the co-pilots the space needed to perform their tasks, the Clan Air Force had switched over to Bluebottle Nines soon after the Battle of Little Wizarding.

The Bluebottle family of broomsticks were something like the minivans of the wizarding world. At close to seven and one half feet in length, they weren't pretty and couldn't travel half as fast or maneuver a third as well as a racing broom. Bluebottles were, however, just the thing for the magical family intent on safety and comfort. Standard features in the Nine line included three rows of bench-style cushioning charms, never-full saddle bags, semi-permeable windshields, surround-sound WWN, and six cup-holders (ever-full pumpkin juice cups optional). Given the intended customers, these brooms were also incredibly durable and reliable, with intensive internal shielding in place to ward off accidental magic (something not uncommonly discharged from infant witches and wizards when they're flying about with mum and dad).

The Weasley Twins had been scheming big schemes on how to adapt these brooms for military use, but with only a few weeks of time (and AK-resistant armor a more pressing priority) they had only been able to make a few simple mods to the seating and steering.

The front bench of each Bluebottle broom was replaced by a single pilot's seat, and pushed back a good two feet down the handle (almost to where the ripped-out middle bench used to be). The steering zone was then expanded significantly, so that the pilot could fly the broom with hands positioned anywhere along the first three feet of broom handle. This allowed the broomstick pilot to fly either sitting upright mid-handle, or to lie down in an aerodynamic prone position (with chests magically cushioned along the top of the handle).

While the upright flying position was more comfortable, once the enemy was engaged the pilots leaned forward and flew by their bellies. This not only gave their co-pilots a clear forward field of fire from the rear bench, but got their trigger fingers within reach of the belt-fed M240B machine gun that was fix-mounted just off the handle. Each of these machine guns was fed from a never-full saddlebag stuffed with an obscenely long split-link belt of 7.62 mm bullets that offered more than twenty minutes of sustained rapid-rate fire. The broom's gun mount also had a dragonhide scabbard attached to it, from which the wizard or witch could safely store (and quickly retrieve) their wand.

As the pilots and co-pilots of each broomstick swung their legs over and belted into their cushions, Ron gave Luna a flight helmet (with the moniker "*Radish*"). With a smile and kiss she grabbed her own bag of equipment and hopped behind Ron. After a Muggle and magical communication check, The Prince's Own First Magical Squadron lifted off the ground.

They were barely ten feet off the ground when the Muggle soldiers began humming a tune over the radios. Hermione couldn't help but laugh when some of the witches and wizards joined in.

"So I take it that viewing *Apocalypse Now* was part of Phoenix Team training?"

Sergeant Major Anderson replied. "Yes, Ma'am...just a bit of introduction to Muggle arts & entertainment."

"Dare I ask what other bits of Muggle culture you've exposed them to?"

Roger Granger laughed at his daughter's question. "Of course you should dare, you are a Gryffindor, aren't you?"

"Don't *you* dare, Roger," Emily chided.

"Yes Dear," he replied. "Guess it's up to you, then, Dean."

"You got it, Doc!" replied his wife's broom-buddy, using a voice that, to Hermione, sounded a bit cartoonish. She soon found out why, as her fellow Muggleborn led the squadron in singing Elmer Fudd's adaptation of the Wagnerian aria.

"Kill da wee-wolf! Kill da wee-wolf! Kill da wee-wolf!"

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The mission was vitally important, but also relatively simple, which suited the Phoenix Teams just fine.

Ron had given Luna a warning just before bugging out to St. Mungo's, and she had responded by grabbing her broomstick and flying over to the Burrow. From there she was able to track the werewolf pack on broomstick to Dartmoor, which was the largest and wildest expanse of open land within all of Southern England. Fenrir Greyback had planned on waiting out the night with his pack in the Park's moorlands. But as it happened, Luna shared message mirrors with Ron, whose Art Club badge connected him to Hermione, who had spent most of evening under 10 Downing Street elbow-to-elbow Britain's Minister of Defense, who had his own ways of communicating with those under his command. And so it came to pass that several hundred soldiers and marines who were presently training at Dartmoor's commando training center, wilderness survival school, and artillery training grounds were hastily mobilized for an unplanned live-fire exercise.

As Her Majesty's Armed Forces were a bit short on silver ammunition, the immediate orders for these ground and air forces were to guard the inhabited areas that bordered the Park until wizards could arrive. Helicopter gunships were sent aloft, and tasked with keeping visual contact with the pack (using thermal imaging video equipment), as well as encouraging the werewolves to stay together within an uninhabited portion of the Park.

There had been a brief, but spirited debate on whether silver weapons were really needed when an Apache helicopter pilot was armed with twin machine guns that delivered 30 mm bullets at a rate of 10 rounds per second. There was little research on the regenerative rates of werewolves, and an overwhelming desire to keep the werewolves from scattering (the last thing anyone wanted was werewolves running off in fifteen different directions), The question was therefore tabled for future examination, and the helicopters were ordered not to fire directly on the Pack.

The Apache gunship pilots quickly learned that the werewolves paid no heed to warning shots, and could only be shepherded away from inhabited areas with strafing fire that drew blood. The werewolves, in turn, learned that large caliber bullets stung like hell.

Fenrir took two bullets in the shoulder the first time he ran into a spray of canon fire, and a third to his thigh a few moments later. Without an obvious way to retaliate against an unseen opponent, he quickly decided to run for forest cover. The gunships followed along, using their guns as airborne sheep dogs. By the time the Phoenix Teams arrived on the scene, nearly every Pack member was licking a bullet wound or two within an isolated area of plantation woodlands (which, by strange coincidence, was owned by the Prince of Wales and the Duchy of Cornwall).

Had this been a natural woodlands, Fenrir's pack would have been safe even from magical attack. For despite aspirations and comparisons with Luke and Leia's Speeder chases through Endor's forests, TPOMS' broomsticks and their pilots weren't nimble enough to bob and weave around trees haphazardly growing within a "normal" woodland...especially at night.

But this wasn't a wild woodlands...it was a managed tree farm, with conifers that were planted in straight rows and trimmed of all branches less than ten feet from the ground. In addition, each Phoenix Team member was wearing the same kind of thermal imaging eyewear that the gunship pilots had used to find and track the pack. As so it was quite manageable to have one-half of the Prince's Own broomstick cavalry enter one end of the woods and to act as Muggle "beaters" by driving the pack out to the other side, where the balance of the squadron would wait with silver weaponry.

George, Katie, Alicia and Lee peeled off from the squadron and formed a four-abreast line that swung gracefully around and down towards the ground surface just south of the woods. Neville, Seamus, Fred and Dean continued on and swung down into a four-abreast position on the opposite side of the plantation. Ron and Luna hovered above the "beaters" while Harry and Hermione stood sentinel above and slightly behind the "catchers."

Harry counted out thirty-five rows of trees that formed thirty-four different corridors. "Oy, Keeper, any intel on which of these rows the tangos are holed up in?" he asked.

"Negative, Seeker." Ron replied. "We'll need to scout 'em out."

He then ordered Katie and Alicia to fly into the woods, just far enough to determine how well their thermal imagers could spot targets in adjacent rows. Two minutes later, Ron announced that the heat signals of adjacent broom pilots could be spotted six rows apart.

"Roger that, Keeper," said Harry. He then ordered Neville and Dean to fly down the east and west forest margins, checking for tangos along the plantation's edges. When they reported that no heat signals could be spotted from the sides, Hermione did the math.

"Ron, line the beaters up five rows apart, starting from the tenth row."

"Tenth row from which side, Hermione?"

"Doesn't matter," she replied, swallowing her annoyance at Ron's inability to logic out the answer himself.

"Copy that."

As the beaters spread out and started to fly down the rows of evergreens, the squadron heard Lee's partner call out a warning.

"Be vewy, vewy, qwuiet....we're hunting wee-wolfs. eh-eh-eh-eh!"

"Pipe down, Stout," admonished Seamus's partner, "or you'll be hunting fwoaters on watrine duty."

Woger, that, Bwade," the Muggle warrior replied cheekily.

Katie Bell announced contact before the dialogue could deteriorate any further.

"Got two piles of tangos, three rows to my right and about two hundred feet ahead."

"Targets confirmed," announced Alicia, who, being on Katie's right wing, spotted the werewolves a few rows to her left.

"What's the count?"

"Can't tell for sure," Alicia replied. "They're in two dog piles...I'd say at least ten total."

"Comments?" Harry asked over the radio.

Sergeant Major Anderson took this as a request for advice and replied. "Have the flanking beaters continue down their rows to check for strays or sentinels. Then have them pull back and take attack positions in rows between Comet and Cupid."

"With the catchers all waiting on one end," Sergeant Beemer added, "might also want to have the gunships cover the east and west flanks, in case they run sideways."

"Number One?" Harry asked.

Radio silence indicated to Hermione that the squadron's Muggle cultural training hadn't included *Star Trek, The Next Generation*.

"He means you, Ron," she stated.

"Oh." The wizard strategist paused for a moment. "Sounds like a plan to me, Major."

"Well, then Number One," Harry quipped. "*Engage*."

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When military historians were finally allowed, several decades later, to compile an official history of The Prince's Own First Magical Squadron, great care would be taken to accurately and honestly portray the group's exploits. As a result, there would never be references made to a "Battle of Dartmoor," as that would imply having an enemy that actually fought back, or an encounter in which injuries were sustained.

In reality, there was neither.

George and Lee's reconnaissance of the enemy's flanks confirmed that Fenrir and his pack were huddled within adjacent open paths in the near center of the plantation. They pulled back to the south and, with Katie and Alicia on their wings, reentered the forest along the target rows. Without any real need for fancy acrobatics Lee and George were able to steer one-handed, such that they could wield barbed silver portkeys along with their co-pilots.

The werewolf pack was quite literally in the dark, and licking their wounds gained from the Apache's gunfire. The magical energy that usually powered their were-enhanced senses was instead being used to heal non-lethal bullet wounds and manage the associated pain. When coupled with the assault's silent, above-ground approach from the downwind direction, the werewolves never saw, nor smelled, nor heard what hit them.

The four Gryffindor pilots pulled their brooms up to a full stop about a hundred feet away from and ten feet above the two groupings. The high-tech Muggle thermal imaging equipment that was strapped onto their helmets fed high-definition false-color images of not only the targets, but each other. It was therefore easy for all eight members of the four attacking broom teams to follow Stout's hand signals, as he silently counted down from three, to two, to one.

George and Lee watched the signals from prone positions that gave their broom buddies a wide-opened field of fire. When the count went to zero they tossed their spherical portkeys underhanded towards the targets. Not waiting to see whether they were on target, the two immediately urged the brooms forward, closing the distance to the packs in order to make any follow-up shots easier to complete.

Grenade training ensured that the portkeys lobbed by the SAS-trained co-pilots sailed true, with each striking the flank of a resting werewolf. The silver barbs drew blood that immediately activated the portkeys, and sent the target off towards Gringott's. But as the targets were part of a pile, and in direct contact with several others in the pack, these initial two portkeys bagged a total of seven victims.

The remaining pack jumped up off the ground and separated. Half of the werewolves turned tail and ran in the opposite direction, where they were met by the catcher's hurled portkeys. The other half decided to stand and fight, and leapt towards the attacking beaters. This, however, placed them within the sights of the broom-mounted automatic rifles, which, unlike the helicopter's guns, were loaded with silver bullets.

In the end, none of the werewolves managed to get within twenty feet of a broomstick. Four were instantly killed by gunfire; two more died from silver bullet wounds after they were transported to the secured vault beneath the goblin's bank. The balance, including Fenrir Greyback, were tagged by silver balls and swept from the field of battle.

Not wishing to drag the werewolf carcasses out of the woods, or to risk a surprise regeneration, the Phoenix Team sent the now-transformed bullet-ridden were-cadavers off to the goblins with portkeys tossed towards them from point-blank range. The squadron reassembled atop the tor, where Danny the Royal Marine informed them that their transport was waiting for them at Camp Okehampton, some five miles west.

The eastern horizon was a mixture of greys and light blues as the squadron left the moorlands. Calls to London established that there were no

ongoing battles, or need for the Phoenix Teams to immediately deploy elsewhere. Harry, acting as the squadron's Commanding Officer, therefore ordered the squadron to report to Windsor Castle for some much needed breakfast and rest.

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As the others loaded their equipment and flew off to meet their helicopters, Hermione asked Harry, "Think we have enough room in the Round Tower to house all of the troops?"

Harry smiled. "Oh, I imagine the Queen might have a few spare bedrooms, if need be." He then added, "Pity you weren't offered a commission, or I'd order you straight to bed."

"So you're assuming," Hermione replied, "that they'd have offered me a lower-ranking commission than yours?"

Harry snorted. "Well, I am the commanding officer."

Hermione stepped forward and pulled Harry into a hug. "What you seemed to be forgetting, Major Potter, is that the British military serves the Queen under the direction of her civilian government."

"So? You aren't Prime Minister yet," Harry teased.

Hermione reached down and gave Harry's bum a squeeze. "No, but I am the Prime Minister's Senior Advisor...shall I put in a call and ask him to order you into my bed?"

"You wouldn't dare."

"I wouldn't? After all, Tony is a close friend of the family."

"True...but wait...this is the same bed we're talking about, isn't it?"

"Maybe," Hermione teased.

Harry looked off over the moors. "So how long will it take for the Pumas to get the Squadron back to Windsor?"

"Forty minutes, or so...why?"

"Oh," said Harry, "I was just thinking about having a bit of fun in the water."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "Haven't we played with the dolphins long enough for one night?"

Harry looked down, shook his head, and waggled his eyebrows. "Sounds kinky, but I don't think that they'd all fit."

And before she could banter back, he pulled Hermione close and side-along apparated her directly into the Love Shack's hot tub.

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Sunday, July 8, 5:30am

Round Tower, Windsor Castle

It didn't take Hermione Granger very long to determine that Harry had brought her straight into the Love Shack's hot tub. It also didn't take her very long to express her displeasure over the fact.

"Harry James Potter," she shouted, "if you think that you can just side-along me wherever you want whenever you want..."

"What, don't you like surprises?"

"Not when they get my spare ammo all soggy."

"Well, we can take care of that presently," Harry quipped, as he reached to undo her equipment belt.

Slapping his hand away, Hermione stepped out of the tub and pulled her flight helmet off of her head. "Don't even think about it," she replied. Cocking her head towards the front of the tent, she added, "Besides, we've got company."

"What?" Harry yelled, unable to hear her clearly now that she'd removed her charmed helmet.

Hermione looked towards Harry, shook her head, and put her helmet up against her mouth. "WE'VE GOT COMPANY!"

Harry winced as his hands flew to his helmet and pulled it off.

"Didn't have to shout," he muttered. "Besides, not for another forty minutes, right?"

"Clean the hormones out of your ears and have a listen, Major Potter."

Harry followed her orders. He then shut his eyes, shook his head, and reached for his Art Club badge.

Steve?"

"Yes, Major Potter."

"Hermione and I have redeployed to our Round Tower apartment...any particular reason why it sounds as if we're billeting an army battalion?"

The MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ agent chuckled. "Actually, now that the House Cav's Scimitars are in place, it's more like two battalions."

"Really?"

"Yeah...might be worth a look from your roof. I understand that the Prince is up there right now."

"Right then, Potter out."

"Makes sense," Hermione said, as Harry stepped out of the tub. "This is, after all, part of the Castle's defenses."

Harry shook his head in disappointment. "Promise to hop back into the tub with me just as soon as we get back?"

"With or without our ammo belts?"

"Without, as in 'without wearing anything'," Harry quipped.

"Middle of a war," muttered Hermione, "and he's got a one-track mind."

"Would you want me any other way, Sweetheart?"

Hermione smiled, grabbed Harry's hand, and reluctantly shook his head.

"I thought not," said a grinning Harry, as they walked out of the tent.

Even with Steve's warning, they were surprised by the armed challenge as they made their way up the Round Tower's spiral stairway. The situation was rather tense, as the troopers weren't part of the Windsor's normal security detail, and didn't recognize the two teens. It took a call into "Castle Command" to sort things out.

The soldier who made that call soon regretted the decision, as the doors behind him opened and His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales stepped forward still dressed in his Parachute Regiment uniform.

"Is there a problem here, Lance Corporal?"

The soldier looked over his shoulder and nearly wet his fatigues.

"No Sir...sorry Sir, I mean...colonel, erm..Your Royal Highness...it's just that...well, this man's maroon beret and uniform scream out 'British Army' but his security badge reads "MI-5."

The Prince chuckled. "You might consider a situation where one man wears more than one hat...like me, perhaps?" He then stepped past the sentinel, extended his hand, and said, "Or seven or eight, for that matter...welcome back, Major Potter, Dame Hermione."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Harry replied.

"I trust your latest foray was a success?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Harry replied. "At least that little part of the problem has been taken care of."

"Excellent," the Prince replied, as he escorted Harry and Hermione towards the roof. "On such a horrible night, every bit of good news helps."

The guard stationed at the rooftop exit saluted smartly and opened the door, allowing the early-morning sun to spill in with the sounds of a castle's defenses coming alive.

The rooftop was buzzing with activity. Two-man sniper teams armed with binoculars and Barrett rifles shared space along the ramparts with artillery scouts and anti-aircraft batteries armed with surface-to-air missiles. A staging area had been established away from the roofline, where men were busy offloading a palette of supplies that had just been delivered by helicopter.

Harry and Hermione were introduced to the Prince's military aide-de-camp and three other smartly dressed officers who were liaisons between the Royals and the troops currently protecting them. As they were given a tour of the ramparts the Prince pointed out units and recounted their overnight deployments.

"These men on the roof and those below guarding the Upper Ward and the gates are with the Foot Calvary battalion based in Victoria Barracks," he noted.

"We had the snipers in place early yesterday evening, when the West End was evacuated. Once all hell broke loose at ten the balance of the battalion was mobilized."

Taking in all of the heavy equipment now positioned on the Round Tower's rooftop, Harry asked, "How did they get all of this equipment up here?"

Helicopter transport," the Prince replied. "Wally thought it'd be best to wait for Dame Hermione to adjust the Tower's protections before we started running troops through the front doors."

"Make sense," Hermione replied. "Is there still public access to the Castle?"

The Prince shook his head. "Authorized personnel only."

"Good idea," said Harry, "although I bet Dean Conner's not going to be pleased about Sunday services."

"Oh, he assured me that they'll still be held," the Prince replied. "And that he's expecting to see you in the pews if at all possible."

"That...actually sounds like a good idea," said Harry, thinking that the vicar might offer some additional support for Hermione's post-battle stress. He then pointed towards the missile batteries stationed along the ramparts, and asked, "What type of weapons are these?"

"The platform-mounted systems are Starstreak HVM's, Major Potter," one of the liaisons replied. "Primarily used for short range surface-to-air attacks."

"And those bigger missile tubes on the ground?"

"Short-range, fire-and-forget light anti-tank missiles," the liaison replied.

"Thinking of certain targets, Your Highness?"

The Prince nodded, and noted, "You did have giants and dragons on the list of possible adversaries."

"Then we might want to look at punching power, sir," Harry replied, as he looked closely at the SAM battery launch tubes. "Dragonhide might be a little tougher than metallic fuselages."

Smiling, the Prince asked, "Don't suppose you have a dragon laying about that we could use for target practice?" Without waiting for a response he then turned towards his aide and instructed him to look into the installation of heavy-duty wire-guided TOW missiles.

Looking out beyond the castle's walls, the Prince then picked out roadblocks associated with an outer perimeter. "Those boys are with the armoured reconnaissance squadron out of Combermere Barracks. Up above, of course, we've got Joint Helicopter Command keeping watch."

Hermione and Harry were pleased to see that the checkpoints at each of the Castle's main entrances were just inside her attenuated wards. "How tight are they monitoring the authorized personnel that are coming into the castle?"

"Complete lockdown," the Prince replied. "We're taking your warning about Imperius curses seriously...the only way into the castle right now is by helicopter transits flying out of RAF Northolt."

"Excellent," Harry replied. The mention of helicopter transit prompted him ask about the Phoenix Team helicopters. The RAF officer representing the Joint Helicopter Command informed Harry that the two Pumas had already been cleared to land on the helicopter pad that had established in the Lower Ward's courtyard.

"Hope you don't mind, Your Highness," said Harry, "but I thought it best to bring the Phoenix Teams here for the time being."

"Quite all right, Major Potter," the Prince replied. "We hadn't gotten to a discussion of where exactly TPOMS would be stationed, and the extra wands will be welcomed...which reminds me that we need to consider augmenting the magical side of the Queen's security."

"You mean beyond the Queen's Wizard?" asked Hermione.

"Precisely," the Prince replied. "While having an Order of Arthur member permanently assigned to her security detail means that you two are only a badge-call away, Agent Wall can't be expected to work 24/7, and there are situations where he can't be expected to be by her side."

"Like where?"

"Harry," Hermione chided gently, "Start with the Royal dressing rooms and use your imagination from there."

"Oh, yeah, guess you're right," Harry replied. "So we're talking about a witch, and preferably one that can more or less move into the Castle and travel with the Queen at all times?"

"That's one possibility," the Prince replied. "Were it not for the fact that Dame Hermione's talents were currently being so brilliantly exploited by the Prime Minister's office and his Intelligence Ministers, we'd ask her."

Hermione blushed. "You are too kind, Your Highness."

"Not at all, Dame Hermione," the Prince replied. "He said as much himself just an hour ago when Her Royal Majesty broached the topic."

"Really?"

"Yes, really, Dame Hermione...from the way he was zealously guarding your time and talent I half expected him to announce intentions to adopt you and offer the spare bedroom above Number 10."

"Oh my," the red-faced witch replied. "I'm afraid that my parents might object to the adoption."

"And I'd object to the change in bedrooms," Harry whispered, earning himself an elbow to the ribs.

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Harry, Hermione and the Prince of Wales were at the helicopter-landing pad to personally greet the Phoenix Teams as they arrived. They even helped off-load their equipment. And if anyone wondered why the Prince of Wales was walking within the castle grounds carrying a seven-and-a-half foot long broom, they kept it to themselves.

There was more than enough magically-supplied hot water between the Round Tower's three magical tents to offer each of the Phoenix Teams members the chance to clean up. Sir Evan, who was now back from his Rookery deployment, was happy to host Andy and the other Muggle military men. They, in turn, were more than happy to closely examine Sir Evan's artwork as they waited their turn to shower and shave.

The Grangers offered up their magical lavatory to Fred, George, Katie, Alicia and Lee, which allowed Harry and Hermione to show off the Love Shack to Luna and Harry's four Gryffindor dormitory mates. Needless to say, the tacky-romantic décor created quite an impression, and no small amount of grief to be delivered onto Harry's shoulders by his male friends.

"Bloody hell, Harry," said Dean, "this is the same tent you had pitched on Privet Drive, isn't it?"

"Erm, yeah, it is."

"Did it come this way, or did you and Hermione doll it up this way to suit your moods?" asked a smirking Seamus.

"It came this way, thank you very much," said Harry.

"Where did you get it?" asked Dean.

"Headmistress gave it to me," Harry replied.

"Really?" asked a smirking Neville. "Reckon I might like the way the new Headmistress will run Hogwarts when we return, then."

With all of their teasing, the boys failed to notice Hermione as she slipped into the back room with Luna. By the time that Harry tried to show them in the door was locked, and it was only after a five-minute wait that the locking charm was removed and they were allowed inside.

Harry Potter was used to seeing two trails of clothing leading from the bath house door towards the hot tub. That said, he was not used to seeing bras and knickers included within *both* sets of discarded garments.

Ron and Harry took in the sight of their girlfriends' heads floating just above the water's surface and simultaneously uttered their first names in disbelief.

"Hermione?"

"Luna?"

"Hop in, Ronnikins," the Ravenclaw witch replied.

"Just make sure you wash first," added Hermione with a smile.

"Erm you want us to strip down and wash first?" asked Harry.

"That is how we generally do it, isn't it Harry?"

"Erm yeah, but...not when we've got company."

"Oh pish posh, Harry...weren't you the one that made me promise to jump in with you just as soon as we got back?"

"Erm yeah, but...but..."

"Luna, I should know better than to ask what you're wearing, right?" asked Ron.

"Yes," Luna replied matter-of-factly.

"Sweet Merlin's shorts," uttered Dean Thomas.

"Wait a minute...you two girls expect us to strip down starkers and jump in with you?"

"No," Hermione replied patiently. "We also expect you to scrub yourself clean somewhere in between stripping and jumping."

"Bloody Hell!" Ron exclaimed.

"Oh, you...boys," Hermione sighed, as she reached for her wand. The bit of naked shoulder exposed by this movement drew in more breaths as she turned and fired *Obscuro* charms on each of the five young wizards. This spell played with the light rays as they reflected off of each wizard and his clothes, so that they, or anyone looking at them, could only see a blurred image.

Harry thought it similar to the pixilated soft-core porn that he'd once caught Dudley trying to make sense of on a partially-blocked telly channel.

"There, happy now?" asked Hermione. "Luna and I can't see your bits as you wash...oh, and Harry, be sure to show them how to use the scrub brush."

"Erm...yes Dear," he replied, just managing to remember the proper response to that situation.

As Luna and Hermione watched the five blurry Gryffindors strip down and wash up they decided that the blurry images were highly entertaining. The obscuring charms affected the wizards themselves, so scrub brushes didn't always land where they were supposed to. The spells also played havoc with depth perception, and made it hard for each of the boys to keep to their own spaces. Combine these vision problems with soap suds and a slickened floor (which may or may not have been made more slippery by a discrete spell cast from the peanut gallery), and the boys found themselves falling all over themselves. (to their embarrassment and to the Hermione and Luna's amusement).

Finally, after five minutes of slipping and sliding the boys were allowed to join the witches in the now-expanded hot tub. Ron and Harry made sure that Luna and Hermione were sitting next to each other and that they were by their respective boyfriend's sides.

As the group finally began to settle down, Hermione leaned towards Harry and whispered into his ear.

"So, is this as fun as you thought?"

"Not as such."

"Planning on surprising me again with a side-along apparition into the tub?"

"Not anytime soon."

"Good," Hermione replied, squeezing his upper thigh for emphasis.

Harry slumped down into the water and considered the possibility that Hermione's Slytherin streak was just as strong as his.

Especially when Hermione scooted next to him and he felt the fabric of her strapless bikini top scrape against his chest.

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By the time that they had finished their soak, reapplied obscuration charms, and gotten dressed, a House Calvary Unit's quartermaster had arranged for Muggle tents, cots and other supplies to be set up in the Round Tower's upper floor. They had decided to convert this upper story into a barracks, with facilities not only for the Phoenix Teams but for the Muggle military troops that would now be stationed on the Round Tower's roof. Harry had been all set to tuck into some serious conjuring and transfiguration remodeling work, before Hermione quietly reminded him that the expended magical energy might negatively interfere with the laser-guided target acquisition systems and other sensitive electronics now positioned on the roof.

The Prince had arranged for a fresh set of uniforms to be left on each cot, not realizing that the magical hampers installed within each of the three tents had cleaned and pressed the uniforms that had been worn into the field. Luna was surprised to find that a fresh set of black fatigues had been discretely set out for her use inside the Deputy Commanding Officer's tent. On top of this clothes pile was a plastic identification card attached to a lanyard necklace.

Ron snickered when Luna brought this to his attention.

"M...I...5," Luna sounded out, as she looked at the badge. "What does that mean, Ronny?"

"Ask Hermione," he replied brightly. "I'm sure she'll be thrilled to tell you."

Once they'd reassembled, Harry asked for a show of hands on the issue of rest vs. rations. Ron was ready to argue that his growling stomach deserved its own vote, but this wasn't necessary, as the post-combat high was still in place and food won out.

Given the Castle's augmented security forces, the mess had geared up in its own way and changed over from menu service to a buffet line, and from individual tables to long, Great-Hall style seating. Fortunately, the quality of food didn't diminish, as Ron was all too eager to state as heaped food on his plate.

Neville Longbottom ended up sitting across from Harry and Hermione, which gave opportunity to address something that had been nagging him all night.

Gesturing at his uniform, and down the table towards the Phoenix Teams, he asked Harry, "So...what's all this mean now, after last night?"

Harry shared a look with Hermione, then replied. "Don't really know myself, Nev...was there something specific?"

"Well, lots of things," Neville replied. "But maybe I should start with asking what it means to be Lieutenant Longbottom, and a wizard within the Muggle army."

Harry sighed. "When I talked with The Prince last night, he said that the Muggles wanted to be sure that the Phoenix Teams couldn't get into trouble for what happened in the woods with the werewolves."

"What kind of trouble...and from whom...the Muggles or the Ministry?"

"Both, I think," Hermione replied. "In the Muggle world, people can't just go out and kill werewolves, or wizards, or each other, unless it's a clear case of self-defense. Even then, very few Muggles are allowed to carry the kinds of weapons we have to defend ourselves."

"What, you mean those guns?"

Hermione nodded. "That's a huge difference between the Muggle and wizard worlds, Neville...in the wizarding world, everyone can legally carry a concealed, lethal weapon."

"You mean our wands?"

"Exactly," Hermione replied. "Muggles who don't have permission to carry a gun can be sent off to Muggle prison if they get caught. And Muggles who don't have permission to use guns against criminals or terrorists can get into even more trouble."

"So...if you're in the Army you've got permission to carry and use weapons?"

Hermione nodded. "To a limited extent, yes....so long as you are doing your job and follow orders."

"Oh," Neville replied. He then asked, "So what happens if the Muggles say our job is to kill wizards?"

"It won't happen, Nev, unless it's fighting Death Eaters who are trying to kill us," Harry replied. "But if it did happen...well, Muggles have a different set of laws to cover those cases."

"What do you mean?"

"Moral laws," Harry replied. "Killing innocent people is morally wrong, and if a soldier is ordered to do that he can say no and refuse to carry out those orders."

"But won't he get in trouble?"

Hermione shook his head. "The soldier would only get in trouble if they obeyed."

"So how do we learn when it's okay to follow these types of orders and when we have to refuse?"

Harry thought for a moment. "My first thought is that you don't have to learn that kind of thing, Neville....because you already know the answer. You know what's right and wrong, you fight for the light....you just know."

Neville responded with a contemplative nod. "And second thoughts?"

Harry turned to Hermione, who replied, "Neville, the Muggle army has a Code of Conduct that it has to teach you before it can expect you to follow the rules. And as for what's moral during wartime, well...Harry and I are actually working with someone on that."

"In fact," Harry added, "if we're not too terribly busy later this morning we'll introduce you to Dean Conner."

"Thanks, Harry," Neville replied. "I think I'd like that." After a moment's pause and another bite of food he asked a related question. "But what about the Ministry?"

Harry chuckled. "Well, I think that the Prince and Prime Minister will be keeping the Ministry occupied for the next few days...why?"

"The internships," Neville replied. "Today's Sunday, but tomorrow it's the start of another work week for all of the pure-bloods that were drafted into becoming the Ministry's house elves."

"Ah, I hadn't thought about that," Harry replied. "Well, my first response is to tell the Ministry to sod off."

"Harry!" Hermione chided.

"Probably my second response as well," said Harry with a grin. "What's the penalty for calling in sick?"

"Hmm, there's a fine and if you skiv off long enough they say they'll arrest you."

Harry nodded. "Well, we can cover any fines, if need be, and if the Aurors think they've got enough time on their hands to play truant officers, well...."

"What Harry is trying to say is that we'll raise the issue with our bosses," interrupted Hermione. "For now, consider TPOMS to be the same kind of part-time job as the Clan Air Force."

"Thanks, Hermione," Neville replied. "Not that I wouldn't miss the grunge work, but there have been one or two good things about that internship program."

"Oh, what's that?"

"Lunch dates with Susan," chimed in an eavesdropping Seamus.

As Neville blushed, Harry raised an eyebrow, "Really, Nev?"

Hermione swatted her boyfriend's arm. "Oh, shush, Harry. You're the Queen's Wizard, not the Queen's Gossip...it's Neville's business, not yours."

"Yes, dear," Harry replied with a smirk.

Mention of the Queen brought Harry's mind back to an earlier conversation, and the need to expand and rearrange his white board.

"So, Neville, you've been talking with Susan last couple of weeks?"

When Neville smiled and nodded, Harry followed up. "Do you think she likes being an intern, or that she only likes it for the same reasons you do?"

Neville sighed, then admitted that Susan hated her job, but seemed to enjoy her lunches.

"So," Harry reasoned, "if TPOMS were based here, at the Castle, and you were living in the Tower and taking your meals here in the Queen's Mess, and we found a way to offer Susan a job that would do the same..."

"Oh, Harry, quit playing yenta," Hermione said. "Although...it's not a bad idea...haven't got Susan on your org chart yet, have you?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope, not her, or Padma, or Parvati, or Hannah Abbot..."

"Thinking about more than one magical bodyguard, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Nodding, Harry explained, "Well, if the whole point is to find a way to get Neville and Susan some quality time together, then it'd hardly do to have her spending all her time with the Queen, right?"

"Harry," Hermione replied, "Are you planning on bringing the entire Peanut Butter Brigade onto the Royal payroll?"

The Queen's Wizard shook his head. "No, not at all, just minding my responsibilities."

"Responsibilities to the Queen?"

"No, silly," Harry replied. Giving Neville a wink he said, "To my troops."

"Planning on housing these witches-in-waiting in the Tower as well?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "We'll see...it would be up to the Queen. Although...we do have that spare bed in the Love Shack to offer. What do you think, Nev?"

Hermione thought to kick Harry's shin, as Lieutenant Longbottom choked on his Cheerios. The call out of "Attention!" and the scrape of chair legs as the mess hall sprang to its feet saved Neville from further teasing.

"As you were," the Prince called out, as he entered the room and strode towards Harry. The Royal Historian trailed closely behind, looking extremely worried and wringing his hands together as he muttered to himself. When he caught sight of Ron dressed in his captain's uniform the man let out a sharp cry.

"Hush, Mr. Baxter," said the Prince, "We'll soon get to the bottom of this."

"Is something wrong, Your Highness?" Harry asked.

The Prince nodded. "There may be...I'm afraid that I gave our Royal Historian quite a shock when I saw him in the hall just now and mentioned your commissions."

"The orb, Your Highness," the historian begged.

"Ah, yes," the Prince replied. He turned towards Harry and said, "Mr. Baxter is afraid that certain actions taken on our part may have caused some difficulties with treaty obligations."

"How is that, Your Highness?"

"Well...we are not quite certain, but it has to do with your Queen's Wizard's necklace. You don't happen to have it with you, do you?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Harry replied. "It's here in my rucksack...would you like to see it?"

"If it isn't too much trouble, Major."

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he set his rucksack on the table, opened the top flap, and rummaged through the expanded interior. After a few moments he muttered, "There it is!" and fished out the symbol of his station.

"Put it on, Sir Harry, please?" begged the Historian.

"Erm, sure," Harry replied. He held the huge pearl in one hand as he slipped the heavy gold chain over his head with the other. Once he let the orb dangle against his uniformed chest it began to glow with the same amber light displayed when the Queen elevated him to the position of Royal Wizard.

"Oh, thank goodness," the Royal Historian cried, as he held a hand to his heart. "I was so certain that...can't imagine why it wouldn't..."

Harry shifted his confused gaze between the Prince and the Royal Historian.

"Major Potter, there is an explanation, but perhaps it best be provided elsewhere?" asked the Prince.

"Of course, Your Highness," Harry replied, as he closed his rucksack back up. "Might Ron and Hermione join us?"

"Oh, certainly," the Prince replied.

Harry turned to Neville and said, "Lieutenant, once everyone's eaten the squadron can stand down in the Tower Barracks."

"Yes, Sir, Major Potter," Neville replied with a smirking salute.

The Prince led the three teens and the historian out of the mess hall and down the walkway towards the State Apartments that housed the Royal Family. Finding an empty sitting room just inside the entrance, he asked an assistant for tea and bade the others to sit.

"Mr. Baxter, has your heart rate slowed to the point where you can talk again?" the Prince asked with a smile.

"Yes, Your Highness," the historian replied. After a moment he said, "Sir Harry, your right to wield magic as the Queen's Wizard was established by the Treaty of Carlisle signed in the year 1567 by Queen Elizabeth I."

"Yes I remember...you mentioned this back when we met on Privet Drive," Harry replied.

"Yes, well you might also remember me saying that this was a negotiated treaty, with terms and conditions that each of the signature parties, or their successors, were obligated to fulfill," said the historian. "One of those conditions was that the Muggle monarchy would disband her wizard military forces, and authorize the Ministry of Magic's Aurors and Hit Wizards to work in their stead."

"And so," offered Hermione, "you thought that the creation of The Prince's Own Magical Squadron violated that condition?"

"Exactly, Dame Hermione," the historian replied.

"What's that got to do with Harry's gaudy jewelry?" Ron asked.

"Ron!" Hermione chided.

"Quite alright, Dame Hermione," the historian quickly said. "The question was one of treaty enforcement," he stated. "Since the magical and mundane worlds were to be separated, there were concerns at the time of signing about how each side could verify that the other side was honoring its obligations."

"So?" asked Ron.

"So, according to what I've read within the treaty's ancillary documents, a magical way was created to ensure compliance."

"And that has to do with the necklace?" asked Harry.

"Yes, Sir Harry," the historian replied. "That necklace and one other was created with magic linked to the treaty. Based on what I've read, so long as the orb on the Queen's Wizard's necklace glows, he has the right and authority to do magic for the Queen."

"So if the Queen or her Wizard violated the treaty's terms or conditions, his necklace would stop glowing?"

"Yes."

"So...what does that mean?" Harry asked. "Based on what you've said, it should have stopped glowing, right?"

"Not necessarily," the historian replied. "It's possible that there's some sort of loophole about the military commissions that you've been offered. But..."

The historian paused to sip some tea. "It's more likely that this is the result of other concerns at the time of signing...fears that one side or the other would at some point knowingly abrogate the treaty in order to make it unenforceable."

"Why was that a concern?"

"This was the treaty that basically created the Ministry of Magic," the historian explained. "Before this treaty, all British wizards and witches were subject to direct rule by the Muggle monarch, just like their Muggle counterparts."

"So," Hermione reasoned. "The wizards were afraid that some future king or queen might want to go back on the agreement, disassemble the Ministry of Magic, and bring the worlds back together again?"

"Exactly," said Baxter. "So the solution was this. If one side violated the treaty, it lost the rights they gained by treaty, but the other side got to keep their own treaty rights, as well as any rights they had previously given up."

"Oh, my," muttered Hermione.

"What?" Harry asked.

"I don't think you want to know, Harry."

"Why is that?"

The Prince, who had followed the conversation closely, suddenly reached the same disturbing conclusion.

"Because Sir Harry," he explained, "there is the distinct possibility that you have just gained yet another title."

"Let me guess," snarked Ron. "Harry is now the Minister of Magic."

"Oh no," the historian replied. "As the Queen's proxy ruler over the wizarding world, I believe that his correct title would be Duke."

Harry choked on his tea.

Hermione jumped to help.

Ron learned the Heimlich maneuver.

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Once it was determined that the Queen's Wizard would not choke on his latest potential title, the Prince quietly conferred with the Royal Historian, who then made a quick telephone call. He was pocketing his mobile just as the Queen's Wizard regained the ability to not only breathe, but also talk.

"Ruler of the wizarding world?" asked Harry. "Duke?"

The historian cast a nervous look towards the Prince and replied. "Pardon me, Sir Harry, but I may have gotten ahead of myself. My first thoughts were that by governing the magical world in the Queen's stead you would be the Duke of Cornwall."

"Duke of What?" asked Harry sharply.

"The Duke of Cornwall."

"I'm sorry," said Hermione, as she glanced towards the Prince, "but isn't that title already taken?"

The Prince chuckled. "Yes, it is, which is why we've asked our local expert to join us."

As of on cue, a matronly woman was shown into the room.

"Come in, Madame Secretary, come in," welcomed the Prince. "So sorry for asking for your help on an early Sunday morning."

"Quite all right, Your Highness," she replied. "I was staying over with the lockdown in place."

"Madame Secretary," the Prince said with a smile, "may I introduce you to the subjects of your latest research project?" He held an arm out towards the teens.

"We've already met," the Queen's Wizard said, as he reached out his hand. "You were explaining things to us before we were knighted first night of hols, right? Although, I guess we were never formally introduced."

"Yes, milord," the Secretary primly replied. "I'm Purity Exposition, Secretary to the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood."

The Queen's Wizard blushed and said, "Just Harry is fine, Madame Secretary." He then introduced her to Ron and Hermione, who had a slight curl to her lips.

"You wouldn't happen to be related to Basil Exposition over at MI-5?" she asked.

The woman smiled. "He's my younger brother."

Hermione nodded, as the Prince explained that Purity's job involved heraldic research and the administration of the various Orders of Chivalry.

"And you've been doing research on me?" Harry asked.

The Secretary replied. "Yes, milord, I've had a very busy time keeping track of the honours you've accumulated over the past several weeks."

"You're not the only one," Harry muttered.

Taking note of Harry's uniform, the Secretary said, "Added a military commission, milord?"

"Erm, well, yes," Harry stammered, as he glanced towards the Prince.

The Secretary smiled as she turned towards the Historian. "No wonder you called for help. His military rank needs to be placed in between 'Earl Gryffindor' and 'Sir'."

Harry choked on some residuum within the back of his throat.

"What's all this about Earl Gryffindor?" asked Ron. "Thought he was Lord Gryffindor?"

The Secretary explained, "Well, Sir Ronald, within the British Peerage the title 'Lord' refers to any member of the ranks. When Her Royal Majesty restored the House of Gryffindor and created your friend Lord Gryffindor by Letters Patent, his title-behind-the-title was Earl, just like Godric, the last Earl Gryffindor."

"Oh, Merlin, so I'm an Earl, too?" asked Harry.

"It's not so much a new title, but a different way of noting an existing title," the Prince said with a smile. "So that one doesn't really count."

Nodding, the Secretary said, "While you can be addressed as Lord in conversation, your title on paper must include Earl."

Ron asked, "So what is Harry's paper title, then?"

The Secretary replied, "Well, with the new addition of his military rank, the Queen's Wizard should now be addressed on envelope as 'Her Royal Majesty's Wizard, The Right Honorable Earl Gryffindor, Major Sir Harry Potter'."

"Merlin, how would you ever fit that on parchment?" Ron asked.

The Prince chuckled, and replied, "With very compact handwriting."

"So where can be addressed as 'Just Harry'?" the Queen's Wizard asked.

The Secretary replied only with a knowing smile.

"Where does this Duke part fit in?" Ron asked.

The Secretary raised an eyebrow towards the Prince. "Giving me some more work to do, Your Highness?"

"Perhaps, Madame Secretary," the Prince replied. "We were considering the possibilities should Her Royal Majesty once again exert direct rule over the wizarding world of Great Britain."

"Oh, my," the Secretary replied, with almost feral gleam in her eyes. "That would change things, wouldn't it?" She then added, "It's been some time since we've had need of a Lord High Steward."

"Actually, I was thinking about the Duchy of Cornwall," the historian replied.

"Oh, pish posh, Baxtor," the Secretary said. "That wouldn't apply in Lord Gryffindor's case...you should know better."

"So I won't be a Duke?" Harry asked hopefully.

"At least not under those circumstances," the Secretary replied. "Allow me to explain."

As the Queen's Wizard let out an audible sigh, Purity Exposition began to pace back and forth in front of the others as she adopted a lecturer's tone of voice.

"The Duchy of Cornwall is a kingdom-within-a-kingdom established in 1336 by King Edward III, who named his son Edward the first Duke of Cornwall."

"Edward, the Black Prince?" asked Harry, who had received a smattering of English history at his Muggle primary school.

"The very same," Purity replied. "Famous for his nickname, not so famous as the last wizard in direct line for the English throne."

"Really? Well...there's a story behind that I imagine," said Hermione.

"Quite a story," the Prince agreed.

Ron, whose interest level was holding just above that reserved for Binns's lectures, stifled a yawn. "Erm, no offense, Your Highness, but..." He then turned towards Harry and asked, "Would it be alright if I read Hermione's lecture notes later on? I'd like to check in with Mum, and see what's left of The Burrow."

Harry nodded. "Of course," he replied. "She's still at St. Mungo's right?"

"Yeah, with Dad and Ginny...probably Bill and Fleur still too."

Realizing that transportation might be an issue, Hermione suggested that Ron badge-jump to Wally's location at 10 Downing Street, and get a ride from there to the wizarding hospital. Harry mentioned that if The Burrow's fireplace had been destroyed that Ron's family could use The Farm's floo connection. Ron liked that idea, adding that from there he could drive his family to The Burrow using one of the Farm's vehicles.

With the audience head count down, but the average attention level up, Hermione asked more about the Black Prince.

The Royal Historian replied, "Yes, well, as you probably know, by the Fourteenth Century there was a rather strained relationship between the Muggle and magical populations. The arranged marriage between King Edward III and Phillippa of Hainault was designed to fix this situation.

"She was a witch, then?"

"Yes," interrupted the historian, "Witch and princess from the Flemish royal family."

"So Edward III was a Muggle and they were hoping that their first-born son was a wizard that would rule with support from both worlds?" asked Harry.

"Exactly," the historian replied. "And it actually worked, at least at the start. The crown prince displayed accidental magic at the age of six, and his father celebrated by creating the Duchy of Cornwall out of all of magical lands within the Royal real estate portfolio."

"So," Hermione reasoned, "as the Duke of Cornwall, Prince Edward held dominion over parts of the wizarding world even without becoming king?"

"That's right," the Prince replied. "The idea was to get The Black Prince immersed into the wizarding world, and to get the wizarding world more interested in the idea of being loyal subjects of the Crown."

"So did he go to Hogwarts, then?"

The Royal Historian nodded. "Slytherin, Class of 1347."

"So what went wrong?" Harry asked.

"Well, nothing, other than the fact that Edward was a loyal son whose father lived too bloody long," the Prince said with a smile.

The historian picked up the narrative. "This was at the start of The Hundred Years' War between England and France," he explained. "Edward shared the aspirations of his father to fully conquer both Muggle and wizard France, and as a result spent much of his adult years in military encampments on the Continent while his father ruled from home."

"Did he fight against both Muggle and wizard France?" asked Harry.

The historian nodded. "He was supposedly equally versed in sword and wand, and rather successful on both battlefields."

"Making him rather popular, right?" asked Hermione.

"Certainly within Muggle England," the historian replied. "But much less so amongst English wizards."

"Why?"

"He was allegedly very ruthless, particularly against wizard warriors," the historian replied. "But perhaps more importantly, his success threatened the magical power bases of pure-blood families in England."

"How so?"

"The plan was working too well," the Prince answered. "The largest and wealthiest pure-blood families stood to lose much of their power if the Muggle monarchy could rule from a strong position over not only Muggle and magical England, but France as well."

"So let me guess, they offed him?" asked Harry.

The historian nodded. "The Muggle history books say that he contracted a nasty illness in Spain, but in reality Edward was hit with a painfully slow-acting curse that killed him before he could be crowned King."

"At the same time a separate, much more powerful curse was placed against the English throne," the Prince added. "As a result, no child in direct line of succession has been born with magical abilities for over six hundred years."

"Wow," Hermione replied. "I wonder how this curse would have worked when there were disputed successions."

"Actually, Dame Hermione, there is reason to believe that the curse might have actually influenced the outcome of the War of the Roses."

"Really?"

The historian nodded. "Richard III's son, Edward of Middleham, was born a wizard. But this didn't go against the curse, since neither Edward nor his father were in direct line for the throne at the time."

"Richard's older brother, King Edward IV, already had a son," the Secretary added.

"Let me guess, Edward V?" asked Harry.

Sensing the slightest edge of sarcasm in Harry's voice, Hermione reached over and slugged his shoulder. "Stop it, Harry, this is interesting."

"Yes, dear," Harry replied.

"Erm, yes, Sir Harry, it was Edward V," the historian said. "King Edward V, actually, for all of two months once his father died in 1483."

"His uncle usurped the throne," said Hermione, "and declared himself King Richard III."

Indeed," said The Prince. "Richard, the third of his nephews in the Tower of London, and after an Act of Parliament was crowned king in July of 1483." He then added, "Richard's magical son, Crown Prince Edward, died under mysterious circumstances at the age of eleven the following April."

"Probably a few months short of getting his Hogwarts letter," Harry mused.

"And Richard himself died without an heir one year later at the Battle of Bosworth Field," Hermione concluded, "which ended the War of the Roses, and started the Tudor Dynasty."

"Exactly, Dame Hermione," the historian beamed. "I thought they didn't teach English history at your school?"

"Oh," Hermione replied, "I may have read a book or two on the subject."

Harry's snort earned him a second punch to his shoulder.

"Can we return to the Duke of Cornwall situation?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said the historian. "Well, not much to say after that...when the Black Prince died in 1376 his squib son Richard was first in line for the throne, he became Prince of Wales, and the Dukedom was recreated for him."

The Secretary added, "A charter was eventually signed in 1421 that automatically passes the dukedom on to the Sovereign's oldest son and heir, and it's been that way ever since."

"So, I can't be the Duke of Cornwall because we've already got one."

"Yes," the Prince replied. "And by secret codecil it was declared that in the absence of magical abilities, the Duke of Cornwall yields dominion over wizarding Britain to the existing sovereign."

"Who, by convention," added the Secretary, "governed magical Britain on the advice of the Royal Wizard and *Magnum Concilium*."

Translating the Latin, Harry asked, "Where did this Great Council come into play?"

"Ahh," said Mr. Baxter. "Separate bit of history...we'll need to jump back a few centuries."

Harry stifled a sigh, looked to Hermione, and yielded to her enthusiasm.

"Well, if there are no other pressing issues..." he said slowly.

"I think we have a few minutes, right?" asked Hermione. "Now, from what I remember, wasn't the Great Council sort of a proto-Parliament?"

"That's a separate Great Council," Baxter replied. "That council has origins back to the Magna Carta, and is now known as the Privy Council... which, now that I think of it, might also hold relevance to the question of magical rule."

"How is that?"

"Well, as you probably already know, King John II was forced to sign the Magna Carta in 1215 by a group of barons who had revolted under his rule. The most powerful magical Patriarchs were invited to sign the Charter as well, but they declined."

"Does that mean that the Queen's dominion over the magical world was never constrained by the Magna Carta?"

The historian nodded. "I think it was the first clear break by the wizarding world as a whole."

"But moving on," the Secretary interrupted, "King John II's son, Henry III got along better with these barons, who had grown to distrust their magical counterparts, and had insisted on some say over how wizard England was ruled. Henry III therefore created a *Magnum Concilium*, or Great Council of peers of the realm to advise him on wizarding world issues."

"So, if I may summarize," asked Harry. "The Prince of Wales is the Duke of Cornwall, and the Duchy of Cornwall includes some amount of magical properties across England. When the Duke isn't a wizard, control of the wizarding world resides with the sovereign, as advised by the Queen's Wizard and this Magnum Concilium, except there wouldn't be much advice to offer, because Queen Elizabeth gave the wizarding world Home Rule back in the Sixteenth Century based on the Treaty of Carlisle."

Baxter the historian nodded. "In fact, the Magnum Concilium hasn't been convened since 1630."

"So," Harry continued, "Let's say that the Ministry of Magic screwed up their end of the treaty, and have lost their right to home rule...doesn't the power to rule fall back to the Queen?"

"Yes."

Hermione had been processing the conversation to the point where she could ask, "Could the Queen reconvene the Magnum Concilium?"

"Of course," Baxter replied. "And as Queen's Wizard, it would be Sir Harry's job to lead that council."

"Not necessarily," the Secretary stated, "although I agree that the Queen's Wizard is by convention Lord High Steward of the Magnum Concilium."

Just as the Privy Council is led by the Lord President of the Council," said the Prince.

As much as she enjoyed seeing Harry get teased, Hermione thought it might be productive to address a related issue.

"This conversation is predicated on the idea that the wizarding world has lost its right to Home Rule," she noted. "How do we determine not only if this has happened, but how it happened and what needs to be done about it?"

The Prince looked towards the Secretary to the Central Chancery and decided that "Need to Know" issues were about to be addressed.

"Thank you for your time and assistance, Madame Secretary."

Knowing a dismissal when she heard it, the Secretary took her leave.

"Excellent questions, Dame Hermione," said the Prince, once the Secretary had left. "Particularly as we try to work through the question of jurisdiction over last night's magical attacks."

"You said that my glowing orb signaled my right to be Queen's Wizard," said Harry. "I assume that there's a similar signet for either the Minister of Magic or the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot?"

The historian agreed. "The Minister of Magic holds it in his or her capacity as the Queen's Magical Justice of the Peace...it's a necklace quite similar to yours, except that the pearl is mounted with dragons guarding either side."

"Mmmm," said Harry, "Don't think I've seen Fudge or Scrimgeour wearing anything like that."

"I doubt that it's something that they would want to show off," Hermione noted. "It would be a reminder that their power to rule over the wizarding rule was derived from the Muggle monarchy."

"Good point," said Harry. "So how do we force him to let us see whether his orb is glowing or not?"

"There is a formal process outlined within the treaty," the historian replied. "Any of the parties can summon the others."

"Others?" asked Harry. "Aren't there only two signatories?"

"No, Sir Harry, there were three signatories," the historian replied. "At the time of the treaty signing, Scotland was a sovereign kingdom."

"So that explains the location of the signing," reasoned Hermione.

"Scotland had its own Royal Wizard and orb, then?" Harry asked.

"It did, right up to the union of England and Scotland," said the historian. "So, back on point, when a summons is issued, the instruments of power must be displayed during the resulting meeting."

The Prince looked at his watch. "Well, we should present this to Her Royal Majesty later today, then."

The historian asked, "Forgive me, your Highness, but the sooner we issue the summons...."

The Prince shook his head. "Issuing that summons might set in course a chain of events that we should consider most carefully."

Looking down at the tea leaves at the bottom of his cup, he then added, "We've already had one civil war in this country, and we would do well to take steps to avoid a second."

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Special Ambassador, Part 1 (part 1)

Chapter 32 - Hooray for Holyrood

Sunday, July 8, 7:00am
Chamber of Secrets, Hogwarts

Remus Lupin woke from his post-transformation nap and took stock of his situation. Not finding any immediate issues beyond the usual aches and pains, he left the lair of the recently butchered basilisk and walked into Slytherin's Apartment, where he had placed his Art Club badge for safe keeping. After activating the badge he asked,

"Tonks?"

"Good morning, Remus."

"Is it?"

"Depends on your perspective. How do you feel?"

"Sore, as usual, but the wolfsbane worked, the Chamber had room to run, and the goblin snacks hit the spot."

"Great...any venison steaks left for me?"

"Sure, if you don't mind meat lathered in werewolf spit."

"Well, I have swapped spit with a werewolf before."

"Yeah, but did you mind?"

Tonks laughed into her badge. "Jump upstairs and I'll show you."

"Thanks, but I'm still feeling rather wolfish."

"And that's a problem because....?"

"Right. Are you in bed, or do I need to get dressed?"

"No on both questions...I'm in our suite, but you've got work to do, and the clothes you'll need are up here."

Remus replied by badge-jumping to the Auror's position. After a hug, he asked, "So what did I miss?"

"A lot," replied Tonks. She pointed towards a Muggle shirt, tie and suit that she'd laid out for him. "So get dressed...Wally will fill in some of the details when you get to 10 Downing Street."

"The Muggle Prime Minister's?" Remus asked. "What in Merlin's name will I be doing there?"

Tonks smiled as she handed him his Muggle identification badge. "Discovering that your MI-5 credentials are no longer fake, I imagine."

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7:00am, The Rookery, London

Lucius Malfoy woke from his miserable bit of rest and took stock of *his* situation. He then sat up within the only windowless room of his Rookery flat and called for the concierge.

"Gilbert?"

The house-elf popped into the lavatory and looked down upon the one-armed wizard, who lay fully-clothed within an empty bathtub.

"You called, Patriarch Malfoy?"

"Yes, Gilbert...what has happened over the past few hours?"

The house-elf replied, "We have finished repairing the building's structural damage, as well as the interior damage done to the dead patriarch's apartment. The patriarch's body has been taken away, according to the rules. We also took care of the body of the dead witch."

Malfoy nodded. Over the years three other patriarchs and more than thirty of their "guests" had died within the Rookery's walls. Procedures were in place to move bodies out of the building in order to preserve secrets held by both the deceased and the other patriarchs.

"So how did this happen, Gilbert?" Malfoy demanded.

"We are...not certain," the house-elf replied carefully. "The Club is consulting with the goblins that designed the protective wards."

Malfoy shook his head. The house-elf had been tight-lipped about the attack, and refused to identify who had died, or even which floor of the building had been affected. That said, that same level of reticence was something he was counting on to keep his own presence there a secret.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Patriarch Malfoy?"

The elder Malfoy nodded as he sat up in the tub. Deciding that he'd be able to manage most morning foods without need of a knife, he ordered breakfast-in-bath and spent the balance of the morning considering if there was a safer place to hide.

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10:30am, Somewhere Hidden in Salisbury, Wiltshire

Lord Voldemort left his recently upgraded living quarters to join the Death Eaters that had portkeyed back with him to his hideout.

"What is the latest news?" he demanded, as the flaps of the stolen magical tent closed behind him.

"Still no sign of Rookwood and the Carrows, my lord," Bellatrix replied. She then added, "And we have still to hear from Fenrir, although...."

"Yes, Bella?"

Taking comfort in the belief that her master still couldn't hurl Unforgivables with impunity, she replied, "*The Daily Prophet* reports that the werewolf attacks failed."

Had the snake-skinned wizard actually had eyebrows, they would have risen towards his hairline (had he actually had hair).

How so?"

"Well, several werewolves were found dead in the blood-traitor's Diagon Alley shop, but the blood-traitors still live." She then added, "And while the *Prophet* reports that their hovel of an ancestral home in Devon was destroyed, their family still lives."

"So what of Greyback and the others?"

"The pack apparently attacked two Muggle farms, but there have been no other sightings."

Voldemort fingered his wand, but took no action. He turned his back to Bella and walked over towards the tables filled with the previous night's plunder and stated, "No matter, the werewolves will soon all be dead."

"Why is that, my lord?"

The Dark Lord winced at the impudence of the Death Eater who had just questioned his assessment.

"Bedford, come here."

"Yes, my lord."

As the Death Eater approached the Dark Lord grabbed a beater bat taken from the Quidditch supply shop, turned, and clubbed the man in the face. Blood spurted out of the minion's nose as he crumpled to the ground unconscious.

Voldemort set the bat down and reached into a robe pocket for a deck of cards that he himself had charmed the night previous.

"Is he still alive?" he asked.

One of his other Death Eaters nervously squatted down and felt for a pulse.

"Yes, my lord."

"Good...then strip him."

As the other Death Eaters rushed to obey their leader Voldemort pulled a specific card from the pack. Once the prone Death Eater was down to only his pants, the Dark Lord placed the playing card on wizard's bare chest and touched it with his wand. The body disappeared as the code word activated the portkey.

"I wonder if he knows how to swim?" mused Voldemort.

"You sent him to the bottom of the sea, my Lord?" asked Bella.

"No, just the opposite," he replied. "A mile or so above it."

"Now...to answer the recently departed's question," Voldemort said, "All magical beasts and beings were warned that the goblins would go to war with any that dared attack Muggles. Now that the werewolves are at war with the Goblin Nation, I expect that the packs will be culled most severely."

Bella choked down a question that would have asked if that was a good thing.

Not really wishing to kill somebody else just to reestablish his authority, Voldemort asked what Bella didn't voice.

"And how many werewolf packs are there in Britain?"

The Death Eaters looked at each other. MacNair finally answered for them. "Besides Fenrir's pack, there are at least a half-dozen packs of Muggle werewolves."

Voldemort nodded. "And do you think that the Muggles will know that they have werewolves within their filthy populations?"

"No," said the Dark Lord, answering his own question. "So let us assume that the goblins will be smart enough to attack the Muggle werewolf packs on any night other than the night of the full moon."

Bella's eyes lit up in understanding. "The Muggles, and probably the Ministry as well, will think that the goblins are killing Muggle humans."

"And so their impudence is rewarded," Voldemort concluded. "The Ministry will go to war with the goblins if for no other reason than to keep the wizarding world's secrets safe from the Muggles."

"Which takes their eyes off of us, and lets the Muggles think that any of our attacks or raids were done by the goblins," added Bella.

The Dark Lord nodded as he pocketed the deck of portkeys, grabbed the bat and asked, "So, does anyone else have a question?"

When (predictably) nobody responded, he began issuing orders.

"Nott, take the train back up to London and find out what is happening around the Rookery."

"Yes, my lord."

"Snape, you've got the potion ingredients you said you needed, so why aren't you brewing?"

"I have three pots on the simmer now, my lord."

"Then go...as for the rest of you...I have some research that needs to be performed...MacNair?"

'Yes, my lord."

"Take a group of four up to the Ministry and start scouting for polyjuice targets."

"As you wish, my lord."

"Bella, take the rest and figure out how to make a house unplotable...these dispersed accommodations and the inability to use magic freely are starting to annoy me."

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1:45pm, Round Castle, Windsor Castle

Ron Weasley's voice boomed through Hermione's Art Club badge just as soon it was activated.

"Oy, Hermione, are they still serving lunch down in the Mess Hall?"

"Ssshhh!" she whispered into the badge. "I already woke Harry up once today!"

"Oh, sorry," Ron whispered back. "So...about lunch?"

Hermione shook her head as she folded and placed the last piece of packed clothing into her trunk. It wasn't until she left their bed chambers that she replied to Ron's question, and allowed him to badge-jump back from his quick trip to the wizarding world.

"Dobby left some food under stasis charms down in our common room," she told Ron.

"Thanks, Hermione," he replied, as he walked down the stairs to their quarter's main floor.

"Good to see you too, Ron," Hermione replied.

Ron's apology was muffled by his wizard robes as he pulled them over his head and threw them on the back of a chair.

"Make yourself at home, Ron."

"Oh, thanks, Hermione," he replied, missing the slight edge of sarcasm.

In between mouthfuls of shepherd's pie, Ron told Hermione that his family was doing as best as could be expected. Headmistress McGonagall had opened up Hogwarts and placed them in guest quarters. Madame Pomfrey was now keeping an eye on both Molly and Fleur (whose shoulder had been struck by a cutting curse inside St. Mungo's). Ginny had floo'ed to Fred and George's shop to help them try to reopen for business, while Arthur and Bill were busy salvaging what could be saved from the Burrow.

"So how'd the rest of the meeting go?" Ron asked.

"Oh, I thought that it was very interesting," Hermione replied. "Still want to look at my notes?"

"Erm, sure...might help me shake off that last bit of pepper-up."

"You are such a git sometimes, you know?" Hermione said.

"Yeah, hear that a lot," Ron replied, as he wiped his face with his sleeve.

"Well mind the journal pages," admonished Hermione, as she disarmed her privacy spells and handed him her notebook.

"Let's see what we've got," Ron said to himself. "King Edward I-I-I?" He looked up towards Hermione, who had taken out a laptop and was waiting for a Powerpoint presentation to load.

"Oy, Hermione, what kind of surname is spelled 'I-I-I'?"

Hermione let out a sigh. "That's Edward the Third," she replied. "I-I-I is the number three in Roman numerals."

"Roman numerals?" Ron asked. "What are those?"

"It's the numeric system used by the Ancient Romans," she replied with exasperation. "I can't believe...simply ridiculous..."

"What's ridiculous?"

"That English wizards use Latin for incantations, but are completely ignorant of Roman numerals."

"Oh, well, it could just be me, couldn't it?"

"Yes, that is a distinct possibility," Hermione admitted.

Ron went back to his reading, and did a fair job of distracting Hermione from her lecture review with his muttered commentary.

"Edward...Black Prince...Wars Over Roses...boring...even more boring...beyond boring...hold on, what's this about a Scottish Royal Wizard?"

"What, aren't my notes clear enough?"

"Well, yes, but...what does it mean?"

"Probably not too much," Hermione replied. "Scotland was a separate country at the time that the Treaty of Carlisle was signed, so they had to agree to having a wizard government that included Scotland as well as the rest of Great Britain. That meant that the Scottish sovereign also had the right by treaty to have a Royal Witch or Wizard."

"So that could be important right?" Ron asked. "What if there's some other glowing orb out there, or a rogue royal wizard?"

"Relax, Ron," Hermione replied. "Though we don't have all the facts, it's unlikely that there ever was a Scottish Royal Wizard."

"Why is that?"

Hermione chuckled. "It's a long story, but for most of the 140 years between the treaty signing and the formal Union of Scotland and England the two countries shared the same king or queen....and when Scotland did have a separate king, well...let's just say that he made Harry's Uncle Vernon look like a wizard-lover."

"Really?" Ron asked. "So who was that?"

"King James VI and I," Hermione replied. "As in *King James Bible* King James."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"Oh, probably not," noted Hermione. "But this is also the King James that ruled during the peak of the Scottish witch-hunts, and who wrote a treatise called *"Demonology"* that became the witch-hunter's textbook over for the next century."

"So there can't be two Royal Wizards now?" Ron asked.

Hermione shook her head. "The treaty obligations of the two countries were combined at the time of union," she explained. "Now, there could have been a new Royal Wizard when most of Ireland gained independence, but you can't have a royal wizard without royalty, and the Irish were keen on forming a Republic."

Ron nodded...although he really didn't understand the Muggle politics involved, he didn't care to give Hermione an opportunity to ride him about that fact. So rather than continue down that conversational path he finished the notes associated with the Royal Historian's expository. Ron then came upon notes from a completely separate meeting.

"Hermione," Ron asked, "What was this After-Action Report about?"

Right...forgot that you missed that meeting as well," Hermione replied. "The Queen asked the Prime Minister to prepare a summary of last night's attacks, and outline what the Muggle government is doing in response."

"Oh," said Ron. "What's all this?"

Hermione stood and walked over to Ron. "That's who was at the meeting," she replied, looking over his shoulder. "Lot easier to use initials than to write out full names."

"So who are all these people?"

"Well, HRM is the Queen, of course," Hermione replied. "Then there's the PoW Prince, P.M. for Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, Home and Foreign Secretaries, the heads of MI-5 and MI-6, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Harry and myself."

"Really?" asked Ron. He looked down at the list and added, "I get the HG, but which one is Harry?"

Hermione blushed a bit. "Erm, Harry is *QWEGHBMSP*."

"So...QW is Queen's Wizard...what's the rest of them?"

Hermione laughed (a bit nervously). "Well, I was just making a joke to myself, you see, so the whole string stands for 'Queen's Wizard, the Earl Gryffindor, Hermione's Boyfriend, Major Sir Harry Potter.'"

Ron's eyes narrowed slightly as he snorted. "So now we can start calling him 'Queeg-him'?"

"Don't you dare!"

"Didn't realize that 'Hermione's Boyfriend' was an official title."

"Oh sure it is," Hermione replied. Trying to make light, she added, "There was an investiture and everything."

"Must have missed it," Ron replied. "Not that I would want to watch the initiation ceremony."

"Stop it...any other questions?"

Ron scanned down the next bit, and smiled.

"So when did you start doodling hearts on the margins of your notes?"

Hermione looked at him cross-eyed. "Do you have any *substantive* questions?"

Ron smiled as pointed towards a line of notes and asked, "How do you even pronounce a word that starts with a number?"

The bushy-haired witch smiled. "The chemical is called '3-quinuclidinyl benzilate,' but don't feel too bad...most of the Muggles in the room didn't know how to pronounce it either." She then added, "That's why it's called 'BZ' for short."

"And this is that gas that is being used to explain away the magic done in front of Muggles last night?"

"Q Branch's bright idea," Hermione replied with a nod. "The Muggles are saying that it was the work of Muggle terrorists using a mild type of nerve gas...something that makes you loopy when you breathe it."

"Oh yeah, I was going to asked what 'confabulation' and 'phantom behaviors' were."

Hermione said, "Basically, it means you start seeing strange things, and doing strange things...rather perfect for the situation, since it can explain almost all of the hexes and jinxes."

"Including the running around starkers bit?"

Hermione nodded.

"So what's this part about Muggles buying the cover story?" asked Ron. "They need to pay for something?"

Sighing, Hermione replied. "Buying is another term for accepting the story," she replied.

"Couldn't you have just said that?"

"Sorry, Ron, didn't realize that I'd have an audience for these notes."

"Right, well...you're saying that there's seventy-nine Muggles who were told about magic because they couldn't be convinced otherwise?"

"Right."

"Why not just obliviate them?"

"Because that's seen as a rather serious invasion of a person's individual rights and liberties," she replied.

"But wouldn't it be for their own good, not remembering running around with their bits on display, or having backwards knees?"

With a heavy sigh, Hermione strove for the perfect analogy. "Image that during a detention Snape forced you to kiss his bare bum."

"Ohhhh! Why'd you have to make me imagine that?"

"Because it's relevant," Hermione replied. "Now, would you want that memory kicking around inside your head?"

"Of course not...except maybe for the fact that if Snape erased the memory before the detention ended, he'd be able to get away with what he did."

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Now, can you imagine that the Muggles who were attacked last night might feel the same way?"

"Erm...you mean that...but it's not the same," Ron replied. "The obliviation isn't to allow the Death Eater's to get away with what they did...it's to keep the wizarding world secret."

"But why would Muggles make that distinction?" Hermione asked. "Why would they care one bit about whether the wizard world stays secret?" She then added, "When you really think about it, having obliviator squads cleaning up after a Muggle attack keeps the Aurors from having to do anything...it *is* part of the problem."

"So, what's this about getting paid to have memories erased."

"It's compensation...the Muggles have already been victimized, why should they be forced to get attacked again with a obliviation spell without getting something in return."

"Makes sense," Ron agreed. "Although 10,000 galleons for every minute of erased memory sounds rather steep...can't see the Ministry wanting to pay those kind of rates."

"That's the idea," Hermione replied.

Ron moved on to the next section of notes.

A few minutes later, he looked up from the notes and asked, "You really like using initials, don't you?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders.

"So 'H' stands for Harry, right?" Ron asked. When Hermione nodded, he asked, "So who is HHR?"

Only slightly embarrassed at the question, Hermione replied, "HHR stands for Harry and Hermione together."

Ron snorted. "Very cute, Hermione...next thing you know you two will be sitting on pink cushions drinking tea at Puddlefoot's...so this bit about rental flats...we might have a lead on where the Death Eaters are hiding?"

Hermione nodded. "Rookwood registered the car they were using in his own name, and also used his name to sign rental agreements for Muggle flats in four different cities."

"And all we're going to do right now is watch?"

Hermione nodded. "Want to make sure what's inside before we knock on the doors."

Ron moved on to the "Analysis" and "Action Items" portions of the presentation and faltered. "Oy, Hermione, these notes make my eyes hurt...tell me what I need to know, please."

Hermione sighed, "Oh, well, first off, the Queen couldn't be convinced to cancel her trip to Scotland."

"But wasn't Edinburgh one of the ten o'clock cities?" Ron asked. "Is she stubborn or just daft?"

"I wouldn't dare characterize the Queen as either," Hermione replied with a smile. "You'd be on safer grounds calling her an honorary Gryffindor... someone not about to hide when the going gets tough." She then added, "This 'Holyrod Week' is an annual event...it'd be a big deal if she canceled it."

"Guess she did sit there in the front row during the Dementor attack at Ascot," Ron admitted. "So the whole operation is packing up to go with her?"

"Pretty much," Hermione replied. "We did decide it best to keep the peanut butter brigade at their internship positions, at least for another week."

"Don't want to tip your hand before the big confrontation?" Ron asked.

"Exactly...so that means business as usual for you and Neville starting tomorrow. My mum will also hang back to make sure that the Summer Institute gets off as scheduled."

"Another bit of Gryffindor courage?" Ron asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Actually, given the attacks, having the students board at Cumberland Lodge while they go to school might be the safest place for them to be...and mum's checking on whether we can expand some of the living quarters so that we can house the students' families as well."

Ron nodded. "What's all this about a clamp-down on the wizarding world?"

Hermione replied, ""Just what it says, Ron...if the Ministry won't enforce wizarding secrecy laws about using magic around Muggles, then we will. Anyone caught by Muggle police using their wands in public will have the wands broken on-the-spot."

"A bit harsh, isn't it?"

"And just how are Muggles supposed to tell between good wizards and bad wizards?" Hermione replied. "It's tough even for wizards to tell, especially if the Death Eaters are going to start attacking wearing Muggle clothing."

Ron shook his head. "Sounds like we're going back to the days of witch hunts."

"No, I don't think so," said Hermione. "More like we're trying to prevent Muggle hunting."

"So how does this delusional gas fit into the picture?"

"BZ is a deliriant, Ron, not a delusion...ant?...that is to say, it makes you delirious, not delusional."

"What's the difference?"

"Well...delirious means you act loopy...delusional means you look at a situation and make a loopy conclusion."

"So, that's the same thing, right?"

Hermione sighed. "No Ron...look, if I inhaled BZ right now and the delirium caused me to strip down starkers, you would be delusional to think that it was some anvil-sized hint that I fancied you."

"Oh, well...if you say so," Ron concluded. "So back to the BZ excuse."

"Sure," said Hermione, "Wally's idea was to use the BZ terrorist gas attack story to our advantage when we're looking for Death Eaters in Muggle disguises."

"How would that work?"

"Word has gone out that these imaginary Muggle terrorists made the BZ gas themselves, and some of them breathed too many fumes while it was brewing. As a result, they now exhibit the same symptoms of delirium as their victims."

"So?"

"So?" Hermione replied. "Think back to the Death Eaters parked in front of my parent's house. How did we spot them?"

"Their clothing was a bit off, wasn't it?"

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Acting or dressing strange, and appearing to suffer from severe memory loss are symptoms of BZ exposure."

"So whenever a wizard gets caught without a clue in a situation Muggles take for granted, like waiting for a toilet seat to rise on its own ..."

Hermione smiled. "Or getting spooked by automatic doors at the grocers, or not knowing how to make change using Muggle money..."

Ron's ears turned red. "Okay, okay, so I was a clueless wizard my first few weeks in the Muggle world...I've gotten better, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have," Hermione admitted. "But we're thinking that the Death Eater's won't be as clever. The Muggle authorities have used the telly and newspapers to ask that anyone spotting a person acting strange that way to call the Muggle police."

"But then what?" Ron asked. "What if they're wizards, but not Death Eaters? Do they go to jail just for that?"

"Of course not, Ron," Hermione replied. "The police would just ask a few simple questions, and if the wizard cooperates they'll be sent on their way."

"And if they don't cooperate?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Well, presumption of innocence still holds true. But if the witch or wizard thinks they can get out of the situation by drawing their wands it'll be a taser and then we'll get called in."

"We, like you and me?"

Hermione nodded. "All of the Art Club witches and wizards will be on call to help sort out these incidents."

Ron shook his head. "I don't think that the wizarding world is going to be to happy with this."

Snorting, Hermione replied, "Just like Muggles aren't too happy being hexed while the Ministry keeps all of their Aurors at home to defend the wizarding world...if Scrimgeour won't defend us, then he can take his complaints on how we choose to defend ourselves and jump in the lake."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "Not that I'm disagreeing, Hermione, but did you hear what you said? You're throwing out words like *us* and *we* as if you're a Muggle."

Hermione paused to consider Ron's insight. "Well, do you remember back when Harry said that if protecting Muggle lives means violating magical secrecy laws then sod the laws?"

"Yeah, so...no different here?"

Hermione nodded. If sides needed to be drawn, then she had definitely jumped off of the centerline.

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2:30pm Royal Mewes, Windsor Castle

Harry Potter woke from his kip with just enough time to cover the short distance from the Round Tower to the stables with a brisk walk. The secret meeting's other attendee was waiting inside a designated empty stall.

The Queen's Wizard spotted footprint-shaped depressions in the strewn hay and smiled. "I'd be careful about using disillusionment spells this close to the castle," he said as he reached out to shake the invisible Auror's hand. "A roving Muggle army patrol might take a dim view of things if they spotted you."

"Even with my near-authentic identification?" the Head Auror asked, as he canceled the spell and held out the plastic badge at the end of his lanyard.

Harry snorted as grabbed hold of the badge. "Need to work on your transfiguration skills," he replied. "Plastic laminate doesn't weigh the same as stone." He then added, "But to answer your question...even with authentic security clearances I'm not risking any magic use near the Muggle military after last night's attacks."

"Can't say I blame them for being on edge," the Head Auror admitted. "So, I need to emphasize that this unofficial meeting will involve an unofficial exchange of information."

Harry nodded. "I understand completely, and appreciate the risk you've taken just to meet under those terms...especially after what you did at the ten-o'clock attack sites last night."

"Yes, well, I understand that you did more than your fair share of avoiding open warfare between the magical and Muggle worlds yourself, Harry."

"Okay, enough of the mutual admiration," Harry grinned. "Some decisions have been made by the Muggle higher-ups that could well affect your Department."

"What about the rest of the Ministry?"

"Oh, well it will definitely affect them, but I don't care nearly as much about the consequences," Harry admitted.

"So how can I help, Lord Gryffindor?"

Harry shook his head, but let the title pass by without comment. "First off, the Muggle Queen's trip to Scotland is still on...her flight's leaving in just a few hours."

"Even with Edinburgh one of the attack sites?"

Harry nodded. "Stiff upper lip, and all that...I wouldn't put it past her to visit the attack site on her way in from the airport."

The Head Auror nodded. "We've got the Muggles sorted out on that one, haven't we?"

The Queen's Wizard replied, "Yes, but you've also got an Auror group there that's doing a piss-poor job of hiding themselves."

The Head Auror shut his eyes and sighed. "Dawlish?"

Harry nodded. "Thought about throwing a swamp at him for old-time's sake...suppose he was reinstated after he proved that he was more incompetent than disloyal?"

The Head Auror simply nodded.

"So," Harry continued, "I probably can't get you to pull your boys out of the city entirely, but could you at least get somebody up there that I can work with?"

Robards nodded. "I assume that Auror Moody fits that description?"

Harry smiled. "That would be lovely." He then passed a piece of parchment to the Head Auror. "Here's the coordinates of a safe meeting place. We'll arrange the cover story and uniforms, just like last night."

Gawain pocketed the parchment and nodded. "Patrols in the Edinburgh wizard's quarter alright with you?"

Nodding, Harry replied, "That would be useful, so long as Mad-Eye holds them on a short leash."

"What else, Harry?"

"Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," the teen-aged wizard replied. "Fred and George have sent along word that their attempts to clean-up enough to open for business tomorrow are being forcefully impeded."

The Head Auror shrugged his shoulders. "Well, Harry, it *is* a crime scene that needs to be investigated."

"True enough," the Queen's Wizard replied. "But from what I hear, your investigators seem to be spending more time trying to figure out how the Twins took down the werewolves than investigating how and why the attack occurred in the first place."

"But Harry," the Head Auror replied, "the fact that they were able to kill the werewolves without even being there...you've got to understand how exciting that is from a law enforcement perspective."

"I do," said Harry. "But you've got to understand that it wouldn't be the first time that the Ministry tried to convict someone for trying to defend themselves against an attack by a magical creature."

"Good point."

"Tell you what," said Harry. "You find a way to get the Ministry out of the shop and I'll talk with the Twins about sharing one or two of the relevant secrets with you."

"Deal," the Head Auror replied. "Anything else?"

Harry nodded. "Just one tiny thing."

The Head Auror squinted at the young wizard. "Why do I get the feeling that it isn't going to be so tiny?"

Harry snorted. "Just talking about the possibility of eliminating a few layers of middle management at the Ministry."

"And what, exactly, would these management layers be?" the Head Auror replied cautiously.

Harry grinned. "Oh, just the ones between you and Her Royal Majesty."

And with that cryptic comment he passed along copies of a treaty and an official Summons, whose original would soon be nailed to a tree just outside of Carlisle Castle.

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3:00pm, Outside the Leaky Cauldron

Secret Agent Lupin and Chief Inspector Miller approached the street entrance of the Leaky Cauldron with wizard robes draped over their arms in a manner that hid their drawn weapons.

"First trip to Diagon Alley?" Remus asked.

Kate shook her head. "When my brother got his Hogwarts letter we turned his first trip into a family outing."

"So what did you think?"

"Thought it was scary enough for me never to want to go back," she replied.

Remus nodded as he noticed the scaffolding and barriers that had been erected on the sidewalk right in front of the pub.

"So this makes it look like the building is under construction?" he asked.

It was Kate's turn to nod. "Sandblasting requires those protective tarps," she explained. "They also do a good job of screening the entrance from the rest of the street and justifying the closed sidewalk."

The two ducked under the tarps holding their identification out for inspection by the well-armed and wary guards that were stationed just inside. Once they'd cleared this hurdle, they approached the repaired door, and Remus introduced his partner to the utility of extendable ears. Not hearing anything of concern, Remus opened the locked door with some spell work. The interior was empty. After donning the robes they were carrying, Kate hid her revolver up a sleeve while Remus made short work of opening the hidden entrance to Diagon Alley.

The Chief Inspector's second ever visit to London's wizarding quarter started off a bit tense, as they were greeted by another set of stern-looking guards (this time armed with wands rather than automatic rifles). After Remus cautiously offered the Aurors an owl-delivered pass signed by Head Auror Robards, they were allowed on their way.

The goblins didn't look any less scarier than they had years earlier, but Kate managed to make it inside the bank and through their introductions with Gringott's bank personnel without wincing or wetting.

Clan Chief Ragnok was waiting for them in a conference room.

"No need to worry, Chief Inspector," the goblin grinned, after he had shaken her hand. "No goblin would think of harming anyone who is under the

protection of Clan Chief Potter."

The policewoman gave Ragnok a confused look, prompting Remus to explain that the robe she was wearing identified her as Clanfriend to the Queen's Wizard's House.

Seeing the Muggle woman release a small bit of tension in her shoulders, the goblin Chief discussed the status of the werewolf "guests" who were being held beneath the bank. The bodies of the six werewolves who had either arrived DOA or died soon after had been segregated from the others, and were available for inspection. Fenrir and the other survivors had, of course, transformed back into human form, and were being kept naked and wandless in a rather cold vault.

Remus cautiously asked about the goblins' intentions with respect to their "guests." Ragnok replied that they were at Clan Chief Potter's disposal, and that the goblins would be happy to do the disposal work. Remus thanked the Clan Chief for the offer, but conveyed Harry's wishes that no harm immediately come to the prisoners. The goblin somewhat reluctantly agreed, and offered to extend hospitality to their "guests" for an indefinite period of time.

Ragnok then moved on to the Malfoy question. Remus and Kate told the goblin chief everything that they had learned about the Rookery attack. Ragnok, in turn, informed the two that goblins had been hired to examine the building's wards, and to assist the house elves with heavy construction and body disposal. He then placed a small block of wood on the table.

"We customarily dump the Rookery corpses in Knockturn Alley," Ragnok stated. "But given the apparent cause of the Death Eater's death...well, we think it best that wizards don't get a chance to examine the corpse."

Remus nodded as he pocketed the block. "Thank you, Ragnok, your discretion is much appreciated."

The goblin nodded, and replied, "As for the Malfoy patriarch himself, please let your Clan Chief know that we received his proposal and agree with his plan. The Goblin Nation will make no further attempts to convince Voldemort to kill Lucius Malfoy."

"Excellent," Chief Inspector Miller replied.

"Wait, I didn't hear about this one...can you fill me in?" asked Remus.

"Rookwood entered the Rookery in an attempt to kill Malfoy," replied the goblin. "Because of the building's wards, he can't remember whether or not he succeeded."

"But if the goblins stop demanding that Voldemort kill Malfoy, then the Death Eaters will assume that Rookwood and the Carrows did get to Malfoy," added Kate.

Remus thought for a moment, and then smiled. "But Malfoy won't know that, will he?"

The goblin shook his head and gave the werewolf a wide toothy grin.

Sensing that their meeting was drawing to a close, Remus asked one final, pressing question.

"Clan Chief, I heard that one of the messages sent by the Grand Council to Voldemort informed him that the Goblins would go to war with any magical beings or beasts that attacked Muggles. Is that true?"

Ragnok nodded his head, his smile less toothy, but still present.

"So, with Fenrir's attacks last night, do I need to worry, about..well...erm...."

"Mr. Lupin, I'm disappointed," said Ragnok. "Why would you think that goblins would adopt the same racist attitudes adopted by the Ministry of Magic?"

"How's that?" asked Kate. "Sorry, my turn to not understand."

"That is itself understandable, Chief Inspector," Ragnok replied. "The Ministry of Magic has in place rules and restrictions on werewolves that are based on the belief that if a wizard or witch is attacked by a werewolf and turned, then they are no longer human, and instead a magical beast."

"Really? Oh, that's horrible."

Remus sighed in relief. "So werewolves as a group aren't covered under the Grand Council's threat, because they consider me to be a wizard with a medical condition, rather than a magical beast."

"Exactly," replied Ragnok.

"So," Remus mused, "do you think that Voldemort would see it that way?"

The goblin chief shrugged his shoulders. "Would you think it more likely that the Death Eaters take the Ministry's position or ours on this matter?"

It didn't take long for Remus to reach the obvious conclusion.

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Having made one final sweep of the castle grounds and buildings, the Queen's Wizard and Wally walked out into the inner courtyard of the Queen's official Scottish residence. Swapping normal glasses for prescription sunglasses, Harry asked, "Think we're ready for this?"

"No, but what does that have to do with anything?" the agent replied. Wally then added, "You do know that those sunglasses don't work at all with those robes, right?"

Harry looked down at his brightly colored garment, which was covered from hood to hem with the checkerboarded crests of the Queen, Scotland, and Clan Potter.

"Yeah, well at least I won't be the only one dressed funny," Harry replied. The two secret agents then walked through the main gates of the castle, where local politicians and civic officials were gathered to officially greet the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh. Surrounding these men and women were super-sized contingents of police and military, including a mounted detachment of Household Calvary, a drum and bagpipe band, and one hundred members of the Highlanders First Battalion (dressed with full colours). Two hundred more infantrymen were in the surrounding area (dressed more for combat than for review), with an additional five-hundred troops stationed along the eight mile route from the castle out to the airport. This surface force was augmented by a full squadron of helicopters that patrolled the city's skies, and a much-less noticeable cadre of British Army and M1-5 ¾ snipers positioned on rooftops surrounding the castle.

Harry and Wally headed towards a small group of men dressed in green tunics and Balmoral bonnets. Wally smiled as he reached out towards the group's leader.

"Why, don't you look dashing?" he asked, as adjusted the angle of the retired Auror's cap. "You do know that The Stag offers discounts to men in uniform, right?"

"Gerroff, me, you," growled Moody dangerously.

"Hey Mad-Eye, nice pom-poms," grinned Harry.

The retired Auror's magical eye gave Harry's robes a full look over. "You should talk, Lord Major Fancy-Pants."

"Hey, I resemble that remark!" Harry complained.

"Now, now, Captain Moody," said Wally. "I was so certain that and your men would appreciate a Muggle disguise that wasn't quite as garish as last night's reflective vests."

"Not quite as garish, he says," Moody whined. "Bloody outfit has a sash and shoulder boards and feathered cap, but it's 'not quite as garish'...and don't even get me started on these ridiculous bows and arrows."

Harry chuckled as he looked over the dress uniform of the Royal Company of Archers. "Would you rather be honorary Highlanders?" he asked, pointing towards the active infantrymen whose dress uniform included kilts, sporrans, and garters.

"At least those costumes let your bits breathe," Mad-Eye replied.

Harry shrugged. "Figured you and your men would be more comfortable holding long bows rather than rifles with attached bayonets."

"Well you got that right, at least."

Harry then asked about Gilmerton Close, the small wizard's quarter hidden within Edinburgh's Old City. Moody's response was only partially discernible to Harry, as an in-bound report from his ear piece competed for the Queen's Wizard's attention.

A few moments later he talked into his shoulder, then gave Wally a nod. Harry then turned to Mad-Eye and said, "The Queen's plane has been cleared for landing, and I need to head out to the airport. Promise me that you lot will follow the rules-of-engagement that I worked out with Head Auror Robards earlier today?"

"Yes, yes, we get to stand still and look pretty with these useless sticks in our hands unless all hell breaks loose."

Harry nodded, "And even then, you'd do best to sit on your wands...the Muggles are on the lookout for weird looking men with small wooden sticks in their hands. And for Merlin's sake don't cast any concealment charms...while our sharpshooters have been briefed on what you look like now, they've also been ordered to shoot anyone they spot in their thermal imagers using magic to hide."

"Still can't get over the fact that their lot can see through glamour and disillusionment charms," Mad-Eye muttered.

Harry smiled. "Yes, well let's hope that you don't find out the hard way what else Muggles can do." And with that he headed to the street, where a small gaggle of men were fawning over his motorcycle.

"Yes, it's a '69 Bonny," he said, as he stuffed his robe into a saddlebag and took his "Seeker" helmet off the handlebar.

"I inherited it," he stated, as he strapped on the helmet and kick-started the engine.

"No, barely any modifications at all," he claimed with a straight face, as he revved the engine. TPOMS Muggles Stout and Blade rolled up on matching Yamaha FJR1300 motorcycles.

Nodding to the two men, Harry took advantage of their helmets' charmed comm gear and asked, "What happened to New Six?"

A belly laugh rang in Harry's ears. "Still out looking for what he calls a 'real' bike," replied Blade. "Didn't think it'd be right for anyone named 'Beemer' to be caught riding a crotch rocket."

Harry shook his head as he looked down the Royal Mile and the start of an unbroken stretch of cordoned-off streets and motorways. "His loss, as far as I'm concerned."

"Couldn't agree with you more, Sir," replied Stout.

And with sirens blaring the three men covered the eight mile distance between Palace and Airport in well under eight minutes.

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5:30pm, Edinburgh International Airport

The Queen's flight landed at Edinburgh International Airport without incident and taxied to a bit of tarmac that connected the main airport with RAF Turnbill, a former military air base used presently for cargo operations. Harry (who had pocketed his shrunken motorbike and thrown on his robes) was waiting along with a large police and military escort.

"Steve, the tarmac is clear of magic and magicals," Harry announced into his badge. "Excepting me, of course."

"Roger that, Harry," Steve replied. "How about the route?"

"Looked clean when I flew up from the Palace a few minutes ago," Harry replied.

"Flew as in 'in-the-air-flying' flew?"

"Nah, stayed on the ground the whole time," replied Harry with a grin. "Speaking of flying," he added, "how did Comet and Cupid enjoy the trip?"

"They were fine, once they were introduced to the Queen and Dramamine."

"Looking for my head on a platter, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh no, I took pains to caution them on the downsides of fragging," Steve replied smartly. "Of course, I wouldn't rule out a good hexing from either of them."

"I'll take that under advisement," replied Harry.

By this point in the conversation the jet doors had opened and a cadre of security men had spilled out with trigger fingers and steely gazes. As they walked down the mobile stairway three black limousines pulled up, sandwiched in between open-cab Land Rover Rapid Deployment Vehicles.

"We're ready to go here," said Steve.

"Roger that," said Harry, as he stepped inside a small storage shed that he'd parked next to. Fifteen seconds later, he stepped back outside, accompanied by most of the Order of Arthur dressed in the same brightly-colored robes that Harry was wearing. The Queen's Wizard then dashed up the mobile stairway as Hermione and Ron led the others to the open backs of the Land Rovers.

Harry found Steve waiting for him just inside the airplane's opened door and shook his hand. Katie and Alicia were standing right behind the MI-5 ³/₄ agent; they, too were now wearing the same robes as Harry.

"So tell us again, Mr. Queen's Wizard, why he have to wear these robes?" asked Katie.

"Because if you try and hex me whilst wearing anything else the snipers will shoot you?" replied Harry.

The young witch paused, and then replied, "So I can hex you now, then?"

Somebody behind Katie interrupted. "We would rather you wait until later in this evening to hex my Wizard, Lieutenant Bell."

Katie blanched as she looked over her shoulder and curtsied. "Yes, Your Majesty." She then turned back towards Harry, gave him a scowl, and whispered, "You best be getting your witches-in-waiting lined up soon, Potter." In a louder voice, she asked, "After you then, Major?"

Harry smiled, and fought back the urge to note that, given their respective ranks, he should be the one to issue orders. He turned and led the Queen and her entourage out of the plane and into the waiting limousines.

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6:00pm, Holyrood Palace, Edinburgh, Scotland

The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh arrived at the Palace at Holyroodhouse on-time and unhindered by terrorists and nationalists. Harry and the other witches and wizards stayed in the background as the Royal couple walked from their car to the forecourt of the Palace, where the Lord Provost and other local officials were waiting to presents the keys to the city. The Queen smiled as she accepted the ceremonial keys, only to hand them back with words that she had memorized decades earlier.

"I return these keys, being perfectly convinced that they cannot be placed in better hands than those of the Lord Provost and Councillors of my good City of Edinburgh."

And with that 700-year old tradition dispensed with, the Queen and Duke reviewed the contingent of Highlanders as an artillery battery fired off a 21-gun salute. Hermione was able to quickly reach Moody's side and reassure him that the Muggle weapons were not actually aimed at him.

The Queen finished her review and then engaged in conversation with Scotland's First Minister (who, after devolution, was nominally Scotland's chief executive). Harry didn't need an extendable ear to pick out the politician's strained politeness, particularly when the man expressed his "disappointment" over not being able to personally welcome the Queen to "his" country at the airport. Needless to say, the Queen was not amused. Taking in the sight of a busload of reporters and camera men that had just arrived from the airport terminal, she boldly suggested that the First Minister join her on a tour of the previous night's attack site.

"But...but, Your Majesty," the politician stammered. "I am not certain that the area has been reopened, for fear of remnant pockets of poison gas."

The Queen's lips pursed into a tight smile as she turned towards Harry and asked, "Gryffindor, what say you on the threat of poison gas at Grassmarket?"

Harry paused for a moment, then smiled in recognition. "Your Majesty, I can assure you that you will not be threatened by a release of BZ at the site."

With that reassurance, the Queen turned back towards the First Minister, who offered additional protests. "But...but Your Majesty, can your...your wizard...speak with authority on this issue?"

The Queen smiled. "We have every confidence that Lord Gryffindor is well positioned to offer counsel on this matter." She then added, "Come now, First Minister, you did wish a photo-op, did you not?"

"Erm, well...actually..."

The Queen didn't wait for a coherent sentence to emerge from the man's lips. She summoned the commander of the troops that she had just finished inspecting and asked, "Colonel Cartwright, are my Highlanders up for a short march?"

The Colonel lost his eyebrows underneath his cap, but had the presence of mind to salute and reply, "Your Majesty, Your Highlanders are always at your disposal."

"Very good, then," she replied resolutely. "We shall leave in ten minutes time for Grassmarket Square." Turning towards the Scottish Minister, she said, "We assume that is sufficient time for you to acquire any protective equipment you deem necessary for your person."

"Erm, yes, Your Majesty," the First Minister replied quietly.

Cries went out for troops to form ranks and prepare to march on the Queen's orders, as the gathering of politicians and soldiers scrambled to follow her lead. Harry discretely activated his Art Club badge and let the others (who were positioned around the perimeter of the forecourt) know what was taking place. After quick consultations with the MI-5 Agent and Defense Ministry Official in charge of the scene he walked back towards Mad-Eye and his men.

"What kind of madness is this, Potter?" the Auror asked.

"Easy, Mad-Eye," Harry replied. "There are far too many armed Muggles within earshot who wouldn't take kindly to your opinions of their Queen."

"So what are we doing, then?"

"We're visiting the attack scene about an hour later than I expected," Harry replied with a smile. "Later than we expected, actually."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that those employed to protect the Queen anticipated her desire to stand with her subjects in the face of terrorism," Harry replied. "We've already got boots on the ground, laid down television camera platforms, and cleared the site of all but a few carefully screened loyal subjects who are ready and waiting to be inspired."

Mad-Eye thought about what Harry said for a few moments. "So this really is a publicity stunt, then?"

Harry shook his head. "There's a difference between planning and anticipating." He then added, "And given the breath of last night's attacks, it's no stunt for the leader of Great Britain to offer words of reassurance at this time of crisis."

The Auror let out a "Harrumph!", then added, "And she expects that the loyal subjects will listen?"

Harry nodded. "You should come along, Mad-Eye, and find out what it's like to have a real leader rise to the occasion."

"I should, should I?"

"Of course," Harry replied. "You are, after all, part of the Queen's security."

Mad-Eye scowled. "Expect you'll want us to ride in the back of those metal beasts?"

The Queen's Wizard shook his head. "Wouldn't think of it," he replied. "As the Queen's Guard, you'll get to run along side her motorcar."

"Run?" Moody asked incredulously. "On this leg?"

Harry shrugged. "It's that or riding on the metal beasts...your choice."

The Queen's Wizard didn't see the wooden bow raised as if to strike him, as he had already turned back towards his motorbike for a scouting trip in advance of the impromptu parade.

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**Monday, July 9, 6:00am,
Palace at Holyroodhouse**

The Queen's Wizard woke at his customary hour within an uncustomary bed. Resisting his body's inclination to spoon closer to his girlfriend, Harry swung his legs over the side of the bed and headed towards the three owls that were perched on the opened windowsill. One of the three birds pecked at his hand sharply, and refused to let him untie the message fixed to its leg.

"Fine, fly over there, then," Harry said, as he pointed towards the bed. The owl took his advice.

"Harry!"

"Morning, sweetheart," he said with a smile. "Apparently that message is for you."

Hermione quickly cleared the cobwebs with that comment, and tore open the message.

"Anything you care to share, there?" Harry asked.

The nightgown-wearing witch pursed her lips and shook her head. "Oh, nothing worth twisting knickers over."

"But worth my finger when I tried to open it?"

"Maybe," Hermione replied with an enigmatic smile. Noticing the suspicious look on Harry's face, she added, "Can't a witch keep a few secrets to herself, especially around her boyfriend's birthday?"

Harry relaxed his shoulders and smiled. "I suppose so."

"So what was in the fancy envelope you opened, Harry?"

Looking down at the official message in his hand, he replied, "Formal response to the summons I nailed to the Carlisle tree."

"Oooh, did Umbitch seal it with a kiss?"

Harry winced. "Erm, no...that would have been a C.O.D. Howler."

"C.O.D.?"

"Yeah, the kind of message that makes the recipient howl when he opens it."

"Very cute...so who did send it?"

"Somebody from the Department of Mysteries, confirming next week's meeting."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Really? Well that's interesting."

"Yeah," said Harry, "and it fits in with the Head Auror's surprise when I gave him a copy of the Treaty yesterday afternoon."

"Well, I suppose that the agreement is something that nobody would want to speak about within the Ministry."

Harry nodded. "So now I'm wondering if Scrimgeour even knows that he was supposed to be keeping the Queen's Peace."

"Well, if the Head Auror didn't realize he was acting on the Queen's behalf..."

Harry nodded. "So do you think that the Minister of Magic could be held accountable for violating a treaty that he might not have even known about?"

Thinking for a moment, Hermione nodded. "The Treaty was a magically binding contract. If that kind of magic forced you to compete in the Tri-Wizard Tournament when you didn't even enter your name into the cup...."

Harry smiled. "It's that's the case, well...about time that kind of magic bit somebody else in the arse."

Realizing that there was limited amount of time to prepare for the day, the two deferred further discussions on that topic and continued to plow through their odd assortment of magical and mundane correspondence. Owl posts were read and responded to while laptop computers were accessed for e-mails. Magical mirrors, Art Club badges, mobile phones and MI-5 comm gear were tossed about as Harry and Hermione checked

in with those they were in charge of, and those they shared the results of these messages and inquiries into the laptop, forming the guts of a daily brief that they would eventually submit to Queen and COBRA.

It was only after they determined that the world hadn't gone too far to hell while they were sleeping that they had enough confidence to sit down for a private breakfast and read the Muggle and wizard newspapers.

"Looks like last night was a hit," said Harry, as he reviewed the coverage of the Queen's ad-libbed address to the nation.

Hermione nodded as she sipped her tea. "Completely ignored by the *Prophet*, although that's probably a good thing," she replied.

Harry set down his paper and picked up his PDA and the day's schedule. "What time are you popping down to the Institute, then?"

Checking her own appointments calendar, she replied, "Eight-thirty, or so, unless I'm needed here...still think you'll have time to speak at the assembly?"

Harry nodded. "The Duke's pretty much out flying solo today," he replied. "Visits the University of Edinburgh in the morning, then the Royal Scottish Academy and Royal College of Surgeons in the afternoon."

"Queen's staying in, then?"

"Yeah...private meetings with me and the First Minister, so that I can let him in on our world and run roughshod over the magical secrecy laws." He then sighed. "Merlin, I don't care much for politicians."

Hermione smiled. "Hey!"

"Present company excepted, of course," Harry added.

"No worries, Harry," Hermione replied. "It's just as clear that some politicians don't care much for the peerage, or for Royal Wizards."

"And when you're both?"

Hermione chuckled. "I still love you, Harry."

"Well that's something, isn't it?" he replied with a grin.

Chapter 33 -The Ministry of Meetings

Monday, July 9, 7:00am
Ministry of Magic

Having recently celebrated his one hundred and twenty-third birthday, Archibald Oswald considered himself too damn old to be sleeping on the office couch. But as the freshly-minted Director of Magical Law Enforcement, he thought it important to lead by example, and if not being able to trust the floo network meant that most of his staff had to stay holed up inside the Ministry, then so would he.

On his return from a bland but filling cafeteria breakfast, Oswald found a half-dozen new memos flying in a circular holding pattern in front of his door. He sighed, then ducked his head as he opened his door and the memos buzzed by, joining a queue that was lined up for in-basket landings. Ignoring for a moment the sheer volume waiting his attention, he sat down and watched as the Ministry's pecking order played out in spelled parchment. Correspondence from the Minister's office and from other Directors were particularly vicious as they slapped lower status memos down within the stack.

What the Director wanted to see first that morning were memos that summarized troop strengths, analyzed the recent attacks, updated injury reports and detailed funeral arrangements for his fallen Aurors. But as these reports would be prepared by his staff, rather than from the Minister's office or by the other Directors, they were buried in the stack, underneath "highest priority" memos, like the one written by Percy Weasley that proposed changes in the number of blueberry scones to be set out during Cabinet Meetings.

Director Oswald plowed through the stack of "highest priority" memos. There was, of course, nothing of significance within these documents...none of the Directors liked to tip their hands too far in advance of the meeting if there were power plays to be made, or blame to be assigned. But with decades of bureaucratic diligence drilled into his soul, the elderly wizard paid no mind as he initialed his receipt and scribbled a short note where needed.

Once the drivel was disposed of, Oswald fished out the reports prepared by his unit managers and reviewed them with a fine-toothed comb. He muttered during most of this process...there were still many unanswered questions about the weekend attacks...questions that he would need answers for.

The elderly wizard sighed, then fired off three quick memos requesting his direct reports's immediate presence. Based on past experience, he expected the three to trickle in over the next half-hour or so. Such was the level of respect he'd managed to garner during his short tenure as Director of the reorganized (and severely downsized) DMLE.

Under the Ministerial reorganization, much of the power that formerly resided within the DMLE was transferred to other Departments. Dolores Umbridge took control of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes and renamed it the "Secret Security Office," with broad authority to protect the secrets of the magical world from Muggles. In the process, more than half of the Auror Department was transferred, and assigned to either the SSO's "Compliance Office" or to a "Rapid Response Squadron" of obliviators and magical reversal specialists. More staff were lost when the Magical Surveillance Office was taken from MLE and elevated to a Cabinet-level Department, and when Arthur Weasley's office was

transferred to his son's control as part of the regulation of magical commerce.

Minister Scrimgeour had claimed that these changes were necessary, given that the Department of Magical Beasts and Creatures was to be folded into DMLE, but the mass balance didn't work. Many of the B&C personnel had already been transferred out of the department to take positions formerly held by exposed Death Eaters, and the Minister's Office had either left these positions vacant or backfilled them with school-aged interns. Some of these teen-aged students were even acting as section leads.

Two of the direct reports surprised Oswald by appearing several minutes earlier than he had expected.

"Wanted to see us boss?" asked Head Auror Gawain Robards, as he entered the Director's glass-walled office.

"Yes, come in gentlemen, come in."

"Should I get the door?" asked Hit Wizard #1.

"Still waiting for...ah, perhaps this is her now," said the Director. With a beckoning wave he ushered the last meeting participant into the office.

After a surreptitious glance down at his org chart, he said, "So, it's your turn to play acting MB&C Director this week, Miss...Turpin?"

Lisa Turpin looked at the three wizards rather nervously and said, "Yes sir, Director Oswald."

"So, how are things in the Spirits Division?"

"Well, rather busy, once I was informed that the Minister's Office considers Dementors to be Spirits," Lisa replied.

"Yes, well...I imagine that the Ministry wasn't too particular about their classification when they were under our employ, eh?"

Head Auror and Hit Wizard #1 snorted in unison.

"Right then, might as well start," said the Director. "H.W., you can get the door, now."

The Hit Wizard closed the door behind him as the Head Auror and that week's Acting Director of Magical Beasts and Creatures took seats in front of their Director's desk.

"I've read your reports on this weekend's attacks, and need some additional information and, erm...clarifications so that I'm better prepared for this afternoon's Cabinet Meeting."

"Better prepared to save his own arse," the Head Auror thought to himself.

Director Oswald then turned to Lisa and said, "Let's start with the Dementor and werewolf attacks, then."

Lisa nodded. "You should have both my report and the report prepared by the Werewolf Restraint Office."

"Yes, I read them this morning," the MLE Director replied. "I'm a bit disappointed that we had to rely upon civilians to fight the Dementors in Inverness."

"Didn't have any choice, boss," said Head Auror Robards, jumping to the young witch's defense. "All of the Patronus-qualified Aurors were commandeered for obliviation duty."

"Yes, well...these citizens have not yet been interviewed?"

"No, Sir," Auror Robards replied. "Won't be able to until I get my witches and wizards back into the fold."

"That will be discussed this afternoon, I assure you," Oswald replied. He then added, "At least there weren't any casualties in those attacks."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Lisa.

"Exactly what I said," Oswald replied. "It's from your own report, Miss Turpin...no witches or wizards were kissed during the attack."

"No, but more than two-hundred Muggles were, and that's in the report as well," Lisa retorted.

"Yes, well...I guess if you want to expand your casualty count that way..."

Lisa bit her tongue. She was rather incensed at the Director's cavalier attitude towards Muggle deaths, but didn't want to say anything that would get her booted from the balance of the meeting.

"Moving on, then...quite hard to believe that werewolves were immobilized and killed by Muggle chemicals."

"I don't think you need to call them Muggle, necessarily," said Gawain Robards. "Colloidal silver is, I'm told, an ingredient in certain potions, and the spray was used in conjunction with magical, erm...swamps."

Oswald snorted. "Silver-flavored water and swamps...any progress on tracking down the missing werewolves?"

"No, Sir," Lisa replied. "But perhaps the Head Auror..."

Gawain nodded. "As you know, Director, we never did catch up with the pack that destroyed Arthur Weasley's house out in Devon. As for the Diagon Alley pack, it appears that the four who peeled off from the attack and killed one of my men inside the Leaky Cauldron escaped into the Muggle world."

"What of the other missing werewolf, then?"

Gawain shook his head. "We found no evidence within the joke shop of more than the seven carcasses that we recovered. There must have been eleven total, rather than the twelve that was originally reported."

"And the Muggles...still no reports of werewolf attacks by the ones that escaped?"

"No, sir," Gawain replied truthfully.

"Well maybe that part of the night actually worked out," Oswald replied. "Moving on...H.W.?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Your Department was notified that at least three of the fugitive wizards on your Hit List were involved in the Diagon Alley, St. Mungo's and Hogsmeade attacks on Saturday night. None of them were apprehended, yet you place the blame for this failure on other departments rather than on your own."

"Yes, Director."

"These other departments are under the control of Directors Weasley and Umbridge."

"Erm, yes...and your point is?"

"My point is that I need to be certain that this is truly the case before I present that to the Minister this morning."

"Director," the lead Hit Wizard said, "One of my witches has a friend that was working in the Surveillance Office that night. She says that it took more than six minutes to notify the DMLE from the time that each of those Death Eaters cast their first detected spells. Six minutes!"

"Oh," replied the Director. "I see." He paused for a moment and then asked, "This anecdotal account, then...it involves some sort of whistle blower who spoke out of turn...presumably without authorization?"

"Hard to be a whistle blower if your information has been authorized for release," quipped Director Robards.

"Gawain..."

"What, are you going to kill the messenger?"

"I imagine that I'd be standing in that line behind Madame Umbridge, if I disclosed that one of her people had talked out of turn."

Oswald looked down at the Hit Wizard's report. "Your teams also took more than eight minutes to mobilize from the time that you were notified."

"Yeah," spat the indignant Hit Wizard. "By the time we were notified, anti-apparition wards had gone up over the targets, so my team needed portkeys. But could we make them ourselves? No-o-o-o, of course not. Only authorized ministry personnel in the Portkey Office can make portkeys, and that ponce Weasley had understaffed the office Saturday night, because he didn't want to pay the overtime! It ended up being quicker to ask Head Auror Robards for rides using his badge, and by the time our teams arrived on scene the targets were long gone."

"Yes, well, I don't think Head Auror Robards wants to be dragged into your mess...he's got his own problems to worry about, eh Gawain?"

"Excuse me?" asked the Head Auror.

"Your own mess, well, it'll be mine, actually...two dead and three wounded Aurors in Diagon Alley, delayed responses to the attacks at St. Mungo's and Hogsmeade, no Death Eaters caught or killed..."

"And all of my pre-positioned Auror teams in those locations pulled away by Umbridge five minutes before the attacks occurred and ordered to join Obliviator Squads at the Muggle attack sites," added the Head Auror. "Because Merlin knows that the wizarding world's secrets are more important than the lives of the witches and wizards that live within it."

"Well, yes, they are, aren't they?" asked the MLE Director. "But frankly, I'm more worried about your actions after the attacks, Head Auror." He pointed towards a stack of spent Howlers and stated, "Six different complaints from Madame Umbridge, stating that you overstepped your authority at the Muggle attack sites."

"And she'd be wrong," Robards retorted. "Those twelve attacks were obviously coordinated Death Eater diversions. And last time I checked, the Auror Department still has the authority to investigate Death Eater attacks."

"Death Eaters?" asked Oswald. "What evidence do you have that the Muggles were attacked by Death Eaters? I see no reports of Dark Marks, or wizards dressed in Death Eater robes."

"What evidence?" asked an incredulous Auror. "Twelve attacks all at the same precise time across the bloody country...what do you think it was, a massive coincidental dose of accidental magic?"

“Circumstantial, at best,” Oswald replied. “Since none of these twelve so-called Death Eaters were captured...”

“Not surprising, since it was Umbridge’s goons that were first notified by the MSO,”

“Head Auror Robards!” admonished his boss. “I’ll not have you talking that way about our colleagues in the Secret Security Office. You might think that your Order of Merlin is enough to carry you through this mess, but you’ll be lucky if I can save your badge.” The Director then added, “Why should I try to keep what’s left of this department together? Merlin knows I didn’t get my hundred-year service pin by sticking my neck out.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Gawain quipped. “You regulated dragons.”

“Yes, well I haven’t found Umbridge and Weasley to be any less vicious,” Oswald observed. He gave the three subordinates a calculated glare, then said, “Look, I am well aware of why I was put in this position...they wanted to set someone like me up for failure, just so it’d be easier to gut what’s left of this Department and divvy up the spoils amongst the other Directors.”

“I wouldn’t go that far...” said Hit Wizard One.

“Why not, I do,” Oswald replied. “More I think about it, the more I want to just wash my hands of all this and return to my old job and pay grade.”

“But you can’t, sir...”

“Why not?” asked Oswald. “Dragons are far easier to work with than politicians. They’re both wily, calculating, deadly beasts, but at least when a dragon dies you get some new boots out of the deal...think there’d be much of a market for tanning Umbridge’s hide once she bites it?”

Robards snorted. “Well, toad skin is one of the more popular potion ingredients, isn’t it?”

The MLE Director shook his head dismissively. “Laugh now, but she might be your Director if I can’t hold my own this afternoon.”

That statement got the three subordinate wizards’s attention.

“So, Chief,” Gawain said rather contritely, “what can we do to help?”

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Once the brainstorming session ended, Peanut Butter Brigadier Lisa Turpin used the lift to return to the Fourth Level offices of Magical Beasts and Creatures. Along the way she stopped to use the witch’s lavatory, where, after determining that she was alone, she entered a lavatory stall, closed the door and pulled a single unstoppered glass vial from her purse.

Lisa sat down and concentrated on the complete memory of that morning’s meeting and the documents that she had read. Once she was certain that she had the memory properly segregated, she drew her wand and placed it against her temple. A very long silvery thread was drawn out of her head, and guided into the vial, which the young witch then corked. Lisa then used a sticking charm to hide the small vial behind the toilet tank, flushed the unused toilet, then made her way out to the washbasins. Thankful that she was the only witch using the lavatory, she straightened her hair, took a deep breath, and walked back out into the hallway.

Once Lisa returned to her desk she wrote a short memo to another Ravenclaw witch, suggesting that they meet for lunch. After folding the memo into a distinctive origami swan, she sent it flying off to its destination.

Five minutes later, a mailroom intern got the memo and penned an affirmative reply. She then told her supervisor that she was going to make her morning nargle inspection, and made her way to a pre-arranged dead drop location.

Luna had made it known within her office group that she preferred to inspect her navel and other body cavities within the Fourth Level Witch’s Lavatory. Her boss and coworkers accepted this excuse as a way for the young witch to steal a few minutes time visiting her boyfriend in the Goblin Liaison Office. The Magical Surveillance Office personnel who were in charge of monitoring the movements of known associates of Harry Potter did as well, so no alarms were raised when Luna took a detour after using the lavatory and knocked on Ron Weasley’s office door.

“Come in,” called out Ron.

Luna walked into the office closed the door, then ripped open the Velcro-fixed flap in her robes and smiled.

“Want to check for ants in my pants, Ronnie?”

Her boyfriend smiled and nodded as he rose from his chair, walked around to the front of his desk, and dropped to his knees. As he reached inside her robes, Luna shook her head.

“I think that it will be easier to taste them than to feel them.”

Ron snorted as Luna reached out and pulled her boyfriend’s head towards her bared midriff.

“There’s one particular spot,” Luna said, as she encouraged him to search lower and lower. A few moments later, Luna pulled the wizard’s head away from her belly and began to rearrange her clothing.

“Well. Ronnikins, did you find any?” she asked with a smile.

Ron shook his head and replied, “Mmm-mmm.”

"Oh, I could have sworn...perhaps you should check later this afternoon?"

Ron nodded and gave Luna a thumbs-up.

Once Luna left the office, the tight-lipped Ron reached for his teacup, took a sip, then spit the contents of his mouth back into the cup.

"Smiley!" he called out.

A Ministry house-elf instantly popped into his office.

"This tea is cold," said the wizard. "Take it away and bring me back something that's at the right temperature."

The house-elf's eyes went wide as it took the teacup and plate. "Yes, Mr. Weasley, sir...right away, Mr. Weasley, sir."

The house-elf popped away to the Ministry of Magic's kitchens, where she reappeared within a small supply closet.

"Dobby!" the house-elf called out.

Harry Potter's favorite house-elf popped into the closet.

"Yes, Smiley?" he asked.

"Mr. Ron Weasley's tea was cold," she replied.

Dobby started to fidget rather nervously. "I will be taking care of that for you, Smiley." He took the cup and saucer from the other house-elf and popped to the Hogwarts kitchens. It took just a moment for him to seek out and find his target. With another pop he disappeared, and reappeared within the walls of a different castle located a few hundred miles to the south.

"Mr. Harry Potter, sir?"

The Queen's Wizard looked up from an intelligence report that he was reading in his guest bedroom at Holyrood House.

"Hey Dobby, what's up?"

"Mr. Clan Champion's tea was being cold."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Was it now? Well, perhaps I should see."

"Yes, Mr. Harry Potter, sir," Dobby replied, as he held out the teacup.

Harry looked inside the teacup and fished out the stoppered vial that had traveled from London to Edinburgh via a lavatory dead drop, Luna's knickers, Ron's mouth, a teacup, and two house-elves. He held the vial up to the light, noted the silvery string trapped inside, and nodded.

"Thank you Dobby, and please thank the other house-elf for me as well."

"Yes, Mr. Harry Potter, sir," Dobby beamed, then popped away.

Harry shook his head as he considered all of the cloak and dagger that had gone into that morning's intelligence transfer. It would have been so much easier to have just badge-jumped into Ron's office to get the memory, but there were some concerns that all of the interns, and Ron especially, were being watched.

Fortunately, there were far fewer concerns about monitored badge travel within the Muggle world. After a quick call to let Steve know that he had to be away from the Queen for a few hours, Harry badge-jumped to Windsor, retrieved his pensieve, and then jumped to 10 Downing Street, where he planned on sharing Lisa's memory with Hermione.

Meanwhile, Smiley had returned to the Goblin Liaison Office with a replacement cup of tea.

"Thank you, Smiley," said Ron. He took a sip, and then let a very satisfied smile creep onto his face as he thought about his little scene with Luna. While they had received some rudimentary training in dead-drops and other espionage techniques from their Muggle MI-5 ¾ colleagues, there had been no mention of passing off information via simulated oral sex.

That, of course, was Luna's idea.

Ron thought it was rather brilliant.

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Having finished preparations for his Cabinet Meeting, Special Assistant to the Minister Percy Weasley sat back in his office chair with the Ministry's latest organizational chart in hand and assessed the latest threats to his upwardly mobile career. The floo shutdown happened on his watch, and there were bound to be complaints about the Portkey Office, but given all of the weekend issues associated with departments run by other cabinet ministers, Percy thought that there were opportunities to add to his square footage.

There had been a time, early on in his career at the Ministry, when Percy considered this type of exercise to be unnecessary...a time when he

naively thought it was enough to play hard to play the rules. But the fates of Barty Crouch and Cornelius Fudge had disabused him of that kind of idealism, and none too soon; had his ability to cover his bureaucratic bits not been well developed by the time he started to work with Madame Umbridge, she would have gnawed on them most severely.

Like Dolores Umbridge, Percy still clung to the Special Assistant title that made it clear to everyone that he was tight with the Minister of Magic. Clung to it so much, in fact, that he favored it over his official cabinet position, which was "Director of Magical Education, Transportation, Commerce and International Relations." Of course, this preference was much more understandable given some of the contempt within the Ministry for his position...since his box on the org chart sat right next to the Department of Mysteries, more than a few of his colleagues and subordinates had come to call Percy's domain the "Department of Knowns".

Despite the nickname, Percy felt quite satisfied with his present position within the Ministry. Aside from the Unspeakables, he was in charge of everyone and every office within the Ministry not associated with the defense of the wizarding world. This included two of the original seven Ministry departments (Transportation and International Relations), as well as two new subdepartments that gave him supervisory or regulatory control over Hogwarts, his father, and twin brothers. With all that in hand, losing control of magical surveillance had been rather easy to swallow.

Percy stared hard at the organizational chart, looking for openings. The werewolf attacks fell under Magical Beasts and Creatures, which had been folded under Magical Law Enforcement, but it would be hard to argue that that division would be better off under his umbrella...it was far more likely that the MLE would be added to Madame Umbridge's portfolio as part of an expanded Secret Security Office. But then most of the incidents that past Saturday had involved Muggles, and were under her purview, so she would be hard-pressed to claim that she was capable of taking even more on. A more reasonable scenario would be that the MLE Director would be sacked, and if that happened.....

Special Assistant Weasley counted boxes. While he held sway over far more ministry personnel than the MLE Director, the Ministry's org chart didn't reflect that fact; Director Oswald still had as many boxes linked to his name as Percy did. Which Percy thought was ridiculous...the Centaur Liaison Office, for example, still had a place on the chart, even though that office was vacant! Maybe, just maybe...Percy gathered his papers and made his way towards the MLE for some tactful negotiations.

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10:30 Thames House, Millbank, London

After pulling into an open space within the car park underneath MI-5 Headquarters, Chief Inspector Kate Miller shifted her new "company car" into neutral and slammed her foot on the accelerator. The responding roar of the BMW's 3.2 litre, 333 horsepower engine brought a satisfied smile to her face...nothing in Brixton Station's motor pool could come close to making a sound like that.

Unfortunately, her passenger was more confused than enthused.

"Is that a required action whenever a Muggle car is parked?" Remus asked.

Kate turned and replied, "It is when you finally get to drive one of these lovelies." She then killed the engine, unbuckled her seat belt and added, "Come on, Remy, we're running a tad late."

The former DADA professor rolled his eyes as he followed suit and got out of the car. CI Miller had given him the new nickname after deciding that "Remus" wasn't sexy enough for a secret agent...and stuck with it, despite his protests.

"Hard to believe we're late, given how fast you drove here," he said.

"Yes, well, we did make a few wrong turns...figured you would have known how to get to your headquarters."

Remus shook his head. "First time here...I've been swept up into this just as much as you have."

Kate nodded as she pushed the remote door lock button on her key chain. She snorted as her partner flinched at the car's chirped response.

"Getting better, Remy...didn't draw your wand this time."

Remus just shook his head, and mentally reviewed the list of pranks he intended to play on his partner once there was time for him to enjoy them.

The two made their way through automatic glass doors to a security checkpoint. Remus was amused by the fact that, as a credentialed MI-5 agent, he was given the responsibility of minding his partner during the Metropolitan Police officer's visit to "his" headquarters.

"That necklace looks good on you, Kate," he quipped, as they waited for an opened lift

The Chief Inspector looked down at red laminated badge that yelled out "GUEST" in big block letters and frowned.

"Would have thought the silver chain would have put you off," she replied.

Remus smiled. "No worries...it's Muggle made, so the chances of that being real silver are slim and none."

Kate and Remus returned to business banter once the lift dropped them off at the appropriate floor. An escort was waiting there to take them through a second security check, and from there to a forensic pathology laboratory. Remus's senses were assaulted by the combination of strong iridescent lighting and chemical odors, so much that he didn't even notice the sharp drop in temperature as they entered the room. A lab-coat wearing Muggle was there to greet them.

"Ah-hah, here we are, here we are," the Muggle announced, as he strode towards the entrance. "I'm Dr. Samsky, resident c-mug pathologist and

xenobiologist.”

“Chief Inspector Miller,” Kate replied, as she shook hands, with the man. “And this is my partner, Agent Lupin.”

The scientist’s eyebrows arched slightly as he shook the werewolf’s hand. “I’m thrilled to finally meet you, Agent Lupin.”

Remus eyed the Muggle warily...the glint in the c-mug’s eyes looked slightly predatory.

“Now, Agent Lupin, I was told that you have something of interest for us?”

Remus nodded as he pulled the small block of wood from his coat pocket and handed it to the pathologist. Samsky examined the block and marveled. “So, there really is a full-sized body inside here?”

“No, Dr. Samsky, the block is the body.”

“Amazing, simply amazing,” the pathologist replied, as he walked over to the center of the room and placed the block on one of two gurneys. Remus noticed that another small rectangular object was resting on the other bed.

“So, Agent Lupin, if you could work your magic, we could get started then,” the doctor said.

Remus nodded as he drew his wand, then took a look around. “Might want to move all this back,” he noted, as he waved his arms towards the electronic equipment that surrounded the beds.

Having seen some rather expensive machines fried by stray magnetic fields, the MI-5 ¾ pathologist didn’t need to be told twice, and pushed the wheeled equipment off to the side. Remus then cast *Finite Incantatum* spells on the two small objects, returning them to original form.

“Fascinating,” the pathologist said, as two female bodies (one nude, the other clothed) appeared before him. He approached the gurneys and placed latex gloved fingers on the neck of each cadaver.

“Good heavens this one is still warm!” he exclaimed, as he turned towards the Alpha Bitch’s reverted form. “What time was this one shot?”

“Approximately 2210 last night,” stated Kate.

“Truly remarkable,” the c-mug exclaimed. “It is one thing to know that magic exists...quite another to see it in action like this.” He took a closer look at the bullet-riddled skull and stated, “These entry points look altered...different than the others.”

CI Miller nodded. “She was shot within a magical jurisdiction. Wizards don’t like the idea of guns being used around them, so the slugs were removed in the field.”

Wilson nodded. “That’ll make facial reconstruction a tad more difficult.”

“We could probably get you the original slugs, if that would help,” offered Remus.

“Thanks, but I think that we’ll be able to work with what we have.”

“No need to reconstruct this face,” Remus said, as he looked down at the other cadaver. “This is Alecto Carrow.”

“And she was a werewolf too?” Wilson asked.

Lupin shook his head. “No, she was born that ugly.”

The pathologist snorted as he walked over to the side of the room and began wheeling the equipment back towards the bodies.

“We’ll get started straight away on this facial reconstruction, then,” he said. “Now that the hocus pocus is done, I can bring in my MI-5 colleagues and get their help...should have a head shot and preliminary autopsy results for you in a few hours.”

Kate and Remus left the pathologist to his work and made their way to their second scheduled meeting within MI-5’s biometric laboratory. Once there, their retinal patterns and other body parts were scanned and saved into a top-secret database for future access to high-security areas, such as MI-5 ¾’s headquarters. The wizard was amazed by the Muggle technology, and said so. He didn’t, however, have the heart to tell the scientists and technicians who were gathering the data that a simple polyjuice potion would likely fool the machines.

After being poked and prodded, Kate and Remus made their way to the Ministry’s cafeteria for lunch. Dr. Samsky sent Kate a text message during their meal, indicating that he already had some results to report, so the two made their way back to his workspace. Classical music was playing in the background as the two entered the pathology lab, but it was the smell of death that caught their attention; Dr. Samsky and a colleague were wrist deep into the opened chest cavity of the female werewolf.

“Ah, welcome back, Chief Insector, Agent Lupin,” the pathologist said, as he pulled bloodied gloves off of his hands and tossed them into a red biohazard bag. He then led them to a computer workstation and sat in front of two large monitors. With a few deft keystrokes, passwords were entered and photographic images appeared on screen.

“We’ve had some initial success identifying “Werewolf Doe,” Samsky quipped. He pointed towards the screens. “The first photo on the left should look familiar...that’s how she looked before we started poking around in her skull. This second photo is a computerized reconstruction of what she probably looked like before she was shot seven times in the head.”

"How did you do that?" asked Remus.

"With the right equipment," Samsky replied. "We used lasers to obtain a detailed three-dimensional model of the subject's head, including all of the bullet holes. Then, based on bullet trajectories and depths, the computer pieced back together the broken bones and filled in the bullet holes, to show us what the subject looked like before she was shot."

Remus nodded as he compared the computer rendering to an actual photographic image on the other screen. "And this third photograph, then?"

"It's a potential match for the subject," Dr. Samsky said proudly. "Once we had the rendering we searched our database of criminal records."

Chief Inspector Miller nodded, looking at the text that accompanied the mug shot. "Maggie Stevens, age thirty-one, arrested and convicted of violating the Queen's Peace three different times."

"What did she do?" asked Remus.

Kate leaned over Dr. Samsky's shoulders and used the computer keyboard to link to additional data. "Two minor assaults, involving pub brawls, and the third...public indecency."

"Public indecency?"

Kate frowned. "According to the records, she was found passed out drunk and naked in the street back in 1996."

"Really?" asked Remus. "What time of day was this?"

"Six-thirty in the morning...surprised she didn't freeze to death, given the time of year."

"When?"

"January sixth," Kate replied.

Agent Lupin thought for a moment, and then asked, "Can you look up historic lunar phases with that computer?"

Kate raised an eyebrow, then turned to Dr. Samsky.

"Suppose we could search the Internet," he replied. The pathologist opened his browser and tried to Google search "lunar cycle 1996." When the first couple of pages of results failed to turn up anything more interesting than how to do tarot readings, Kate suggested the search terms "full moon," and "1996." The second hit on that search produced a web page that listed the date of every full moon since 1940. Dr. Samsky scrolled down the page for the right year and said, "There you go."

Remus looked over the pathologist's shoulder and smiled. "First full moon that year was the fifth of January."

Chief Inspector Miller turned towards her partner and grinned. "Hey, I'm supposed to be the detective here, not you, Remy."

"What did I just miss?" asked Dr. Samsky.

Remus smiled. "Werewolves have a nasty habit of waking up naked and disorientated on the morning after a full moon."

Kate chuckled as she printed out the mug shot and arrest records.

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3:00pm, Ministry of Magic

After two straight hours of watching his Cabinet Officers bicker and posture, Rufus Scrimgeour decided that enough was enough.

"That's it," he declared. "I'll take all of the recommendations on revisions to the organizational charts under advisement."

"But, Minister..."

"But nothing, Madame Umbridge, I've had enough of the blame game. You will return all of the Aurors and Hit Wizards that you borrowed Saturday night to Oswald's Department.

The former High Inquisitor narrowed her eyes, but gave an affirmatory nod. "And about the Muggle's threat to break wands?"

The Minister of Magic stared at the toadish woman, then reached a decision. "We allow it for now."

"But Minister."

"But nothing, Dolores. We aren't in a position to fight the Muggles over this so soon after they lost a few hundred of their own to magical attacks...at least not until we understand the Death Eater's new tactics better. Work with the newspapers to get the word out to the public...we'll revisit this later on in the week."

"Yes, Minister."

"Weasley!"

"Yes, Minister Scrimgeour?"

"You will provide me with options that will ensure that the floo network does not go pear-shaped, at least for prioritized use by Ministry officials."

"Yes, Minister Scrimgeour."

"And Oswald, you will keep the Head Auror on a short leash, and immediately post a *Portus*-authorized Auror team within Magical Surveillance."

"Yes, Minister."

"Speaking of Magical Surveillance, Hopkirk...you will make arrangements for this Auror team to be immediately notified whenever a *Portus* spell is detected."

The MSO Director nodded her head. "I'll make it so, Minister Scrimgeour."

"It goes without saying that your Muggle surveillance team will inform us if the secrecy situation deteriorates any further."

"Yes, Minister."

"Let's see," said Scrimgeour, "who's left?"

"The Department of Mysteries?" asked its Director.

"Ah, yes...is your Department in position to help the others with these tasks?"

"Not really, Minister."

"Well, the continue to do whatever it is that you folks do down there."

The Head Unspeakable smiled. "As you wish, Minister Scrimgeour."

There was a few moments of silence, as everyone waited for the next decision from the Minister. Rufus finally asked, "Are there any other issues not related to org charts that need to be discussed this afternoon?"

Percy let out a small sigh and said, "Minister Scrimgeour, we need to decide what to do about the Muggle Prime Minister's notice...the three day grace period ends tonight."

Umbridge frowned. "Why didn't you dispose of the issue like we did the last time?"

"That avenue is no longer available," Percy replied. "As I noted in my memos, our ICW branch office was officially disbanded when the new Supreme Mugwump was sworn in last week in Kyoto."

The Department of Mysteries Director frowned. "I'm sorry, but is this something that we should have known about?"

"You didn't know that the new Supreme Mugwump was Japanese?"

"No, I knew that," the Unspeakable replied. "I was asking about the Muggle Prime Minister's note."

Minister Scrimgeour looked at the Unspeakable, then turned towards Percy and nodded.

"Last Friday, at a Cabinet meeting that you failed to attend, I reported that Lucius Malfoy allegedly tried to rob a Muggle bank. According to existing treaty obligations, the Ministry is required to send notice of this attempt to the International Confederation of Wizards."

The Unspeakable nodded. "And how is the Muggle Prime Minister involved?"

"The Muggle Prime Minister sent an official notification of this alleged attempt by owl last Friday afternoon."

"By owl?" asked the Unspeakable.

Scrimgeour nodded. "More of Potter's handiwork, no doubt."

"So what's this about a last time?" asked Department of Mysteries Director.

Percy nervously looked towards his boss, and once again got a confirmatory nod.

"On the day after the attack on the Ministry," he noted, "there was a separate incident involving a Muggle bank. The Ministry made the required notifications by hand delivering a notice to the Supreme Mugwump's office down on the Fifth Level."

"You mean Dumbledore's old office?"

"Yes."

But he'd been dead some three weeks, right?"

Percy nodded. "Nevertheless, his office was still officially opened, as our certified date-stamped receipt proves."

The Unspeakable scowled. "You didn't want the ICW to know about the attempt, did you?"

"Whether we wished it or not, we complied with our obligations," Percy noted.

"I see," said the Unspeakable. "So what happened to that notification, then?"

Percy allowed himself to grin slightly. "We made arrangements for the former Supreme Mugwump's office to be packed up and shipped off to Japan. Given all of the piles of parchment accumulated by Dumbledore over the years, one or two pieces of parchment *may* have been lost during this process."

The Unspeakable rolled his eyes. "Fine, so we dodged an Unforgivable that time...but now?"

"Now that the office is closed, we need to find an alternative approach," Percy replied.

"Why don't we simply do the required notification?" asked the Unspeakable.

"Because we don't need any of those foreign busybodies poking their noses into our business," Umbridge declared.

"What do you mean?"

"We're still on administrative probation from the Quidditch World Cup attack," Percy explained. "If we notify the ICW that a British wizard tried to rob a Muggle bank, they'll bring in a full audit team to review our records and procedures."

"And that's a problem?" asked the Unspeakable.

Umbridge and Percy spoke in unison. "Yes!"

"Why?"

"The answer is kept on a need-to-know basis, I'm afraid," Scrimgeour replied wearily. "Suffice to say there were certain advantages to having a British wizard installed as Supreme Mugwump."

The Unspeakable sighed, and rubbed his forehead with his fingers.

"So, what if we simply ignore the incident?"

Scrimgeour nodded. "That would be the best of a series of bad alternatives. It certainly has worked in the past."

"But the fact that the Muggle Prime Minister sent some sort of official notification?"

"Exactly," spat out Umbridge. "That treasonous whelp and his mudblood whore are pinning us into a corner."

"So, if they know enough about treaty obligations to pen the parchment for the Muggle Prime Minister, then they probably know enough to check whether we did the proper notification."

"Exactly," Percy replied.

"I wish I knew what games they're playing," the Minister said. He pursed his lips, and then said, "Percy, arrange an immediate meeting between Potter and myself...we need to get to the bottom of this."

"Erm, yes, Minister," Percy replied. "But how?"

"Use your goblin-loving brother," Umbridge spat out.

Percy shook his head in disgust. "Fine."

The Minister looked down at his watch. "Unless there's anything else, then..."

"Well, actually, there is," the Unspeakable replied.

Scrimgeour scowled. "Can it wait a day?"

The Department of Mysteries Director thought for a moment. "That would depend, Minister Scrimgeour."

"Depend on what?"

"On the status of one of your badges of office."

The Minister furrowed his eyebrows.

Which one?"

"It's a large pearl, set on the end of a silver necklace, set within a mount trimmed with dragons."

The Minister frowned. "Percy?"

"I believe that you placed it within one of your lower desk drawers," his Special Assistant replied.

Scrimgeour was muttering to himself as he ducked down and began to rummage through his drawers. A few moments later, he pulled out the thick chain necklace.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

The Unspeakable nodded as he looked closely at the orb that dangled from the chain. He then drew his wand and cast a few diagnostic charms.

"So can it wait, or not?" demanded Umbridge.

The wand-wielding wizard frowned. "Minister, if you would indulge me, and place the necklace over your head?"

"You want me to wear it?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

The leonine wizard scowled. Hoping that quick compliance satiate the Unspeakable's curiosity, he did a quick check on the piece of jewelry. Finding it free of hexes and curses, he then slipped the silver chain over his head, and let the large pearl rest against his chest.

The Unspeakable sucked in a deep breath as he considered the inert orb. He then exhaled, and then replied, "No Madame Umbridge, at this point, I am afraid that further discussion can not wait."

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4:00pm Smithfield Market, London

Secret Agent Remus Lupin walked out of the meat market with a fresh lead on their case and a desire for raw steak. In contrast, his partner was presently entertaining an upset stomach and thoughts of turning vegan.

Remus pointed down the street and said, "*Stake and Ale*'s down that way, I think." Kate nodded and they made their way to the pub where two of the meat market's butchers had placed "Mother" Maggy Stevens as a barmaid.

"So," asked Kate along the way, "all of those burly men with excess body hair in there were,....erm..."

"Let's call them kin, given where we are," Remus replied. "And yes, I'd say there were a good fifty or so at least in there."

Kate shook her head. "It made sense when you explained it on the way over, but it really hit home when I saw all the blood and guts..."

"Yeah, makes you hungry, doesn't it?" Remus said with a grin. "It is a rather ideal job for the typical London werewolf...not just access to the raw meat, but to the tunnels as well."

The Chief Inspector nodded. Remus had told her that as London outgrew its walls in the Eighteenth Century cow paths were converted into city streets, and city dwellers within the neighborhoods that surrounded Smithfield Market began to object to having cattle driven to market under their noses. In response, the cattle drives were driven underground, within newly constructed tunnels that connected the market to the outer edges of the city. Years later, once cattle were trucked in on lorries, the tunnels were sealed off. Parts of the tunnel system were converted into underground storage, but much of the network was commandeered by the werewolf community, for use as a safe, anonymous area to run when full moons shined aboveground.

When Kate and Remus entered the *Stake and Ale*, they encountered a scene quite similar to what Severus Snape found when he had visited three days earlier.

Kate took in the rough-and-tumble crowd, their blood-stained boots, and hairier than average faces and quietly asked, "Are we okay here, Remy?"

Remus took a careful look about the room, let his were-enhanced senses kick in, and nodded. "More than one pack, no Alphas, mixed company... should be safe."

"Should we talk directly to the publican?" Kate quietly asked.

Remus shook his head. "Let's just take a seat, and get a measure of the place."

Kate nodded, deferring to her partner's instincts in that situation. She made her way to a high table off to the side of the bar, where she and Remus made small talk while they waited in vain for a server to take their orders.

"I do believe that they're blowing us off, Remy," Kate noted.

Her partner nodded. "Watch my back."

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Special Ambassador, Part 1 (part 2)

The lycanthrope walked up to the counter and tried to get the publican's attention. He was blatantly ignored by the barkeep, but not by a few of the patrons sitting alongside the rail.

"Oh look, it's a West End Wolfie," sneered one of the burly men, after taking in Remus's attire.

"Slumming a bit, ain't ya guv'nor?" quipped another.

Remus turned towards the two men and took their measure. They were both were-turned Muggles, probably mid- to lower-pack, and ran together. Not wishing to make a scene, he ignored them.

"Bartender?" he called out.

"Hey Mike," one of the two men called in follow-up. "Make a run to the dairy...looks like we got ourselves another milk drinker."

Amidst the laughter, the man's buddy nodded towards Kate and said, "Nah, take a look-see, the bloke brought his own cow."

Remus turned towards the heckler and scowled as the wolf boiled up inside of him. His eyes dilated with fury, adrenaline pumped into his veins and a musky scent poured out of his sweat glands in an almost tangible cloud. He reached out, grabbed the lycan who had insulted his partner by the scruff of his neck, and bashed his face down onto the bar.

Bar stools scraped back and voices were raised as blood started to flow freely from a cut over the now-woozy heckler's right eye. Several of the pub patrons made a move towards Remus only to stop dead in their tracks.

Chief Inspector Miller was about to draw her badge and her gun to control the situation when she suddenly realized that her partner had, in his own way, somehow taken charge. All eyes were now drawn to Remus stern gaze, and all noses now drawn to his scent. After a few tense seconds, a murmur of voices was heard as the patrons all cast their eyes down towards the floor and backed away.

The original heckler grabbed his pint glass in one hand and his mate's shoulder with the other. "Sorry, Guv'nor," he said to Remus, as he pulled his bleeding mate away. "Just havin' a bit o' fun. Didn't mean to offend."

Remus nodded in response, as he let out a deep exhale.

The publican was suddenly more than hospitable. While he wasn't a werewolf, enough of his patrons and staff were for him to recognize pack behavior.

"This here's neutral ground, Guv'nor," he said apologetically. "Nobody's looking for a fight."

Remus nodded. "My apologies...I don't take kindly to having my partner insulted."

The publican nodded. "So would you and your bird care for a drink on the house?"

"He said partner, not bird," Kate announced, as she joined Remus at the bar. She flashed her badge and added, "As in 'my partner, *Metropolitan Police Chief Inspector Kathryn Miller*'."

A sharp silence followed this announcement, before the pub's chairs and bar stools again scraped against the wooden floor, and the pub's patrons suddenly all had better places to be.

"Well that was subtle," Remus snarked, as the room cleared out.

"No more than the bloody nose," Kate replied.

"Actually, that was a rather normal form of communication for this crowd," the pub owner said warily. He then added, "So, what can I do for you, Chief Inspector?"

Kate looked at Remus, who shook his head in frustration, and pulled a photograph from his coat pocket. He placed it on the bar and asked, "Do you know this woman?"

The publican looked down, and replied, "She looks...vaguely familiar."

"We have good reason to believe that she was employed here," Remus growled.

"You must be mistaken, Guv'nor...I don't have anyone looking like that on my payroll."

Remus rolled his eyes and leaned forward. "But that doesn't mean she wasn't working for you on the sly, does it?"

Chief Inspector Miller's eyes narrowed as she reached into her pocket for a business card. She slid the card across the table towards the bar man and said, "We're not here to close down your business for hiring undocumented workers, or to get you in trouble with your customers. We do, however, need to find out where this woman lived and who her friends were. You help us with that, and the rest will go away."

The publican looked at the card, then looked up at Remus.

"If you don't mind me asking, what in the bloody hell is going on?"

Lupin glanced over at Kate, who shrugged her shoulders.

"Your world, your call, partner."

Remus snorted, then turned back towards the barman. "Just how hooked into the community are you?"

The barman glanced around his now-empty pub and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm guessing you know well enough that I'm not turned?" When Remus nodded, the publican continued. "This pub's been a favorite of the local meat packers since when my grandfather owned it. And since a few of those lot are, well...your kind...this pub's always been friendly to them."

"Friendly enough to hire one?" asked Kate.

The publican nodded towards the photograph. "What's Maggie gone and done now?"

Remus replied, "She led at least part of her pack on an attack Saturday night."

"Really?" asked the man. "Well, I wouldn't know anything about that."

"Didn't say that you did," replied Lupin. "How long has she been working here?"

"Off and on, six years," said the publican.

"You know where she lives?" asked Kate.

The publican looked nervously towards Remus. "What's a were doing cooperating with the Police?"

Remus snarled just a bit. "Trying to keep from seeing every police officer in the nation filling their guns with silver bullets next full moon."

This comment drew the barman's attention. "How bad?" he asked.

Remus shared another look with his partner, and with her agreement replied, "Ever hear of a bloke named Greyback?"

The barman nodded. "Aye, never seen him around here, but I've heard he's a right nasty bastard."

Nodding, Lupin said, "Well, he set his pack loose on Saturday...killed eight people, including seven....seven that are under the protection of the Metropolitan Police."

"So they killed a wizard as well?" asked the publican.

Taking the question as confirmation that the man knew something about the wizarding world, Remus nodded. "Did you know that your barmaid ran with Greyback?"

The publican shook his head. "Like I said, I try to stay out of their politics...much healthier for business that way."

Kate nodded. "We need to find her friends, and search where she lived."

"Lived?" asked the publican. "You mean she's...."

Remus nodded.

The barman's face turned pale.

"Maggie she....I knew she changed packs a year ago or so, but not which pack."

"Who did she used to run with?"

"Don't know pack names...I told you that I try to stay out of it."

"But did she have any friends here...people she might have run with before?"

The barman thought about the question carefully. "Can you keep my name out of this?"

The Chief Inspector replied, "Completely confidential...we recognize your situation."

The publican reached a decision and nodded. "There's a couple of blokes...names are Johnnie Hancock and Ben Pinckney. They're regulars, come in right after morning shift over at the market...they might know where she lived."

Kate smiled. "There, now...that wasn't too bad, was it?"

The barman snorted loudly as he glanced towards Remus. "Yeah, not bit yet."

"We'll do our best to keep your involvement quiet," the Chief Inspector replied.

As Kate and Remus turned to leave, the barman asked, "So the government, it knows about...everything?"

Remus glanced back towards the bar and nodded.

"At least the Muggle government does."

Once the two left the pub, Kate said, "You do know that you violated a half-dozen police regulations in there, don't you?"

Remus shrugged his shoulders. "Good thing I'm not a Muggle policeman, then."

Kate shook her head in frustration. "Mind explaining why they all backed off once you bashed that bloke's face?"

Remus smiled. "Guess I unconsciously established dominance,"

"Thought you said you weren't affiliated with a pack."

"I'm not."

"Oh, so you just naturally radiate a bad-arse Alpha aura?" quipped Kate.

Remus nodded. "In a way, yes."

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4:50pm, Ministry of Magic

As Percy Weasley made his way towards the Goblin Liaison Office, he was too worried about what the Head Unspeakable had revealed about the Treaty of Carlisle and the upcoming meeting to care that he needed to ask his younger misguided brother a favor.

"Come in," Ron called out, when his brother knocked on the door.

Percy walked into the office.

"The Minister needs to speak with Harry immediately," he declared.

Ron looked at his older brother and snorted. "What do I look like, an owl?"

Percy scowled. "He needs to speak with Potter straight away...don't tell me you can't get in contact with him."

"Okay, so I won't," Ron quipped. "Still think it'd be faster to owl."

"Yes, well..." Percy reached into his pocket and withdrew an envelope. "It's all explained in this letter...there's also a two-way portkey for his use."

Ron shook his head dismissively. "After all of the tripe you've shoveled his way, why should he do you any favors? Why should he trust you?"

"Because he's still a wizard, and still a part of our world," Percy snapped back.

"Funny, you claimed that he wasn't in the papers."

"I did not."

"Really?" asked Ron. "I could have sworn that the 'Anonymous senior Ministry official' was you...sounded like you talking out of your arse, at least."

Percy, in a rather angry tone of voice, said, "Just get this letter to him."

"Sorry, brother, but you'll have to make arrangements with my supervisor."

"What are you on about?"

"What I'm 'on about' are the rules and regulations, dear brother," Ron said with a grin. "Courier duty is not part of my official job description, and any assigned task that deviates from my official duties must be approved in advance by both my supervisor and Department Head."

"But..."

"Surely you aren't asking me to go against the regulations that you yourself helped draft?"

Percy started to say something, then thought better of it. "Fine, who is the acting Department Head this week?"

"Lisa Turpin, I believe."

Just as Percy began to storm out of the office a loud "gong" was heard.

"Yes!" Ron exclaimed, as he began to pack his bag.

"Where are you going?" Percy demanded.

"Five o'clock is official quitting time for all Ministry Interns," Ron replied. "Unless you want to force me to work more than the normal eight hours."

"Fine, so I'll authorize..."

"Of course, then you'd be violating the work hour limitations established by the educational internship program guidelines...which would mean that you'd have to hire me on as a full time Ministry Employee, with both back pay and forward pay."

Percy stared at his brother with an open mouth and shocked expression.

Ron smiled as he walked out from behind his desk, and patted his brother on the shoulder. With a wide smile, he pronounced, "He who lives by bureaucratic dragon dung, dies by bureaucratic dragon dung."

"I'll have you know that I'm a Senior Advisor, Ronald."

Ron nodded. "Yes...a Senior Advisor that better be making a trip to the owlry, from the looks of it."

And with a whistled rendition of "Weasley is Our King," Ron made his way towards the outbound floo.

Chapter 34: Politics and Portkeys

Monday, July 9, 6:30pm

Gilmerton Close, Edinburgh

As Harry Potter watched Minerva McGonagall gracefully step out of the floo grate and dust the ashes from her cloak he once again thanked Merlin (literally) for his ability to badge-jump.

"Good Evening, Headmistress, and welcome to Edinburgh," Harry said, as he offered her his elbow.

Minerva nodded. "Thank you for inviting me." As she grabbed the Queen's Wizard's arm she noticed his Clan Potter robe and quietly asked, "The invitation said that I was to wear Muggle evening wear, right?"

The Queen's Wizard nodded as he took in the Headmistress's black tea-length dress, and the tartan sash that was worn over her right shoulder and pinned with a gold brooch.

"You look fine, Headmistress...I'm wearing the robe for a lower profile within the Close."

Minerva chuckled as she glanced at the lightning bolt-shaped scar on Harry's forehead. "As if a low profile was possible for you, Mr. Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes as he led his Headmistress through the main room of the "Thistle and Toad," the pub that guarded the entrance to Edinburgh's small Wizard's Quarter. He nodded at the barman as he passed by.

"I think we're done for now, Kirk," Harry said. "Thanks again for your help."

"No trouble at all, Clan Chief, we thank you for the business," the squib replied.

As Harry and the Headmistress stepped through the Muggle entrance of the pub and into the daylight, she asked, "You've made some new friends whilst in town, Mr. Potter?"

The black-haired wizard smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Never hurts to be friendly with the gatekeepers to the wizarding world." He then added, "And the Queen does like to use local caterers during her visits to Holyrood."

It was only a few steps from the pub entrance out to Lawnmarket, one of the four streets that make up the Royal Mile between Edinburgh Castle and Holyrood Palace. A black sedan sat double-parked waiting for them, with a driver who immediately opened the back door once he spied Harry walking out of the narrow alleyway.

McGonagall looked nervously at the Muggle automobile, and then up the street towards the Palace.

"Can't be more than a half-mile walk," she noted.

Harry laughed. "That it is, Headmistress, but we don't want to keep the Queen waiting, now, do we?"

"No, I imagine not," Minerva replied, as she reluctantly ducked into the vehicle.

Once the Queen's Wizard joined her in the back seat, the Headmistress looked warily at the driver. Realizing that she likely had some questions to ask, Harry raised the glass divider between the front and back benches.

"Muggle equivalent of a silencing charm," he explained. "We have a few minutes, if there's something..."

Minerva shook her head. "Some background to this rather impromptu gathering, if you please?"

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry for the short notice." As he continued to talk he began to unfasten the front of his robes, revealing a white dress shirt, black

tie, and bright scarlet jacket.

"Right, so there's a few things going on tonight. First involves the Muggle government," the teen-aged wizard began. "I don't know if you're aware of it, but the Muggle Scots were granted some type of limited home-rule...they've got their own Parliament now, and a leader called the 'First Minister' that's like the Muggle Prime Minister, only smaller."

Minerva nodded, prompting Harry to continue.

"So this First Minister, even though he's the head of Scotland's Muggle government, he wasn't told about the wizarding world like the British Prime Minister was...at least until last night."

"Should he have been told?" asked the Headmistress.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "From a legal standpoint, we think so...Great Britain is a United Kingdom of countries, and Scotland is one of those countries. But from a practical standpoint, I definitely think so...after all, the Dementors struck a Scottish city Saturday night."

"So the Muggle Scots weren't told by the Muggle English why more than two hundred of our kith and kin were killed?" asked Minerva. "Ach, I don't imagine the Scottish minister was too happy about that."

The Queen's Wizard frowned. "No, he wasn't happy at all, even less so because he was told after the fact by me, rather than by the British Prime Minister."

"So how does this all relate to meeting the Muggle Queen?" the Headmistress asked.

"The Muggles call it 'damage control'," Harry replied. "The Queen thought that if this First Minister were to meet more people from the wizarding world, including the headmistress of Britain's finest school of witchcraft and wizardry..."

"Who just happens to be a Scot herself?" the Headmistress asked wryly.

Harry smiled. "You got to the heart of the matter much sooner than I did, I'm afraid."

"Yes, well, age and years of experience jockeying within staff meetings and with the Board of Governors will do that for you," Minerva replied.

Snorting, Harry noted, "There will also be a short award ceremony tonight. Ernie MacMillian and, erm...I...will be getting medals for bravery in Inverness, and all of the others that helped fight back the Dementors will be publicly thanked."

"Not that you don't deserve it, Harry, but why would the Queen want to do that?" asked McGonagall.

Harry replied, "Her Majesty thought it important to let the wizarding world know that she appreciates the efforts of her magical subjects, even if the Ministry chooses to ignore them."

Minerva's eyes narrowed. "That seems like a far more riskier bit of politics, Harry."

The Queen's Wizard agreed with a nod. "That it is, Headmistress...that it is."

"Which brings us to your choice of attire tonight," said McGonagall, as she took in what Harry had been wearing underneath his robes.

The commander of Her Majesty's only magical squadron glanced down at his "mess dress" uniform, worn by officers within The Parachute Regiment.

"Ah, you noticed," Harry replied with a weak smile. As the car passed through the gates of the Palace, he then said, "So, a funny thing happened after I was done with the Dementors Saturday night..."

There was scant time to explain the purpose of The Prince's Own Magical Squadron before the car stopped and a liveryman opened the car door.

A young wizard was waiting for them, dressed just like Harry; a bright scarlet jacket with cuffs, epaulets and lapels trimmed in Regimental maroon, worn over a navy blue waistcoat, white shirt and black tie. The high-waisted navy trousers had cuffs that were buckled under black-heeled boots (known as "mess wellies")

The wizard saluted smartly, and then asked, "Major Potter?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Longbottom?"

"Your aide-de-camp has a message for you."

Harry's eyes lit up. "Ah, so the Ministry's owl finally found me?"

Neville nodded. "Yes, sir, just as Captain Weasley predicted."

"Captain Weasley?" asked Minerva. "Which one?"

"Ron," Harry replied with a smile. "Fred and George are Lieutenants."

Neville held out his elbow for the Headmistress and said, "If you would allow me the honor of escorting you inside, Ma'am?"

Minerva shook her head in disbelief. Between the Queen's invitation, the idea of her students commissioned within the Muggle army, and Neville's display of impeccable manners, she didn't know what to think.

"Thank You," the tartan-wearing witch finally replied, as she accepted Neville's arm. "You look rather dashing tonight Mr....or should I say Lieutenant Longbottom?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Thank You, Ma'am."

Your grandmother would approve, I think."

"Erm, thank you for thinking that," Neville replied. "She does, by the way....and she's already inside, if you wanted to discuss it with her."

"Really?" asked McGonagall.

With a nod from Harry, Neville began to walk towards the front entrance. "Yes, there are actually quite a few parents here tonight...the Grangers, and Spinnetts, and Bells..."

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Harry followed behind until he could slip into an unoccupied room off the front entrance of the Palace.

"Dobby?" he called out.

The only house-elf in unofficial service to Her Majesty the Queen popped into the room wearing an elf-sized version of Harry's outfit, with the addition of the small maroon beret.

"Yes, Major Harry Potter, sir, ADC Dobby is here," the house-elf replied, as he held out an embossed envelope.

"Thank you Dobby," Harry replied. "You've checked that the portkey is inside the envelope, rather than the envelope itself?"

"Yes, Major Harry Potter, sir. It is safe for you to handle."

Harry nodded as he opened the envelope and spilled the contents out onto a side table. Leaving untouched a large black button, Harry picked up a piece of parchment and quickly scanned the letter.

"Just as Ron said," he noted, mainly to himself. He then looked down at the button and asked, "Dobby, is that portkey touch activated?"

The house-elf looked closely at the object. "No, Major Potter, sir. It be needing your wandtip touched to it."

Harry nodded. "So we can grant that they're acting as they claim, at least for now."

Dobby nodded. "Will Major Harry Potter, sir, be needing to send a response?"

Harry retrieved a prewritten response from an inside coat pocket, then asked, "Was the ministry's owl waiting at the remote drop?"

Dobby nodded.

Major Potter reached back into a pocket for some owl treats, then handed them and the letter to the house-elf.

"Will you please give these to the owl, then?"

"Dobby can do that, Major Harry Potter, sir."

Harry smiled. "And then would you come back? If you don't mind, there are a few more Muggles that I'd like to introduce you too."

Dobby nodded. "Would Major Potter sir like the portkey returned as well?"

Harry looked down at the button, and after a moment shook his head. Stuffing the portkey into a trouser pocket, he said, "Thanks, Dobby, but you never know when one of these might come in handy."

7:00pm, Ministry of Magic

After meeting with his brother Percy, Ron Weasley had floo'ed from the Ministry to Hogsmeade; with his family temporarily staying at Hogwarts, he would have walked from The Three Broomsticks up to the Castle, had it not been for his badge. From an empty alleyway he badge-called Harry and Hermione, they used Hermione as an anchor point to badge-jump back to London for a debriefing with the Muggle Prime Minister. Harry's prewritten response to the Minister of Magic's request was developed during that meeting.

Needless to say, Harry's response was not well received when the Ministry's owl delivered it to Minister Scrimgeour.

"He has a previous engagement?" Rufus snarled. "Can't meet until tomorrow afternoon, and then only at a neutral site?"

"Who does he think he is?" added Dolores Umbridge.

"The-Boy-Who-Betrayed Us," said Percy.

The three Ministry officials had been waiting for Harry's arrival within the Minister of Magic's Office.

Scrimgeour passed the letter off to Umbridge, then turned the now emptied envelope upside down.

"Didn't bother to return the unused portkey, I see," he noted. He then turned to Percy and added, "That did have a limited time use window, right?"

Percy struggled to maintain a calm facade, despite the fact that he was screaming "Bollocks!" inside.

"Of course, Minister Scrimgeour," he lied smoothly. "I built it myself." (That part was true, at least).

Umbridge threw the response down onto the table and used her wand to reduce it to ashes.

Percy immediately whined. "Hey, I didn't get a chance to read it...."

"Save it, Wetherby," she snarled back. She then turned to the Minister. "He clearly is trying to force our hand on ICW notification."

Rufus nodded. "Whether it was intentional or not, the effect is the same." He then looked at his two assistants and asked for suggestions.

"I say we obliviate them," Umbridge stated. "Just give me the world, and I'll have one of my teams so deep inside their heads they won't remember their own names."

Percy rolled his eyebrows. "And just whom do you plan on obliterating?"

"Potter and his mudblood whore, for starters...and then their silly queen, and the Muggle minister..."

Percy snorted. "Yeah, sure...send one of your teams out to attack Potter and Granger... Because that worked so well the last time, and that was before Potter could legally do magic, and before they took control of their own wards."

Scrimgeour shook his head. "They'll see it as an act of aggression if we're caught going after the Muggle leaders."

"So?"

"So that wouldn't help move the conversation along, now would it?" jumped in Percy. "Whether that conversation takes place tomorrow at that neutral location, or at Carlisle Castle at the end of the week."

"I suppose, then, that you've a better idea?" Umbridge snapped back.

Scrimgeour turned towards his younger Special Assistant, as if he was waiting for a response as well.

Percy swallowed, and then asked, "What if we were to do nothing?"

"What?" demanded Umbridge.

"We do nothing," Percy replied, repeating the words with more certainty. "We don't notify the ICW, we don't respond to the Prime Minister's notification, and we don't meet with Potter tomorrow."

Scrimgeour squinted at Percy. "Where are you going with this, Weasley?"

"I think we should stall," the Director of Knowns replied. "Let's say we ignore this attempted robbery, and the prime minister's notification. They will probably ignore protocols and contact the ICW directly. But with the new Supreme Mugwump in Japan how long would that take?"

"At least a couple of days, assuming they have access to an international delivery owl," the Minister replied.

"So, two days to get there. Then, even if the ICW decides to immediately investigate, which is a big assumption since the letter is from a Muggle government, it would take them at least two days to look into the issue, right?"

Scrimgeour agreed. "And another two days or so to draft a letter to us, demanding an explanation."

"And then we ignore that," Percy concluded. "Or we don't, depending on how things turn out at Carlisle. The beautiful thing is that if they then wanted to sanction us, it would take a decision by the full assembly, and they aren't scheduled to meet again until August."

Rufus smiled for the first time that day. "And what wizard would want to side with the Muggle government if they are threatening to violate the international secrecy acts?"

Umbridge shook her head. "I don't like it...it leaves too many things in the hands of others."

Percy, reading the expression on his boss's face, chose to say nothing in response. After a moment of silence, the Minister reached a decision.

"We go with Weasley's plan," he stated. "We've already assumed the worst will happen at Carlisle, based on what the Unspeakables have told us. So even if the Internationals try to intervene on their behalf..."

"You know," interrupted Umbridge, trying to save face, "if we decided to lie about the ICW notification we'd likely gain even more time."

The Minister of Magic tilted his head in thought, and then shook it. "It wouldn't gain us that much, and would trip us up if we wanted to claim that the Muggles were lying. No...we stay silent, and keep them guessing."

And with a nod filled with gravitas, Scrimgeour ordered his subordinates to devote their full attention to the upcoming meeting at Carlisle...and to the planned response tentatively labeled "Project Arcanum."

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8:00pm Palace at Holyrood House, Edinburgh

Once the last of the invited guests passed through a reception line that included the Queen, the Scottish First Minister, the Queen's Wizard, and Ernie Macmillan, Harry finally got his chance to congratulate his classmate.

"Well done, Ernie," the Queen's Wizard said with a smile. "And thank you, I really appreciate the fact that you're here with your parents."

"Not a problem, Harry," the Hufflepuff replied, as he looked once more at the "Queen's Gallantry Medal" that had been pinned to the chest of his Muggle tuxedo jacket. "Not all pureblood families are intolerant of the Muggle world, and my folks were absolutely incensed at the lack of help from the Ministry during the attack."

Harry nodded. "Thanks for reminding me...they asked to meet with me as they passed through the line."

The Hufflepuff nodded. "And I promised to search out Hannah to find out more about this 'witch-in-waiting' job you just lined up for her." He then added, "Congratulations on your George Medal, Harry."

The Queen's Wizard looked down at the silver medal that hung from a red and blue striped ribbon and nodded. "Not that I'd argue against the Queen, but I still think that you should have gotten the higher honor."

Ernie snorted. "Oh, please, Potter...I called for help and saved my family from the Dementors. You answered the call and saved an entire city from the Dementors."

Harry shook his head. "Agree to disagree, then," he replied. He shook the Hufflepuff's hand once more, then turned towards the large gathering to prioritize his obligations. Between his MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ colleagues, his TPOMS squadron, and the families of nearly all of the friends and classmates that he had recruited that summer, there were a lot of people that he had promised to catch up with after the ceremony.

The Queen's Wizard thought about coming to his liege's rescue when he noticed that Luna's father was peppering her with questions, but the Queen seemed to be holding her own. The First Minister, in turn, was chatting up Headmistress McGonagall about Hogwarts and historical influence of magic within the different clans. This allowed Harry to not feel too guilty about seeking out the company of his favorite witch.

Hermione was in a corner of the room with a colleague from MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$'s Q Branch, discussing something that had her very excited.

"Harry!" Hermione said brightly, as he caught her eye. She pulled him into a kiss, and then introduced him to their fellow secret agent.

"This is Dr. Wembley," she said. "He's the chemist that's been examining the oil samples that we collected from the firth."

"Nice to meet you," said Harry, as he shook the Muggle's hand. "I assume that you discovered something of interest, since my girlfriend looks like she's about to pee her pants."

"Harry!" Hermione chided, as she slapped his shoulder.

"That might actually help confirm my hypothesis," the chemist said with a sardonic grin. "Being that urine is also fluorescent."

Hermione snapped her head back towards the chemist, but then grinned and nodded her head. "You are rather clever, aren't you?"

"Will someone explain this cleverness to an ignorant wizard?" asked Harry.

The Q Branch chemist turned towards Harry and smiled. "The two crude oil samples were chemically identical, but then I considered their physical properties."

"One was orange and one wasn't when we collected them," noted Harry.

"But when we submitted them to the lab they were both black, remember?" asked Hermione.

"So how does this relate to your pee?" asked Harry.

Hermione shook her head dismissively. "Both crude oil and urine, I presume, fluoresce, or glow in the dark, when exposed to ultraviolet radiation."

Harry squinted at Hermione, then turned to their colleague for confirmation.

"Except that urine fluoresces purple," the chemist said with a smirk. He then added, "But I digress...once I thought to check it was a simple matter to verify in the laboratory."

"You examined your pee in your laboratory?" asked Harry.

"No, Major Potter, the crude oil samples," the chemist replied. "Both of them glowed orange when exposed to short-wavelength ultraviolet radiation."

Harry paused, waiting for something more. When nothing came, he asked, "And so..."

"And so, Harry, your Patronus may have produced the same glow because it is comprised, at least in part, of short-wave ultraviolet light."

Harry nodded. "And so...."

"Oh, Sweetheart," Hermione said with a sigh. "Muggles can't cast Patronus charms, but they can create ultraviolet light."

"So you think that the ultraviolet radiation is the secret ingredient within a Patronus that scares off the Dementors?"

Hermione nodded and shrugged her shoulders. "We'd have to test the idea, of course, but just think if that's the case!"

It was Harry's turn to nod. "It'd be nice if it were true." He then turned towards the chemist. "Suppose you want me to catch a Dementor for you to do tests on?"

The chemist shook his head. "No, if it's all the same, I'd rather the test be performed in the field, if necessary."

"How so?"

"We're working on that," said Hermione. "Maybe we arm all of the Dementor patrols along the coastline with ultraviolet light torches, and have them try to scare them off with torchlight before casting a Patronus charm?"

Harry thought for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders. "Can't hurt, I guess, although I'd rather see something with a greater range than a torch."

"Some sort of flare?" asked the chemist.

Hermione got that certain look again. "Thanks, Harry, you're brilliant," she said, then shoo'ed him off with another kiss, so that she could brainstorm with the chemist about different lighting sources.

The Queen's Wizard was on his way to the open bar, looking to refill his butterbeer, when he ran into two of the Muggle TPOMS members. They, like all of squadron members in attendance, were dressed in Parachute Regiment "mess dress."

"Excuse me, Sir," said Sergeant Beemer, as he drew himself close to attention.

"At ease, New Six, Coley," Harry replied with a smile and dismissive wave.

"Blimey Major," said Coley, "You never told us that you had been that much in the thick of it before you decided to join our little dance out on the moors."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Just doing my job."

"Yes, well...any man that says it's not right for someone your age to hold that rank..."

"Man or woman, for that matter," added New Six as he nodded towards their magical partners. "Didn't realize that Comet and Cupid cleaned up that well before tonight."

The other Muggle commando nodded. "We might just have to get to know our squad mates a little better."

The Queen's Wizard followed New Six's line of sight and chuckled. Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet were also turned out in mess dress, wearing ankle-length navy skirts in place of trousers, and low-heeled pumps instead of dress boots.

"You do realize that Lieutenant's Bell and Spinnet are dating the Weasley Twins, right?" asked Harry.

New Six shrugged. "Perhaps they just needed to get to know the right men."

Harry laughed. "I would advise against the attempt, gentlemen...the Twins are rather brilliant when it comes to pranks."

Coley scoffed. "No offense, Major, but New Six and I have always managed to overcome what's been thrown our way."

"Really?" asked Harry. "And has anyone ever thrown a gender-reversing potion into your beer?"

The two commandos looked at Harry with a mixture of circumspection and shock.

"You're not serious, are you Sir?"

Harry nodded. "Back in school their enemies had an alarming habit of growing tits and losing bits for a day or three."

New Six snorted. "Might actually improve Coley's looks."

"Why New Six," said Coley, as he grabbed his mate's arm. "I never knew that you noticed."

With newfound interest in getting to know Fred and George (and their pranking skills) better, the two Muggle commandos took their leave.

"Just remember to hang around," instructed Harry. "The Prince wants formal squadron pictures."

"Right, sir," the two replied.

The Queen's Wizard started to make his way towards Katie Bell to give her some grief about no longer being a temporary witch-in-waiting, but was intercepted by Padma and Parvati's parents.

"There you are, Major Potter," said Mr. Patil, with a melodic South Asian accent. "I was wondering if you could spare us a few minutes of your time."

Harry nodded warily. "Of course, Mr. Patil," he replied. Harry then turned towards Mrs. Patil, who was dressed in an elegant sari, and added, "I can see where Padma and Parvati got their beauty."

Mrs. Patil smiled. "So you are not only brave, but charming."

"Your daughters are no less brave and charming," Harry replied. "I was thrilled when they accepted the Queen's offer to serve her as witches-in-waiting."

Mr. Patil waved off the compliment. "They were the ones that were thrilled, Major Potter...to have the opportunity to do something of consequence this summer."

Harry nodded. "I assure you both that they will get the best training that can be offered...training that will no doubt serve them well during NEWT DADA examinations."

The twin's father shook his head. "If indeed it is the case that Hogwarts opens this autumn," he replied. "I fear that the Ministry will be reluctant to give up their interns and lose so much of its present workforce." The diminutive man then added with a scowl, "Not that their needs were so great that they bothered to include my daughters."

Harry nodded. "Yes, it seemed strange that Padma and Parvati weren't forced to intern...I understand that your family's pureblood ancestry goes back quite a ways."

"Nine generations," Mr. Patil said proudly. "But when inquiries were made we were told that the Ministry was interested only in British pureblood students."

Harry shook his head in sympathy. "I wish I could say that I was surprised, but given the Ministry's record of bigotry...."

"Yes, yes, but perhaps we could move on to a more pleasant topic of conversation," said Mr. Patil. "Is it the case that you will turn seventeen later this month?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And that you will upon reaching your majority become Patriarch of the Potter family?"

"Erm...yes, Sir," said Harry, thinking it best not to disclose full truth.

Padma and Parvati's father's eyes lit up, and he grew visibly more animated.

"I am certain that you will have many issues to address at that time," he stated. "But I would encourage you to consider an alliance between our two families."

"An alliance?" asked Harry.

Mrs. Patil shook her head and let out a small sigh. "What my husband is dancing about is an open betrothal contract that he has offered your family."

Harry fought back the urge to wince, thinking that the smartest (if not bravest) thing to do in this situation was to play dumb.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, "but I'm not sure that I understand."

"An open betrothal contract," Mrs. Patil explained, "is an offer for an arranged marriage between yourself and either of my precious daughters."

"Or both of them, for that matter," Mr. Patil chimed in. "I understand that it is unusual, but still legal for multiple marriages within the British wizarding world."

Harry coughed, and then stammered a bit. "Erm, well...I am honored that you have even considered this...I don't know what to say, though."

"But my daughters are truly beautiful, as you just noted?" asked Mr. Patil.

"Yes, they are," said Harry, chancing a glance towards the twins. Padma and Parvati were across the room, whispering furiously to each other.. They both blushed and turned away when he caught them taking interest in their parent's conversation with him.

"And you have already asked one of them to a formal ball at your school?"

Erm, yes, Sir."

"Then, my boy, you are already ahead of the game. I did not even see my beautiful wife Rashmi's face until our wedding day."

Mrs. Patil, sensing Harry's discomfort, tried to intervene.

"Perhaps we should give Mr. Potter some space to think, Tarak."

Mr. Patil gave his wife a pained look...he did not know when he would have the opportunity to make his sales pitch in person again.

"Very well, Major Potter...just let me assure you that dowry is not an issue. I am a successful businessman, and I am well-prepared to ensure my daughter's happiness."

"Then perhaps we should let the boy go, Tarak, before your not-so-happy daughters hex you," Mrs. Patil said with a smile.

Harry saw the opportunity and took it. Giving Mrs. Patil a small nod of thanks, he made his way back towards the bar for something stronger than butterbeer. Thinking single malt scotch to be an acceptable compromise, he asked for Talisker over ice.

"Don't be letting your troops see you watering down your whisky," said a voice to his left. "They'll think you're soft,..or even worse, a Yank."

Harry turned and snorted at the First Minister's comment.

"Tell me, Sir...ever had a wizard's whisky?" he asked.

"Can't say that I've had the pleasure."

A thin smile crept onto Harry's lips as he turned and asked the bartender for two shot glasses of fire-whiskey. He handed one to the First Minister and raised the other up.

"To your health," he said with a smile.

The Muggle politician nodded as he matched Harry's one-shot downing.

"It'll need all the help it can get right about now," the young wizard then added with a grin.

The First Minister's face turned beet-red and eyes bulged as he tried desperately not to cough. Harry thought he even saw a bit of steam come out of the man's nostrils, but couldn't be certain.

"Care for another?" Harry asked, as he casually placed his glass back down onto the bar.

"No...I'm good," the First Minister stammered.

Harry had to give the man credit; there was no complaining about the challenge, and it only took a minute or two for a more normal color to return to his face. The First Minister quickly begged off further conversation, citing the need to return to his office.

A smartly-dressed Remus Lupin approached Harry with a smile in his eyes.

"Don't suppose you told that Muggle that a wizard's magic dampens the effect of fire-whiskey?" he asked.

"What, and spoil the surprise?"

Remus laughed. "Speaking of surprises, dare I ask what the Patils were talking with you about?"

Harry shook his head. "If I said no would you do it anyway?"

"Probably," Remus replied with a nod. Turning his back to the bar rail, the lycantrope scanned the crowd. "Let's see, we've got the Abbots', and Susan Bones' parents...I'm sure they'd love the chance to talk about open contracts as well."

"No thanks," Harry replied. He then asked, "So how is it going with the Chief Inspector?"

Remus smiled. "It's going just fine, other than the fact that she drives like a banshee on a broomstick."

The younger wizard laughed. "Any progress?"

Nodding, Remus replied, "We id'ed the Alpha bitch, and tracked down where she worked. We've also got a lead on some potential friends...we'll track those down tomorrow."

"Great," Harry replied. He then grabbed the lapel of Remus's black dinner jacket. "So is this a different suit than what you wore at the track, or a transfiguration?"

"New suit," Remus replied. "Kate said you can't be a proper British secret agent without a proper tuxedo, so she and Tonks teamed up..."

"Your partner and Tonks double-teamed you?" asked Harry with a smile. "Letting your inner Alpha hang out?"

Remus scowled at his former student. "Would you like to see that inner Alpha now, Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard laughed. "Nah, save it for tonight, Remy... Tonks might want to play Little Red Riding Hood."

Ron, Luna and her father approached the two before Remus could fire back a witty response.

"Hello, Major Potter," Mr. Lovegood said, "and once again, congratulations."

"Thank you sir," Harry replied. "Have you gotten everything you need for the news article?"

The Quibbler's publisher nodded. "Between the press release that your Miss Granger provided, and my exclusive interview with the Queen, I'm seeing another sold-out edition."

"That's great," Harry replied.

"So you got the special delivery today, Harry?" asked Luna.

Harry thought for a moment, and then realized what she was talking about. "Yes, actually I did. Thanks for your help, Luna."

The young witch smiled as she snaked an arm around Ron's waist. "No problem, Harry... I just wanted to make sure that my ants hadn't gotten a free ride on the vial."

"Your ants?" asked Harry.

"Erm, Luna..." said Ron, trying to shut down the conversation.

"Yes, my ants," Luna replied, blithely ignoring her boyfriend. "Ronnie usually swallows them when he goes exploring down my pants, but a few of them might have hung on to the vial."

Harry would have been abashed at Luna's comment, if he wasn't so busy enjoying the look of embarrassed terror on Ron's face.

"Luna," he said quietly, "I don't think that your father, or Ron, or Professor Lupin need to know the details..."

"But it's important for Harry to know," Luna insisted. "You wouldn't want him to give my ants to Hermione would you?" She then gave a glance towards the corner where Hermione was still brainstorming and serenely added, "Maybe that's why she decided not to wear any pants tonight?"

It was Ron's turn to snicker at his friend's embarrassment.

Harry turned towards the others... Remus was thoroughly enjoying the conversation, while Mr. Lovegood was following it as if it were the most mundane subject of conversation in the world. The Queen's Wizard shook his head, and then replied, "I have absolutely no idea what Hermione is or isn't wearing aside from that evening gown."

The blonde witch nodded. "Well, when you do stick your head down there tonight, you might want to check."

Harry over towards Hermione. Wishing to end Remus's entertainment for the evening, he nodded quite seriously.

"I'll be sure to do that, Luna," he replied.

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9:45pm, Somewhere in Salisbury

Augustus Rookwood finally reported to his lord, almost two full days after he was assigned to kill Lucius Malfoy. As he strode into the ersatz basement throne room and bent on one knee before Voldemort, the other Death Eaters gave him wide berth (not wishing to become collateral damage).

"Ah, Rookwood," Voldemort said quietly. "So nice of you to finally join us."

"My humblest apologies, my Lord," the Death Eater replied. "I dared not report any sooner, for fear that I might be tracked."

The Dark Lord frowned (as much as a lipless magically-restored construct could frown). "And why would you have reason to fear that you would be tracked, Augustus?"

Rookwood proceeded to explain the events, as best as he could recall, starting with the sudden realization that he and Amycus Carrow were flying on broomsticks in Muggle London. He then described Amycus's fall, his subsequent mid-air apparition attempt and the resulting splinches.

"So Amycus apparated to his safe house?" Voldemort asked angrily.

"Yes, my Lord," Rookwood replied. "I followed, guessing correctly that it would be his destination, and was able to reattach my splinched hand that he had taken with him."

"But Carrow was splinched as well?"

Rookwood nodded. "Yes, my Lord, he left behind a buttock."

Voldemort snorted, finding some humor amongst the dangerous screw-up. "So then what happened?"

"Thinking it not safe to return to retrieve Carrow's butt, or even knowing for sure where he had left it, I applied a magical suppression charm on what was left of his arse and fled the house for fear that the apparitions would be tracked by the Ministry."

"Don't forget the spell that you used to reattach your hand."

"Yes, my Lord," Augustus replied, wishing that Voldemort had indeed forgotten that fact. "Fearing that the splinching would serve as a beacon for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squads, even with my suppression charm, I drove to Bath, and rented a room in a small Muggle motel. We have been there ever since. I have reapplied the charm several times, apparently with some success, since we have yet to attract visitors from the Ministry."

"So now you are here alone?"

"Yes, my Lord... I left Amycus in Bath, and spent twice the normal time to drive here, so that I could ensure that I was not being followed."

"But the suppression charm is not a permanent solution, is it?"

"No, my Lord, which is why I thought it worth the small risk to report back and receive your orders."

Voldemort shook his head in frustration. "Tell me, Rookwood, did you successfully follow my previous orders?"

"My Lord, I am... I am sorry to report that I do not know if I did."

"And why is that?"

"Because, my Lord, I was attacked by some sort of powerful memory charm. Over the past two days I've been trying to recover, and piece together what might have happened, but it is powerful magic."

"I see... so what do you remember?" asked Voldemort.

"I remember that Amycus and Alecto Carrow and I were tasked with bringing you Lucius Malfoy's head on a plate," Rookwood replied. "I remember knowing where Malfoy was located, and that we had a plan to attack him, but... no more from that to where I found myself flying on a broomstick."

Voldemort thought for a moment. "You don't remember that Malfoy was within a building known as the Rookery?"

"No, my Lord."

"You don't remember what happened to Alecto?"

"No, my Lord."

"Or that you and the Carrows traveled to Diagon Alley during the attack and appropriated three broomsticks from the Quidditch supply store?"

"No, my Lord, although that would explain why we were riding broomsticks later that night."

Voldemort let out a deep sigh. It seemed as if the memory charm had been applied either by someone within the building, or by the building wards. If it were the latter, Rookwood and the Carrows could have killed Malfoy but then had their memory swiped. The fact that the goblins hadn't sent another demand to kill Lucius would be consistent with that possibility.

The Dark Lord thought about casting a *Legimens* spell on Rookwood, before remembering where he was. With need to do that kind of spell work away from their hide-out, he reached inside his robes and pulled out his card deck of portkeys. Selecting one from the pack, he returned the others to his pocket, pulled out his wand, and said, "Come Rookwood, we will investigate this."

"Yes, my Lord," August replied, as he nervously grabbed hold of a corner of the playing card.

The portkey that Voldemort activated with his wand tip took them out into the cool night, and to a small, uninhabited valley within the Welsh countryside.

"My lord?" asked Rookwood.

The Dark Lord pulled out a new deck of cards from his robes, and handed a joker to his minion.

"Use this card to fashion a portkey that will take us to Amycus," he ordered.

Rookwood took the card, and asked, "And the Ministry's sensors, my Lord?"

"They will no doubt detect our spell use, but we'll be long gone from here before they send anyone out to investigate."

"Yes, my Lord," said Rookwood, giving himself a mental kick for challenging his master's orders.

As the former Unspeakable turned the joker into a portkey, Voldemort used the opportunity to fashion a replacement portkey for the one used to get

them away from their hide-out. Once the spells were finished, Voldemort pocketed his card and reached out for Rookwood's portkey. Hoping to make up for his prior stupidity, Rookwood said, "My Lord, if we think that the Ministry will send Aurors to this place because of the Portus spells, perhaps we could arrange for some sort of destructive welcome?"

Voldemort thought the idea over. "The suggestion has merit...for the next time. For now, though, let us visit your buttless sidekick."

"Yes, my Lord," Rookwood replied, as he activated the portkey with his wand.

The portkey deposited the former Unspeakable and his Lord into a dingy, dumpy motel room outside the city of Bath. A blanket-covered lump on one of the two beds suggested where the "buttless sidekick" was located.

Augustus scowled as he stepped up and kicked the lump off the bed with the heel of his boot.

"Get up, fool, and bow before our Lord!" he barked.

Amycus's head popped up from under the blankets, and he quickly crawled over to where Voldemort was standing.

"Thank you, my Lord," he whimpered, as he kissed the Dark Lord's boots. "I knew that you would come."

"Of course, Amycus," Voldemort replied sweetly. "I am here for you." He then drew his wand out and said, "Look up, Amycus."

As soon as the Death Eater followed his master's orders, Voldemort hit him with a massively overpowered *Legilimens* spell. Carrow cried out in pain, but had no defenses against the attack. Voldemort ripped through Amycus's mind with little care for delicacy; having cast another spell, they were on potentially borrowed time.

It took no time at all for Voldemort to discover the massive memory block. It was definitely ward-based, and extremely strong, as it was drawing power directly from Carrow's magical core. The blocks themselves were also integrated into the protected memories, and woven so tightly in and around that Voldemort could only get fleeting glimpses of what he sought.

The harder Voldemort pushed against the charm, the more power it drew from Amycus's core, until the breaking point was reached...the breaking point of the host's brain, that is, rather than of the defenses. Large portions of Carrow's brain began to shut down, forcing Voldemort to withdraw lest he become trapped inside his minion's ravaged mind.

The Dark Lord staggered backwards, causing Rookwood to jump out and catch Voldemort before he fell over. A sheen of cold, clammy sweat covered the Dark Lord's reptilian face, as he wheezed and coughed in a fight for air.

"My Lord?" Rookwood asked.

"Alecto's dead," Voldemort declared. "I saw you leaning beside her body, with a large hole in her head. You were in a flat, and there was a wizard's dead body under a pile of rubble."

"Malfoy, my Lord?"

Voldemort shook his head. "I couldn't tell."

Rookwood turned his attention to the other Death Eater.

"The memory block shut down his brain...he's a vegetable...no use to us anymore."

"Yes, my Lord," Augustus replied.

"Unless...." said the Dark Lord. He drew his wand and cast a diagnostic charm on the body that now lay on the floor. "There's enough core there to hot-wire a connection."

"My Lord?" asked Rookwood.

"You spoke of booby-traps earlier tonight," replied Voldemort. He then took Carrow's wand from the side table and placed it in the vegetable's hand. After wrapping the fingers around the wand, Voldemort cast an obscure and extremely dark spell on the wand.

"What is that, my Lord?" Rookwood asked.

"I've linked the wand core directly to what's left of Carrow's core," Voldemort explained, as he placed the wand and hand against Amycus's chest. "Help me to carefully roll him over."

"Yes, my Lord," said Rookwood, as he helped trap the wand underneath the Death Eater's shell of a body.

The two wizards then stood, and Voldemort retrieved the portkey that would return them to their hide-out.

"Now," he said, "we just have to bait the hook to make sure that the Ministry comes to investigate."

"More *Portus* spells, my Lord?"

The Dark Lord shook his head, then quickly pointed his wand towards the former Unspeakable.

Crucio!"

Rookwood dropped to his knees in agonizing pain as the Unforgivable set his nervous system on fire.

Voldemort held the spell long enough to express his displeasure, but not so long as to do much permanent damage.

As Rookwood whimpered in residual pain, Voldemort held out the playing card.

"The hook has now been properly baited. Come worm, I might need you on other fishing trips."

"Yes...my...Lord," Rookwood said softly. He grabbed hold of a corner of the playing card, and was swept away to Salisbury.

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Five minutes later, the Auror team that had been dispatched to Wales to investigate two *Portus* spells cast in the countryside was redeployed to the location of a detected Unforgivable curse. The sensors could only pinpoint spell use down to a twenty meter area, so the Aurors apparated to a spot behind the motel that sat outside of Bath. While the recon expert cast out detection charms to pin down locations of magical activity, the team lead did his own search. It only took a few moments for the leader to bark out orders to follow his lead.

"Thought your eye can't detect residual magical energy," whined the recon expert.

"It can't," replied Mad-Eye Moody. "It can, however, see well enough through walls and clothing to find people missing body parts."

"Sir?" asked one of the junior Aurors assigned to learn under the retired Auror's wing.

"Three doors down from the first automobile," Mad-Eye growled, as he led them around front of the motel. "There's a man lying on the floor of his room who is missing a buttock."

"A missing buttock?"

"Like the one that the Muggles found in the West End Sunday morning, you idiot," Mad-Eye barked.

With wands drawn, they approached the door to the room in question. It was locked, but yielded to a simple *Alohamora* spell. On Mad-Eye's word they burst through the door and into the room.

A quick search revealed pretty much what Mad-Eye said that they'd find...a Death Eater lying face down near the bed, with his robes drooped down over where a rather large butt cheek should have been.

"Is he dead?" asked Mad-Eye, as he team performed different diagnostic spells.

"He's alive," reported one of the Aurors, "but his mind is gone."

"What, he's missing his brains as well as his arse?"

"No, sir," the Auror replied. "No signs of brain activity, and his magical core....mostly gone as well. What's left is acting rather chaotic."

"So," Mad-Eye said, slipping into lecture mode, "We know that there were at least two spells cast in this room...an overpowered *Legilimens* and a *Cruciatus* .

"The mind probe could have destroyed the Death Eater's brain, and maybe caused the erratic core readings," one Auror offered.

"But the second spell?"

The Auror shook his head. "No residual signs of that curse on the body."

Mad-Eye then noted, "Two portkeys were made in Wales, and a few minutes later a Death Eater's mind was raped in Bath, and left for dead. Scenarios?"

"Somebody portkeyed to Wales..."

"Just one?" asked Mad-Eye.

"Two, at least...the portkeys were made at the same time," the Auror replied. "One of the portkeys was used to transport them here, while the second was used to whisk them away just before we arrived."

"And 'who' are we thinking was here tonight?" asked Mad-Eye.

"Well...the Carrows were with Rookwood, and if this is the male Carrow then one of the two would have been Rookwood."

Mad-Eye nodded. "Rookwood saw Amycus splinch himself, figured he had tried to apparate to that house in Bristol, then followed. They then drove from Bristol here, and waited to make sure they couldn't be tracked."

"So Rookwood then goes and gets help?" asked one of the Aurors.

Mad-Eye nodded. "Probably Voldemort himself...not too many wizards alive with that much skill and power, if the detectors are to be believed."

"Voldemort and Rookwood were just here a few minutes ago, then?" asked the most junior Auror. He didn't like the idea of that kind of proximity, even if it was temporal.

Mad-Eye nodded. "Looks like it. Rookwood brings him here, Voldemort casts the mind probe."

"And the *Cruciatus* as well?" asked the Junior Auror.

Moody rolled his eyes. "What's the alternative...that Rookwood cast the Unforgivable on his master?"

"Wonder what they were looking for in Carrow's head," wondered one of the Aurors.

Mad-Eye had a pretty good idea, but since that idea was formed in part by information passed along by Harry he stayed quiet.

"Maybe *Prior Incantatum* will tell us something," said the most junior Auror, as he kicked at the prone body to roll it over.

Mad-Eye would have barked at the Auror for altering a crime scene, were it not for the fact that he was thinking about why Voldemort had left the body behind...Death Eaters almost always took their casualties with them as they left a battle.

As the body was rolled over Mad-Eye noticed the arm that was trapped underneath, with wand in hand. As Carrow's frame was set on his back the arm fell away from the body. It would have fallen all the way to the floor and released the wand, were it not for the fact that the bed was in the way.

Something then clicked in Moody's brain...a memory of a Muggle training film that he had once viewed...a film that warned of unpinned hand grenades that the enemy would prop underneath the bodies of their fallen comrades. There wasn't a hand grenade under the death eater, but a wand where one might have been...

Moody quickly cast a diagnostic charm on the wand. The results prompted him to yell out a warning just as the Junior Auror pulled the wand from Carrows propped-up hand.

"Shields!" Mad-Eye shouted, as Voldemort's constructed connection between wand core and magical core was broken. This caused all of the magical potential energy remaining within these cores to be released.

Violently.

The two-second delay between the broken connection and explosion was just enough time for everyone but the junior Auror to throw up a shield. Even so, strength was necessarily sacrificed for speed, and the shields that were hastily conjured were able to absorb only part of the explosion. The rest of the released energy threw the Aurors about the room like rag-dolls.

Moody's resulting internal injuries, broken pelvis, and shattered ribs earned him a week-long stay in St. Mungo's.

And he was the lucky one.

Chapter 35: Potter Plaid

Tuesday, July 10, 8:00am
Palace at Holyrood, Edinburgh

On the morning after the incident at Bath, Harry Potter struggled not to yawn as he left the morning Palace security brief for a summons by the Queen. A quick badge-call to Steve placed the monarch in a sitting room within the State Apartments.

Once announced and ushered into the room, he found the Queen standing on a small raised platform, wearing a heavy green robe, and a floppy black velvet hat decorated with a plumage of large white feathers. Seamstresses and other household staff were flittering about, taking tassels, chains, and other adornments from a velvet-trimmed chest and adding them here and there to the outfit.

"Good morning, Gryffindor," the Queen said, as Harry walked towards her. "This shan't be more than a minute."

"I am at your disposal, Your Majesty," Harry said, as he bowed low and swept an imaginary hat off of his head. The others in the room thought the affected response and his rakish grin to be slightly scandalous, but not unexpected...the Queen enjoyed Harry's playful approach towards formalities and protocols. In fact, the Prince had even playfully complained that the Queen made more allowances for Harry's behavior than those she provided her own children.

The Queen's Wizard moved to one side of the room, joining Steve and Susan Bones, the Queen's Muggle and magical guards for the morning.

"Merlin, Harry," Susan whispered. "You really do have her wrapped around your little finger."

Harry chuckled. "Jealous, much?"

"Hell, yes," Susan replied with a playful slap on his arm. "Spent the last few days doing nothing but studying and practicing the proper way to act in the Royal presence."

With a nod back towards the Queen, Harry asked, "So what's all this, then?"

Her costume for the Order of the Thistle," Steve replied.

"She's going to wear all that until the service?" asked Harry.

Steve shook his head. "They're just making sure they've got all the bells and baubles in place, and that alternations aren't needed before it's all sent over to the Signet Library."

The three watched as the last bit of Royal bling was retrieved from the storage container and arranged on the Queen's robes. The attendants then stepped back, and after a few whispered discussions, announced that everything was good to go for later that day.

The Queen sighed happily as the rather heavy costume was removed piece by piece, revealing a tea-length cream-colored dress underneath. She dismissed all of the costume evaluators save for her personal seamstress, who withdrew to a position next to a second unopened chest. The monarch then sat down in a leather winged-back chair and summoned her Wizard. Susan and Steve remained watching from a discrete distance.

As Harry approached, the Queen stated, "We have read your brief on last evening's events and a few questions, Lord Gryffindor."

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied Harry, coming to a stop a few feet in front of the chair.

The Queen asked, "Has there been any change on the casualty count at Bath?"

"No, Your Majesty," Harry replied. "The two dead and four injured still appear to be wizards."

"So the Ministry of Magic will claim no harm, no foul, and that the memory charms used on the constable and fifteen civilians were standard operating procedures?"

"That's right, Your Majesty," said Harry. "The Oblivator Squads have been doing this sort of clean-up operation for years."

"And there is nothing to stop them from doing this same sort of cover-up on incidents that do involve attacks on Muggles? Incidents that we might not even know about?"

Harry replied, "Yes, Your Majesty...we were rather fortunate last night. Had that constable not been near the incident and able to report the arrival of the Oblivator Squadron before he himself was obliterated, we wouldn't have been able to get the helicopter to the scene."

"That was useful...how was it that the helicopter pilot and cameraman wasn't affected by these Muggle-repellents?"

With a small smile, Harry replied, "The wizards only applied the repelling wards on the ground...they didn't think to ward over their heads."

The Queen paused, and then asked, "So what led to the explosion?"

"We don't know just yet," said Harry. "The wizards had repaired the building damage and left the scene before Hermione and I arrived. Our people inside the Ministry are aware of our interest, and we may learn more over the course of the day."

With a sigh, the Queen then stated, "It would seem that we are still forced into a mostly reactive position, so long as the Ministry refuses to share its intelligence with us."

"I'm afraid so, Your Majesty," Harry admitted. "We have tried to make inroads within their Magical Surveillance Office, but they've so far done a good job of keeping our people away, and have staffed that office with witches and wizards loyal to the Minister's office."

"Yes, well, perhaps all that will change after Carlisle," the Queen replied. She then shifted topics. "What of the search in Salisbury, and the two suspected safe-houses?"

Harry nodded. "Hermione was hoping to see an update about those issues at their morning COBRA meeting at 10 Downing Street. As far as I know, nothing has changed at the suspected safe houses...we're waiting to see if Rookwood or one of the other high-level Death Eaters shows up at either location before acting. And the lead we had on the Death Eater wishing to take a taxi to Salisbury hasn't produced anything actionable... but then again, we haven't shared that bit of intelligence with the Ministry, and the focus of our magical resources have been on your safety here in Scotland this week."

The Queen smiled. "Ah, yes, that you for reminding us...Lucinda, if you would?"

The seamstress who had been quietly standing to one side retrieved a tape measure and small notebook from her pocket and replied, "Yes, Your Majesty." She then gestured towards the platform that the Queen had been standing on and asked, "Lord Gryffindor, if you please?"

"Your Majesty?" Harry asked.

"We understand that there are some ongoing security issues that my seamstress will be able to address," the Queen replied with a smile.

"I'm...I'm afraid that I don't understand," Harry replied.

At this point Steve and Susan came forward.

"Just get up on the box, Harry," said Susan. "It's your turn to be kitted out."

Harry raised an eyebrow, but followed the Hufflepuff's orders. As the seamstress wrapped the tape measure around his waist, Steve offered up an explanation.

"You know that there's been concern about friendly fire, especially tomorrow during the party, right Harry?"

"Yes, we hit on topic this morning," Harry replied. "The best we've come up with is for our Order of Arthur witches and wizards to be wearing M1-5 jackets if they're called on to draw their wands during an attack."

"But the problem is that your Magical Squadron and Order of Arthur members won't be the only ones on our side with wands," Susan replied. "Take me, for example...you aren't thinking that I'll wear that jacket over a dress during the party, do you?"

"Well, no, but you four should be well-enough known to our Muggle security forces."

"In ideal circumstances, perhaps," Steve countered. "But if there is an attack, there will be chaos, and I wouldn't put it past our snipers to get nervous and start shooting at anyone with a wand in their hand."

"Okay, so...what's this about then?" Harry asked, as he nodded towards the seamstress as she measured his left arm's sleeve length.

"We would be pleased to provide you and all of the other witches and wizards within our service with a highly visible outfit suitable for the occasion," the Queen said.

Harry nodded. "An outfit more visible than my Queen's Wizard's robes, Your Majesty?"

"No, not quite," the Queen replied with a smile. "But one that could be worn by more than just the Queen's Wizard." She then waved towards the unopened chest and asked, "Agent Wall?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Steve replied, as he walked over and opened up the trunk. Inside were several bolts of a bright red and gold wool fabric.

"Tartan?" asked Harry.

The Queen nodded. "As our historians were unable to find historical precedent, we would be pleased to offer the Potter Clan one of our reserved tartans for its own use."

"Oh, my," Harry replied, as he looked at the fabric's bright pattern. "Well, there won't be any mistaking anyone wearing a jacket made of that cloth."

"It's not intended for a jacket, Lord Gryffindor," the seamstress replied with a smile. She then ran her tape from his waist down to one knee.

"You don't mean a kilt, do you?" asked Harry.

Susan nodded as she walked up to Harry and patted his arm. "Don't worry, Harry, you've got great looking legs."

"But a kilt?"

"Suck it up, Harry," Steve admonished with a grin. "And look at the bright side."

"And what would that be?"

"You'll have plenty of room underneath for an extra wand."

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9:00am Somewhere Hidden in Salisbury

The Dark Lord Voldemort sat rather restlessly as those members of his inner circle that were still with him in his Wiltshire hideaway reviewed readiness reports and minion deployments. The extracted memory of the apparent bullet hole in Alecto Carrow's head worried him.

"What cells are ready and capable of another offensive?" he asked.

The inner circle Death Eaters looked at each other, hoping that someone else would risk replying. When nobody did, the Dark Lord sneered, "Lestrangle?"

"Yes, my Lord," Rodolphus replied. "All of your forces are ready and eager to follow your commands instantly. That said, we have Nott and his group out at the Rookery, MacNair and five more scouting the Ministry, and Bella took Rabastan and six others with her to flush out unplotable locations for your use."

"What of the safe-houses under your command, Rodolphus?" Voldemort demanded.

"My Lord, as you know I have most of our injured comrades in Severus's care in Knockturn Alley," the Death Eater replied. "But I have at least fifteen that are capable of joining me in executing whatever plans you may have for us."

"How about you, Rookwood?" the Dark Lord demanded.

"I have twelve within my two remaining safe-houses," Rookwood replied. "All are eager to serve as their Lord sees fit."

Voldemort considered his options. There were another thirty or so he could call upon, but thought it best to keep the male Lestrangle occupied...he got antsy whenever his wife was deployed out into the field.

"Rodolphus," he said, "I want you to lead your fifteen into the biggest, baddest, deadliest attack you can devise against the Muggles."

"Yes, my Lord," Rudolphus said proudly. "Have you any particular target or town in mind?"

The Dark Lord nodded. "Something spectacular...something that would force them to consider attacking the wizarding world as a whole."

"My Lord?" asked Rodolphus.

"While your sick and injured heal," Voldemort explained, "I want the Ministry's forces more worried about the Muggles, than us."

He then turned and said, "Rookwood, you're the closest thing we have to a Muggle, I'll leave it to you to decide the target, and to develop a plan of attack with Lestrage for his teams to execute."

"Yes, my Lord," the former Unspeakable immediately replied. He didn't care to be verbally abused by his master, but it was better than getting *Crucio* 'ed any day of the week.

"Within the next 48 hours," Voldemort stated. "And Rookwood?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Take care that you return with memories of a successful attack."

"As you command, my Lord."

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11:30am, Palace at Holyrood, Edinburgh

Harry's hopes that the custom tailored kilt would take some time to fashion were dashed when the Queen's seamstress arrived at his Palace office with a large box.

"We've got your outfit ready, Lord Gryffindor."

"So soon?" asked Harry.

Lucinda nodded. "The Queen said that she would be pleased to see you wearing it at the Order of the Thistle service, so my staff and I dropped everything else."

"Wonderful," Harry replied, with a tone of voice that suggested otherwise.

"If you would try it on, please, Lord Gryffindor?" the seamstress asked. "I'll just step outside for a few minutes."

Harry sighed, but nodded his head in acceptance and removed his suit jacket. Once the seamstress left he closed the window blinds, opened the box, removed its contents, and stripped down to his t-shirt and boxer shorts. The white silk tuxedo shirt and black bow tie were by now familiar to Harry, and near identical to what he wore in his mess dress uniform. There was also a black Argyle suit jacket and matching vest that were similar enough to "normal" clothing. But then there was the worsted wool kilt...

Without a manufacturer's label sewn into the back of the waistline, Harry struggled to recall that the other kilts he'd seen worn had the flat aprons in the front. Once that decision was made, there were leather straps and buckles to secure on each hip, and two wide loops in the back to accommodate a large black belt, whose huge silver buckle bore the royal crest. Once the kilt was in place, Harry donned the long cream-colored wool socks, held up by special tartan garters known as "flashers." Black tongue-less leather shoes known as "Ghillie Brogues" completed the basic outfit.

Leaving the silver kilt pin and the waistpack-like sporran in the box, Harry called the seamstress back into his office. She entered and immediately began to inspect her handiwork, pulling at this and that piece of fabric.

"Not bad for a first go, Lord Gryffindor," she said with a smile. She grabbed the kilt pin from the box and dropped to her knees in front of Harry. "This keeps the apron neat," she noted, as she put the pin in place. Dragging her hand across the kilt's apron, presumably to flatten it, she added, "And your socks should have a wider cuff." She then reached out to fix the offending hosiery. It was then that she noted a horizontal line across the pleat of his kilt.

"That's strange...the interior lining shouldn't show that way, unless..." She got up from the floor and announced. "I'm expecting that Her Majesty would expect the Queen's Wizard to wear his kilt in the traditional manner, Lord Gryffindor."

"What's that mean?"

The seamstress smirked and replied, "It means that you'll need to remove your boxer shorts."

Harry's head jerked back with a startle. "Really?"

"Yes, Lord Gryffindor...come now, I haven't all day."

"You mean I need to remove them now?"

“Unless you’d wish me to do it for you,” the seamstress said with a waggle of her eyebrows. “Here, I’ll turn my back.”

Once she turned, Harry rather sheepishly reached up under the kilt’s hemline and removed his underwear. After wadding it up into a ball and hiding it inside his trousers, he said, “Right, then, I’m set.”

The seamstress turned back around, looked down at Harry’s waist, and smiled. “Much, much better,” she decided. She then reached for the sporran and the chain that held it up.

“Almost a shame to cover up the lovely way you dress left,” she quipped, as she wrapped her arms around Harry’s waist and fixed the sporran to its chain.

Harry had spent enough time around Wally the clothes hound to know what the seamstress meant by “dress left,” but didn’t allow her the pleasure of knowing that he knew.

“Are we done then?” he asked.

The seamstress nodded. “The Queen suggests that your badge be fixed to the front of the sporran. Other than that, you’re good to go for this afternoon.”

“Are you certain that I’m supposed to wear this today?”

The seamstress nodded. “We’re rushing to finish the skirts and shawls for the ladies, and if they’re to wear them today, then you should too.”

Just then, Harry’s mobile chirped. He reached over to his trousers, which were draped over his desk chair, and fished the device from the front pocket. Noting the caller ID, he apologized to the seamstress for needing to take the call and answered.

“Yes, Steve?” he asked. “She does?...When?...You mean Right now, Right now?...Right, then.”

Harry shook his head as he ended the mobile call. He looked at the phone, then down at his outfit, and frowned.

“You’ll find the sporran has more than enough room for your mobile,” the seamstress said with a smile.

Harry snorted. “If you’ll excuse me, the Queen requires my presence.”

“What a surprise,” the seamstress said with an impish grin. “I’ll be seeing you then, Lord Gryffindor,” she added, before leaving the office.

Realizing that the Queen had set him up for a fashion show, Harry shook his head and sighed as he slipped his wand up the sleeve of his new jacket, and made his way back to the State Apartments.

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Once the Queen and her witches-in-waiting gave their stamps of approval on Harry’s attire, she indirectly asked, “We were wondering if there was any change in the bank robbery notification issue.”

Harry shook his head. “No, ma’am, still no contact from the Ministry.”

The Queen nodded. “We have been considering the potential next step this morning,” she announced. “We understand that the magical U.N. is now located in Japan?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty. There isn’t a permanent base, but there is an official office kept by the magical ministry of the Supreme Mugwump’s home country or region, and the new Chief is Japanese.”

“And are you aware of the state of relations between the Japanese Muggle and magical governments?”

“Not specifically, ma’am,” Harry admitted. “I understand that was a wide range of responses when the Prime Minister’s Office and MI-6 informed their counterparts that Saturday’s attack involved magic, rather than WMDs...some of the other Muggle leaders had already figured it out on their own, some had been told by their own wizard leaders, and others didn’t know what the heck we were talking about.”

The Queen smiled. “So we learned from the Prime Minister, Gryffindor. The reason that we ask is that we are well acquainted with most of the world’s monarchs, and are good friends with more than a few. The Muggle Emperor of Japan is one of these friends, and a Stranger Knight of the Order of the Garter. We would consider asking for the Emperor’s assistance, were it thought advisable by my Wizard and his Consort.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at the Consort reference, but held his tongue on that point.

“I think that it would be a great idea...would you like me to check with Dame Hermione?”

The Queen nodded, swatting away the recognition of Harry’s lapse of protocol with a mental shrug. She expected Harry to ask for her leave, but was only mildly surprised when he activated his Art Club badge and immediately rang-up Hermione.

“Harry?” asked Hermione once she answered. “What’s wrong?”

“I had a question for you.”

Can it wait? Because I'm in the middle of a COBRA meeting..."

"So are all of the big wigs there?"

"Yes," Hermione hissed. "Except, of course, for your boss..."

"Well, that's okay, because I'm with her right now, and she was wondering if her giving her good friend the Emperor of Japan a call might help things with the new Supreme Mugwump."

There was a moment of silence, and then Hermione said, "Merlin, why didn't we think of that?"

"It is pleasing to know that we are of some utility on occasion, Dame Hermione," chimed in the Queen.

"Eep!" said Hermione over the badge. "My apologies, Your Majesty, I wasn't aware that you were actually there, erm... I mean, within hearing range."

"Not a problem, Dame Hermione," the Queen replied warmly. "We trust that your somewhat casual demeanor was influenced by Lord Gryffindor's rather cavalier attitude towards a fuller description of your audience."

"Oops," Harry said with a grin.

"Oops is right, mister," said Hermione. "If it were to please Your Majesty, I could step back into the meeting and query the Prime Minister?"

"Please do, Dame Hermione," the Queen said.

While Hermione went off-line to pose the question to the COBRA members, the Queen instructed Harry to inform her staff if the couch in his guest suite required bed linens that evening. Susan and Steve were delighted with the Queen's sense of humor.

Harry...less so.

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1:30pm, 10 Downing Street, London

The Prime Minister of Great Britain was sorting through his messages, half-listening to a conference call with his political party's leaders when a new e-mail message popped into his in-box. Given the sender's address, he immediately read it, typed in a curt reply, then begged off the balance of the conference call citing need to take care of an urgent issue.

"I'll be out for a few minutes, Millie," he said, as he walked out of his office and past his administrative aide.

"Yes, Sir," his aide replied.

The Prime Minister walked half-way down the hall that approached his office, checked that no one else was in the corridor, then open a coat closet door, pushed a aside a few jackets hung on hangers, and stepped inside. An overhead lamp fixture turned on, shedding just enough light for him to find the umbrella that needed to be pulled from its stand before he could walk through the false back wall. Behind this charmed wall was the magically-expanded, brightly lit office of his Senior Advisor and Special Ambassador to the Wizarding World.

Hermione was sitting behind her large oak desk, talking on the telephone.

"So you think you'll have how many of those UV lamps ready by tonight? Twelve?" she asked. "Well, that's a start, I guess....call Wally or Harry when they're ready and they'll see that they make it up North for evening patrol." She then looked up, realized that she had a guest in her office, and suddenly said, "Sorry, I've got to go, call me back if there's anything else."

Hermione hung up the telephone, and said, "I'm sorry Prime Minister, I didn't hear the bell when you entered the closet."

"No worries, Hermione," the Prime Minister replied.

"That was Q-branch," she noted. "They'll have a dozen high-intensity ultraviolet lights ready to test out tonight on the Dementor patrols."

"Excellent," he said. "Hermione, The Lord Chamberlain just sent me an e-mail, requesting that I release you from work in order to attend the Order of the Thistle service up in Edinburgh."

Hermione looked down at her watch, and frowned.

"Yes, Sir," she said. "I just need to finish revising my brief for this afternoon's COBRA meeting..."

"No, Hermione, you don't understand," the Prime Minister said with a smile. "That was a tactful way for Her Majesty to order me to kick you out of your office and up to Scotland."

"But..."

"I'm sure that your brief is fine the way it is, Hermione."

"Yes, Sir," she said.

"Oh, I almost forgot," said the Prime Minister. "The Lord Chamberlain thought it important for me to mention that you should use Wally as an anchor point, and that Sir Harry is presently wearing a kilt."

Hermione's eyebrows rose up towards her forehead.

"He is, is he?" she asked. She quickly stood and reached for her bag. Gathering it to her chest, she looked at her boss, who was still standing in front of her desk.

"Oh, by all means, go," he said with a smile. "I can find my way back to my office."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you Sir." She then activated her badge, called Wally, and jumped to Scotland.

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"It's about time, love," Wally said, once Hermione had materialized in Holyrood and caught her bearings. "Sir Harry is already at the Signet Library with the Queen."

"Yes, well, duty does call on occasion," she replied.

Wally had stepped out of the control room that monitored the Palace's CCTV network to give Hermione a discreet drop zone. Noticing the empty room, Hermione drew her wand and began thinking about transfiguring her attire into something more appropriate for the occasion.

"Oh, don't worry about your outfit, Dame Hermione," Wally said with a smile. "I left something out for you to wear on your bed."

Hermione smiled as she shook her head in disbelief. "So it's not enough for you to play dress-up only with Harry?"

Wally chuckled. "Let's go...I don't want to be gone long from the control room."

"I can dress myself, you know," Hermione stated.

"Yes, yes, now let's get you upstairs and get you out of that boring gray," Wally replied.

Five minutes later Hermione stepped out of her bedroom and into the sitting room that made up part of their guest suite. She was now dressed in a plain white long-sleeved blouse with lace ruffled cuffs, and a calf-length knife-pleated red and gold tartan skirt. A black bonnet was on her head, and a tartan shawl was draped over her right shoulder and pinned into place with her Order of Arthur badge.

"I'm amazed that it fits," she noted, as Wally looked her over.

"We took the liberty of borrowing from your wardrobe to get an idea on sizes," Wally explained. "You look very nice," he added, "Except that the shawl should be worn on the left shoulder."

"Really?" asked Hermione. "But last night the Headmistress wore hers on the right side."

Wally shook his head, and tsk-tsk'ed her. "Sure, go ahead, make that mistake, I'm just the one that's worked in the Royal Household for years and years."

"Okay, okay," said Hermione, as she switched the shawl around.

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With a whispered warning that he was in the presence of unaware Muggles, Harry asked Hermione to wait until he called her back before she used him as an anchor. A few seconds later he gave her the all-clear, and she badge-jumped into a rather lavish water closet.

The first thing that blurted out of her mouth when she saw Harry's outfit was, "Oh, how cute, we match."

Harry laughed. "No we don't," he replied, after pulling her into a welcoming kiss, "my skirt is a lot shorter than yours."

Hermione smiled. "You know, if you had told me that you were wearing a kilt I would have been here hours ago."

"That's why I didn't tell you," Harry replied with a grin. "Your work is far more important than the opportunity to view my knobby knees."

Hermione reached down and pinched Harry's bare leg just above one of those knees. "I'll be the judge of that, Lord Gryffindor," she said.

As she slowly dragged her hand up Harry's leg she saucily asked, "So tell me, what's worn underneath a wizard's kilt?"

Harry's eyes sparkled. "You should know better than anyone, Hermione."

"Is that so?"

Harry nodded. "Yes...nothing is worn underneath...everything is in perfect working order."

A pout flashed over Hermione's lips as she pinched some flesh on his thigh. "Oh, that's a terrible pun, Mr. Potter."

The Queen's Wizard leaned forward and nuzzled his nose against Hermione's. "So tell me that I'm not the only one going regimental today."

Hermione chuckled as she moved her hand out from underneath Harry's kilt and used it to press down on the lapel of his jacket. "Let's go, Romeo, before more than my hand dives under that kilt."

"Promises, promises," Harry replied, as he walked over to the water closet door. After making sure that the coast was clear, he shoo'd his girlfriend out into the hallway.

Hermione noticed some strange reactions from women that they passed in the hallway, but attributed it the "his and hers" matching tartans. This thought was challenged when they entered the antechamber to the Queen's dressing room, and found Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot wearing outfits identical to her own...save that their shawls were hung from their right shoulders.

"Hi, Hermione," Susan said brightly, as she rushed forward and gave an unexpected hug. "I'm so happy that you decided to join Harry's harem."

Harry snorted, but wiped the smirk off his face when Hermione looked at him crossly.

"She's joking, aren't you Susan?" he asked.

"Sure, Harry, whatever you say," said Hannah, as she walked up, kissed his cheek, then grabbed his other arm. She leaned towards Hermione and said, "No worries, Hermione, all of us expect you to be the primary wife."

Harry chuckled, despite himself.

"Relax, Hermione," he said. "This tartan is the new uniform for the witches and wizards in service to the Queen."

"How so?" she demanded.

"Swatches of this fabric have been distributed to every Muggle sniper looking over Parliament Square this afternoon," he explained. "It's a 'don't shoot me if I draw a wand' signal."

"What was wrong with the robes we wore when we arrived?" Hermione demanded.

"Not enough of them," Harry replied. "Head of security wants everyone on our side to wear the same colors...I expect the Headmistress to be wearing the Potter tartan at the Garden Party tomorrow."

"Headmistress McGonagall?" asked Hannah. "It's your harem, Harry, but don't you think she's a bit old for you?"

"Stop it, Hannah," Harry admonished.

The Hufflepuff witch dropped her eyes demurely and curtsied. "Yes, Master."

"Hannah!" he whined.

The doors to the dressing room opened at that point, saving Harry from additional teasing.

Or so he thought.

"Oh, there you are, Lord Gryffindor...we're ready," said the attendant. The matronly woman then looked at Hermione with the same sort of look that they'd received in the hallway. Except that those other women didn't say, "Forgive me, Lady Gryffindor, but I was unaware of your blessed elevation. My heartiest congratulations."

Thinking that the attendant was in on the harem joke, Hermione quipped. "Thank you, Ma'am, but if my Lord is to have a harem, then I insist on being his first wife."

The Muggle women pursed her lips, then turned them into a tight-lipped smile. "Yes, my Lady. If you please, Her Royal Majesty requests her Wizard's presence."

"Okay, sure," Harry replied with a nod. "Shall we, ladies?"

"Oh, yes, Master," said Hermione, with mock devotion.

As Harry led her inside, she didn't see Hannah and Susan giving each other puzzled looks. What she couldn't help but see, though, was the Queen dressed in full Order of the Thistle attire, laughing heartily as they entered the room.

"Oh, my," the Queen said in between chortles. "We are so pleased that you could attend us, Dame Hermione...or should we say Lady Gryffindor?"

Hermione smiled politely and moved her lips just enough to whisper to Susan Bones.

"So the Queen is in on your harem joke too, Susan?"

The witch-in-waiting snorted. "Actually she wasn't, and neither was her attendant."

Hermione began to panic. "My apologies, Your Majesty, but I am not yet Lady Gryffindor...was there reason to suspect otherwise?"

The Queen raised an eyebrow that disappeared underneath her foppish black hat. "Your sash, Dame Hermione...only the wife of a clan chief wears her tartan sash over the left shoulder."

Hermione gave the other two witches a curt look. Susan shrugged her shoulders. "We just followed how the Headmistress wore it last night. If we had known, we would have put them on the left side just to add to the harem prank."

The Queen smiled. "What of this so-called 'harem prank', Gryffindor?"

Harry smiled. "Your witches-in-waiting thought it would be funny to pretend that wearing the Clan Potter tartan signified membership within my harem."

"Really?" asked the Queen. "Well, we are not certain what your Weasley Twins will make of their kilts, then."

Harry laughed and nodded. He then turned towards his girlfriend, who had a calculating looking in her eyes.

"Hermione?" he asked.

After a moment, his Consort shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I was just sifting through a variety of potential pranks for the person who insisted that I wear the shawl this way."

"Wally?" Susan asked.

The brightest witch of her generation nodded, and then said, "It'll be easy enough to hex Wally's skin scarlet red...it's adding the gold tartan pattern that will be the tricky part."

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5:00pm, 10 Downing Street, London

The sides of the gray business suit jacket that Hermione had changed back into upon her return from Edinburgh fluttered in the headwind as she briskly strode out the afternoon COBRA meeting and made her way to her office. She dumped her leather portfolio onto her desk, and replaced the meeting briefs with an expanding folder marked "EVIDENCE." Grabbing hold of a parchment letter that she'd written just before the meeting, she checked her office for anything she might need, then locked the door and walked down the hall to the Prime Minister's Office.

"You can go right in," his administrative aide said from behind her desk. "He's waiting for you."

"Thank you, Millie," the young witch said, as she walked past the aide's desk, knocked twice (despite the clearance to barge right in), and politely waited for an invitation before she opened the door and stepped inside.

"I've got the ICW notification that needs your signature, sir," she said, as she approached the Prime Minister's desk.

"Oh goody, I get to practice my calligraphy," the Prime Minister replied, as he pulled open a desk drawer and retrieved a quill and ink pot.

A Great Horned owl caught sight of the pen and parchment from his corner roost and began to bob and stretch out his wings.

Catching this motion in the corner of his eye, the Prime Minister turned and apologized to his owl. "Sorry, Beckham, but I've asked Ambassador Granger to deliver this letter to Japan."

The owl stared at both Hermione and the Prime Minister. Having years of practice reading Hedwig's body language, Hermione knew that Beckham's feelings were hurt. As the Prime Minister carefully signed his name to the bottom of the letter, she walked over to the roost and petted his feathered back.

"Beckham, you are such a strong and reliable owl...we know that you could deliver the letter for us," she said with reassurance. "But it would take you at least two days to get there, and two days back, and the Prime Minister needs you here...in case he needs to contact the Minister of Magic. You're the only one he'd trust to deliver such important letters."

Hermione then leaned forward and spoke softly into the owl's ear.

"Now I'm going to be away for a little while," she noted, "and I need someone that I can rely upon to look after the Prime Minister and his family. Would you do that for me?"

The owl turned his head to look at Hermione, rotated it 180 degrees to stare at the Prime Minister, then returned its gaze and bobbed its head up and down.

"Thank you, Beckham," Hermione cooed. "If there's any trouble, you fly straight to my Harry for help, okay?"

Again the owl nodded, and leaned into the scratch that the young witch was giving behind his ear.

There was a knock on the door, and the administrative aide stepped inside with a large thick envelope.

"Ambassador Granger's travel documents have arrived, Sir," she said, as she set the envelope down on the desk next to the parchment. Whatever interest she had in the fact that her boss had an eagle feather quill in his hand was kept to herself.

"Thank you," said the Prime Minister.

"Let's make sure that my Special Ambassador is sent out into the world properly," he said, as he opened the envelope and dumped out the contents.

"Do you give this level of attention to all of your ambassadors, sir?" asked Hermione.

The Prime Minister looked up, smiled, and shook his head. "No...but then again you are my only teen-aged envoy, this is your first diplomatic mission, and the Queen's Wizard would hex me if I allowed you to get hurt."

Hermione sighed. "Has he said anything to you specifically?"

The Prime Minister shook his head. "Doesn't need too...I feel like I'm sending my own daughter out into harm's way."

"No worries, Prime Minister," she replied. "And, thanks...I'm..erm...honored that you think of me that way."

The Prime Minister waved off the comment as he looked down at the envelope's contents. "So, a plane ticket to Oslo...good, they've put you in Club Class...your diplomatic passport...a stack of Krone, two stacks of Yen..." He looked up at Hermione and asked, "What about wizard money?"

His Senior Advisor shook her head as she approached the desk and slipped the bank notes into the inside pocket of her jacket. "I've already got a bag full of galleons, sir, and a Gringott's draft drawn on the Queen's account in case I need extra."

"Good, good," the Prime Minister said. "Are you all set then?"

"Yes, Sir, I think so," Hermione replied. "I packed an overnight bag, just in case, and the evidence and supporting documentation are in my portfolio."

"And you aren't going to carry your sidearm, right?"

Hermione nodded. "It would cause too many problems if it was discovered. Not too worry, though...I've still got my wand, and I'll swing by Q Branch before I leave to load up on toys."

As the Prime Minister nodded in understanding, Hermione picked up the soft burgundy-colored passport, noting that it differed from her old passport only in that the word "DIPLOMAT" was embossed in gold on the cover.

"I do hope that the lack of travel documents from the Ministry of Magic won't be an issue," the Prime Minister said.

Hermione shook her head. "We should be fine there," she replied with a smile. "Amazing what kind of doors are opened when Her Majesty rings up a few of her colleagues and asks for help."

"Yes, indeed," the Prime Minister replied. "I've met the Norwegian king and Japanese emperor myself, and it's only because of the assurances that they'll look after you that I'm letting you go."

"Thank you, Sir," Hermione replied. "It's actually rather exciting...the thought of traveling halfway around the world in a few minutes' time."

The Prime Minister nodded as he stood and took hold of the signed parchment. "Well, I see that your flight leaves in a few hours, and if you're stopping by MI-5 ¾, then I should let you go."

"Yes, Sir."

"Travel out to the airport arranged?"

Hermione nodded. "I can arrange for a car at Windsor."

"And you do have a satellite phone, right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good," said the Prime Minister. "Then I'll be expecting calls from both Oslo and Kyoto."

Hermione nodded. She was certain that the Prime Minister wouldn't be the only one to insist on that level of communication. Fortunately, she would be able to talk to her parents and Harry at the same time using their badges.

Holding out his hand, the Prime Minister said, "Good luck, Ambassador,"

"Thank you, Prime Minister," Hermione replied, as she traded a firm handshake. "I won't let you down."

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Later that evening, Harry Potter insisted on escorting his girlfriend to the airport.

"I don't want you to go," he stated, as an armored car whisked them the short distance from Windsor Castle to Heathrow.

"Harry," Hermione said, "Let's not start this again, okay? If anything, I'm more worried about your guest appearances with the SAS tonight."

"We'll be fine," Harry replied. "Twenty commandos, plus most of TPOMS, against a dozen junior Death Eaters spread out between two houses..."

"Yes, well, I'll be fine as well," Hermione replied. "I'll only be on my own for the first leg to Oslo, and with luck I'll be back in Britain before the morning."

Shaking his head, Harry said, "I still don't like it."

Hermione turned and pulled Harry into a hug. "I know you don't...but you've got your job, I've got mine, and we both need to let the other do what they can do to make the best of all this."

"Yes, Dear," Harry said with a smirk.

"Hey!" he yelled, as the previous quip earned him a punch in the arm.

"I love you, Harry," said Hermione with a warm smile.

The Queen's Wizard eyes went wide, and then he leaned forward to deliver a tender kiss.

"I love you, too."

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Special Ambassador, Part 2 (part 1)

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

Chapter 36: The Norsca Network

Tuesday, July 10, 2000 GMT (8:00pm local time)
15 Dingle Grove, Liverpool, England

The Domino's pizza guy walked up to the door of the nondescript terrace house with cautious optimism. He'd delivered pizzas to that particular address three times over the past week; each experience had been bizarrely unique, but also highly profitable.

A curtain parted on a side window when he rang the bell...a few seconds later, a lock was unlatched and the door slowly opened.

"What do you have there?" demanded a fat-faced man.

"Erm...pizza, sir...you ordered two extra-large Onion and Meat Pies and a large Americano?"

"How much this time?"

"Sixty pounds, ten, sir."

"Right, then...come on in."

The pizza guy nodded as the fat-faced man held the door open to let him in. Neither noticed the stifled snort of laughter as Harry Potter slipped out the open door under cover of his invisibility cloak.

The Queen's Wizard walked down to the end of the street at a brisk pace, towards a small van that advertised plumbing repair services. A knock on the rear door gained him entry; inside he found two men and the cover needed to discretely remove his invisibility cloak.

A masked man dressed in black showed little care to hide his scorn when he asked, "Your report, *Sir*?"

Harry looked at the SAS team lead, then turned towards a far friendlier (and less covered) face and rolled his eyes.

"Still the same crew of Death Eaters, and the pizza guy is still robbing them blind."

"You failed to notice *anything* new?" asked the SAS man.

Harry turned back to the soldier and frowned. "Well, as a matter of fact, I did. The pile of dirty dishes in the sink is six inches higher, there's a hole smashed into the upstairs telly screen, and they've finally figured out how to replace empty bog rolls."

"I meant anything of consequence to the assault, sir."

Harry scowled. "Well, I wouldn't know about that would I? Seeing as how I still haven't been told how we're going in and when."

The SAS soldier snorted. "Right, then...I think it's time for you to hocus-pocus off to Cardiff...Team A is expecting you."

When the soldier's dismissal was capped off by a sarcastically crisp salute, Harry replied in kind, and bolted out of the van with New Six close behind. As soon as their boots hit the ground the van sped off.

As Harry watched the vehicle disappear with a hard left turn, he said, "Let me guess, New Six...you were taught manners somewhere other than Sport and Social's finishing school?"

The TPOMS member who had stepped up to serve as the Queen's Wizard's liaison to the SAS team in Liverpool smiled.

"Oh, don't mind Roberts, Major," he replied. "He treats every officer in the British Army that way."

"Nah, you've seen them New Six," Harry replied. "They all have that crappy attitude towards me."

"Comes with the territory, Major," New Six replied. "SAS is the best of the best...they think everybody in the regular army are useless gits."

"Right, then, I'm off," Harry said, expecting no better treatment from the counter-terrorism team staked out at the Death Eater safe house in Wales.

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Tuesday, July 10, 2030 GMT (9:30pm local time)
Oslo Airport, Gardermoen, Norway

When the pilot of the Oslo-bound British Airways flight announced that it had been cleared for landing, Hermione Granger slipped the briefing documents that she'd been reviewing into her case.

The Club Class flight attendant approached the young witch and asked, "Can I stow that for you again, Ambassador?"

Hermione smiled thinly and nodded; as she had been assigned the front row aisle seat, there was no seat in front of her under which a carry-on bag could be tucked. With hands now free to clutch the arm rests, Hermione closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths (for she liked flying in airplanes only slightly better than flying on broomsticks), and mentally reviewed her mission.

Her primary goal was simple...deliver the Prime Minister's letter and supporting evidence to the Supreme Mugwump and return home as quickly as possible. There was to be no lengthy discussions or negotiations, or direct requests for aid from the ICW; things were too fluid in Britain and their knowledge of how the international wizard community worked too uncertain to risk overplaying their hand.

The Queen's assistance had done much to facilitate this mission. That afternoon, Hermione had received telephone calls and offers of aid from both the Norwegian King's and Japanese Emperor's personal wizards. That Hermione was now on a flight to Norway reflected the fact that the Norwegian King's Wizard had suggested viable methods of transportation, and offered to escort Hermione during her trip.

This first leg of that trip to Japan would be both the shortest in distance, and the longest in time length. While it would have taken no more effort to apparate from Edinburgh to Oslo then to London, the international boundaries between magical sovereign states were highly warded, and there was simply no way one could apparate or use a portkey across the frontier without the Ministry of Magic being made aware of the fact. Once Hermione was outside of Britain, however, the British Ministry of Magic could no longer track her movement.

As the plane touched ground and began to taxi towards the terminal, the flight attendant returned with both Hermione's portfolio and a message.

"The flight deck has received word from the tower that your escort will meet you within the jetway."

"Thank you," Hermione replied, slightly embarrassed for all of the personal attention. That embarrassment only grew when the captain purposely kept the "fasten seat-belt" lights on after the airplane came to a full stop, just so the flight attendants could escort her to the front of the plane even before the cabin door was opened.

A tall man smartly dressed in a gray suit, open-collared dress shirt and a well-trimmed white goatee was waiting on the other side of the cabin door. A look of surprise washed over his face when she stepped out of the airplane, but he quickly recovered, held out his hand and greeted Hermione using fluent English.

"Welcome to Norway, Ambassador Granger. My name is Ole Thorson...we chatted on the telephone this afternoon."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you," she replied, as she warily shook his hand. "How is your Uncle Olav?"

The man smiled as he opened up his suit jacket and revealed the Grand Cross Badge and Star, a medal that signified membership within the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav.

"And you have some rather remarkable jewelry as well, Dame Hermione?" he asked.

The young Ambassador returned the smile as she opened up her own suit jacket to reveal her Order of Arthur badge. With identities thus confirmed, the man led Hermione up the ramp towards the terminal building.

Along the way, Hermione's escort asked, "How is it that Britain's Special Ambassador to the Wizarding World is so young, and so beautiful?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow, wondering if she had another flirty Sir Evan on her hands.

"And how is it," she asked in reply, "that the Norwegian King's Wizard speaks the Queen's English with an American accent?"

The King's Wizard looked at his young charge and chuckled. "It appears that we both have stories to share along the way."

Hermione nodded. "I'm looking forward to it."

By this point they had reached the immigration control station, where two uniformed men waved them by at the sight of her diplomatic passport.

"They don't need to mark my passport?" Hermione asked.

Thorson shook his head. "Even Muggle diplomats get waved through on occasion...plenty of times when you don't want your travel to sensitive meeting locations documented within your papers."

Hermione nodded, noting that her escort was leading her down an empty hallway.

"Your flight was diverted to a special gate," the elderly wizard noted. And as they turned the corner and entered a much larger concourse Hermione did see the typical patrons of a busy international airport.

Her escort led her to a door marked as a family lavatory.

"Don't mind the subterfuge," Thorson said, as he gestured towards the door.

"Oh," said Hermione, "if you'd excuse me, I promised the Prime Minister that I'd call...probably should do that when a satellite phone still works."

The elderly man nodded in understanding as Hermione stepped a few paces back up the hallway to make the calls. She then joined the Norwegian escort inside the empty loo, where he drew his wand and walked over to a drop-down baby's changing table. When he tapped the picture of a

koala in a five point sequence, the table folded into the wall, revealing a fireplace floor connection.

"Direct link to Dyrreheim," explained Thorson, as he lit the fire with his wand and gestured towards a pot of floo powder. "So don't worry about tripping your tongue over the Old Norse."

Hermione nodded as she threw the powder into the fire and, once the color changed, stepped into the flames. It only took a few seconds for her to be dumped out into a cavernous underground complex that resembled a Victorian-era train station. Except, of course, for the clear signs that this was a magical transportation hub...robes instead of jackets, levitation charms instead of luggage carts, and goblins instead of ATMs or electronic currency exchangers. And above it all was a free-floating sign that announced she was now within "Dyrreheim Station."

The Special Ambassador to the Wizarding World stepped to one side of the fireplace and pulled a miniature piece of luggage from a pocket. When her escort stepped through the flames she asked for someplace to switch into robes, and was led to an area with individual changing rooms. Once inside, she swapped out her two-piece suit for silk Clan Potter robes, and replaced low-heeled pumps with soft leather boots. Hermione smiled when she checked her appearance in a magical mirror...it was a lot easier to ignore its disparaging comments about her bushy hair when they were made in a language that she didn't understand.

During this time Hermione prioritized questions to be asked of the King's Wizard. Many of those questions had to do with the two huge wall maps that hung above the ticket counters. Once she stepped out of the changing room she reexamined those maps.

On one side was a geopolitical map of the Muggle world, while on the other was a corresponding projection of the wizarding realm. There were relatively few differences within Europe... the most obvious, based on the maps' projection, was that Scandinavia was united under the name "Norseland." Meanwhile, the other continents were a wash of different colors and rearranged boundaries. The Incas, Mayas and other ancient empires lived on this map, along side major continent-wide confederations; Sub-Saharan Africa was mostly one color, as was that portion of North America north of Muggle Mexico.

Population centers on these maps were linked by an interconnected series of lines that formed an expansive hub-and-spoke network centered on stations in Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen. Hermione noticed that almost all of the line segments on these maps were the same length.

The young witch's escort stepped out of his changing room wearing navy blue robes trimmed with red and asked, "Have you figured out those maps yet?"

"A magical transportation network," Hermione decided. "Each of those small segments must be about two-hundred and fifty miles apart?"

The King's Wizard nodded. "Closer to three hundred, actually."

"And that's the practical distance limit for single apparition jumps," Hermione noted.

"It is indeed," the wizard said with a smile. "Welcome to the central hub of the Norsca Network...from here it's literally a hop and a jump to just about anywhere in the world."

Hermione nodded as she dropped her gaze back down to the people walking about the station. The mixture of robes, skin tones, and languages reminded her of the tent camp established outside the Quidditch World Cup stadium.

Her escort looked down at his Muggle watch. "It's 2100 GMT, and Japan is plus nine hours...we are to meet the Emperor's Wizard at Kyoto Station in exactly two hours and forty five minutes. Would you like to take a few minutes to look around, or to get a cup of tea?"

The young witch snorted. "I think that I could spend hours just in front of those maps," she replied.

"Then I know just the place."

As the wizard led Hermione towards a coffee shop, he couldn't help but notice Hermione's continued interest in the map of the wizarding world.

"I gather that they don't teach geography at Hogwarts, then?" he finally asked.

Hermione shifted her gaze from the map back to her escort and laughed. "No, the only time that the British wizarding world ever seems to be interested in what lies beyond our shores is during Quidditch World Cup."

Thorson nodded in acknowledgment. As they passed by a small bookshop he suddenly decided to pull Hermione inside.

"How did you know I was a book-lover?" she said.

The wizard only smiled in reply as he spoke a few words of Norwegian to the bookseller. The witch nodded, and pointed towards a specific bookshelf, from which a specific book was selected and paid for.

"A present in honor of your first diplomatic mission," Thorson said, as he handed Hermione the book.

"*A Concise History of the World of Witches and Wizards*," Hermione read. "By...." She then looked up with a raised eyebrow.

"You wrote this?" she asked.

The wizard nodded. "I teach Magical History at the University of Oslo," he noted. "I turned my lecture notes into a textbook thirty years ago...some folks think that it is pretty good."

Hermione's eyes let up as she skimmed over the table of contents.

"Thank you Dr. Thorson," she replied. "Our history classes at Hogwarts rarely go beyond the Goblin Wars."

The kindly wizard nodded and smiled, as if he were well aware of his ghostly colleague's syllabus. He then led her to a coffee shop whose round tabletops were each charmed to provide a view of the Norsca network overlain on a polar projection of Earth. With a swish or flick of a wand, a witch or wizard could zoom the view in or out, and change the view to hover over anyplace in the world.

Hermione was torn between diving into the book and playing with the tabletop. Finally deciding that it would be harder to take the table home with her, Hermione chose to examine the map

She pointed down at the table and asked, "So we're taking the long way to Japan?"

The wizard nodded. "We'd have to break up the trip either way...portkeys aren't very reliable beyond 6,000 miles."

"We're traveling by portkey rather than apparition?"

Thorson nodded. "We'd run out of magical reserves over Greenland if we tried to make that many jumps in a row."

Counting up line segments between Norway and North America, she asked, "Ten apparition jumps from here to North America?"

"That's right," the wizard replied. "From Dyrheim to Bergen on the Atlantic coast, and from there to the Shetland Islands...from the Shetlands to the Faroe Islands, then to Iceland, and Greenland...around the coast of Greenland and over to Baffin Island, and finally to North America proper. Six jumps from Baffin Island and you could be eating my mother's hot dish back home on the shores of Lake Wobegon."

Hermione's eyes sparkled. "That brings us back to how an American became a Norwegian King's Wizard."

Thorson nodded. "I was born and raised in Elgurland...that's the northern two-thirds of Muggle Minnesota and Wisconsin," he replied.

"Were your parents both magical?"

"No, only my father was," the wizard replied. "It's hard for Norwegian wizard farmers to find witches willing to live on the edge of the prairie, don't you know?"

"A wizard farmer?" asked Hermione.

Dr. Thorson nodded. "We grew magical herbs that could be sown in the fields, and collected what only grew wild in the Big Woods."

"So did you study magic at Salem?" asked Hermione.

The wizard shook his head. "Salem's a fine school, but it was founded by Hogwarts alumni, and follows the British system," he replied. "I attended a Muggle primary school, then learned magic at the Elgurland Academy, where the Norse methods are emphasized."

"How did you end up living in Norway?"

"After the Academy, I traveled back to the Old World for an apprenticeship...earned a Mastery in Magical History. Got a job in 1938 as a Lecturer at the University of Oslo's wizard's campus, and was there when both the Muggle and magical Germans invaded in 1940."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "So Grindelwald and Hitler's troops worked together?"

Thorson nodded. "It was a nasty bit of business back then. The Norseland Ministry was officially neutral during the war, but it looked the other way when Grindelwald's forces got involved. A few of us at the University decided to level the playing field, and that eventually put me in the right place and time to help the Norwegian Royal Family escape to England."

"So that's when you were made King's Wizard?"

Thorson nodded.

"But you're still teaching at the University?" Hermione asked.

The King's Wizard nodded once more. "It's not as much of a full-time job as your Lord Gryffindor's current duties," he explained. "I'm more or less on call when the need arises."

"Like it did today," Hermione said.

"Indeed," agreed Thorson. He then glanced back down at his watch, finished his coffee, and placed the cup back down onto the table.

"But enough about me...you've got more questions about the Network, right?"

When Hermione nodded, the elderly wizard stood.

"Always easier to show, then to tell," he said. "Come, I'll give you a tour on the way to the jump point."

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The first stop on Thorson's station tour was the ticket counter. After learning that Hermione was Muggle-born, he felt free to lecture using Muggle world metaphors.

"Think of portkeys as airplane flights, and apparition jumps as train trips. Portkeys are much faster, cover far more distance, don't run the risk of splinching, and don't drain the passenger's magical reserves. But they are also much more expensive, and can only take you to designated international arrival points. So it's often the case that an international traveler might combine both methods...use a portkey to get them to the right general area, and then apparate to their specific destination."

"Just like someone wishing to travel from Oslo to England might fly to London, and take a train from there to, say, Brighton?"

"Exactly," Dr. Thorson replied.

"But how does your floo network fit into the mix?"

"To a very limited extent," the wizard replied. "There are local floo networks in the major cities and surrounding areas here in Norseland, but the distances across Scandinavia are far too great to support an integrated floo system."

"So...for a Muggle comparison, it's used like a subway?"

Thorson nodded.

"But why would somebody pay to apparate?" Hermione asked.

"You don't pay for the right to use an apparition spell," the wizard noted. "You pay for the magic that puts the target into your head, and reduces the risk of splinching."

When Hermione bit her lip in apparent confusion, the wizard guided her past the ticket counter and into a departure hall. In many ways, it resembled an airport concourse with multiple gates. Every twenty feet on either side of the hall were jump points...scribed circles each with five tall rune stones along the edges. The two stopped to watch one such circle in operation. A half-dozen witches and wizards were waiting in a line as a ticket agent called out, "Final jump call for Gothenberg...all passengers wishing to apparate to Gothenberg must present their tickets at this time."

When nobody stepped forward, the agent pulled out her wand, pointed towards the stones, and muttered an incantation. The spell that was cast moved the position of three of the five stones to different parts of the circle. Once the stones finished moving, a sign against the wall changed from "Gothenberg" to "Soderham".

"Soderham," the agent called out, "Now taking priority passengers to Soderham."

One wizard who had stood apart from the other five approached the agent with ticket in hand. The witch smiled and wished the wizard a good trip as she ripped off half and returned the stub. The wizard then walked into the middle of the circle, and, ten seconds later, disappeared.

"Last call for priority to Soderham?" the agent then stated. When nobody else approached she nodded to the first person in the remaining line and the process was repeated.

"First class passengers on apparition jumps?" Hermione asked.

Dr. Thorson nodded and gestured down the hallway. "As one of the largest stations on the network, Dyrheim has ten jump platforms. Each can only point towards one destination at a time. Now, as you can imagine, there are lots of destinations within a three-hundred mile radius of Oslo, so there has to be some prioritization." He then led Hermione a little farther down the hall.

"Given traffic volumes, and the fact that circles with fixed stones are easier to create and operate, four of the ten circles are dedicated to single destinations...each north, east, south, or west from here." The King's Wizard then pointing towards different areas of the hall, noting the circles dedicated to travel to Stockholm, Copenhagen, Bergen and Trondheim.

Nodding back towards the first circle, Thorson said, "Now another four of the circles cycle on a schedule of different destinations, almost exactly like different Muggle airplanes using the same gate at an airport. But since there's only a fixed window of time scheduled for each target locality, there may be cases where not everyone who wants to travel to a place can do so during the allotted slot."

"So a first-class ticket allows you to jump the queue," Hermione reasoned.

"Exactly," Thorson replied.

"What about the last two circles?" Hermione asked.

"Those are for the least-requested destinations," Thorson replied. "Once you reach the front of the queue, the agent will move the stones to put you exactly where you want to be, give or take ten miles...that line moves a lot slower, for obvious reasons."

"But I still don't understand what the rune stones do," said Hermione.

"Ah, well, let's show you, then," the wizard replied. He then led the young witch up to "Trondheim" circle, which wasn't currently being used. After the flash of an identification badge and a few words, the agent smiled and gestured towards the circle.

"Have you ever visited Trondheim, Ambassador Granger?" Thorson asked.

Hermione shook her head.

"Would you consider a blind apparition there?"

Again Hermione shook her head.

"Well, step inside, relax your mind, and see if that changes."

With a shrug of her shoulders, the bushy-haired witch stepped within the rune circle, closed her eyes, and tried to clear her mind of the hundreds of thoughts that were competing for her attention. After a few moments, she felt a warm, safe presence almost ask for permission to enter her mind. When she mentally nodded her head, imported thoughts immediately began to fill her consciousness.

"This is strange," she said out loud. "I can now clearly picture a different stone circle...I know that it's in a city called Trondheim, and I have all the confidence in the world that I could apparate there right now if I wanted to."

"Wonderful," Dr. Thorson replied. "Now if you'd open your eyes and leave the circle, we've got a different destination to travel to."

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As the two made their way to the portkey departure zone, Hermione asked, "I see on the maps that we're within both Norway and Norseland, and that the latter includes most of Scandinavia."

The King's Wizard nodded. "Most magical governments gave up trying to mirror their Muggle counterparts centuries ago...the boundaries of Norseland were established more than a thousand years ago, and haven't changed even as the number of Muggle countries and their borders have changed within that same area."

Hermione nodded. "Ah, so it's like the British Ministry of Magic...it rules over magical Ireland even though the Muggle Republic of Ireland has gained independence?"

"That's right," Thorson agreed.

"So are you the King's Wizard in Sweden, or Denmark as well?"

The King's Wizard shook his head. "Each of the Muggle monarchs has its own liaison with the Norseland Ministry."

"So the Swedish king has his own wizard?"

Thorson nodded. "Witch, actually. Same with the Danish Queen and her witch. The Finns gave up on their monarchy a century ago, so they're on their own."

Hermione snorted. "So how many Royal Witches and Wizards are there in the world?"

"Twenty-one, if you add Sultans and Emirs to the list," Thorson replied.

"Wow," Hermione said. "And here we thought Harry was balancing in this unique position between Muggle and magical worlds."

"Not at all, Ambassador," the King's Wizard said with a smile. "We actually all get together a few times each year to compare notes. Next meeting is in Swaziland this November...Sir Harry should be expecting an invite."

As the two approached a short queue to gain entry to the portkey departure area, they switched over to a less sensitive conversation topic.

"Could you talk more about North America and Elgurland?" Hermione asked. "Was it a Viking colony, and how does it fit in with the United States, or the Confederation?"

The King's Wizard smiled. "Elgurland'...elgur is 'moose' in Old Norse by the way...was originally just a Norsca Network station on the northern shore of Lake Superior...near the present-day Muggle city of Duluth. When it was built in AD667 it was the end of the line...ambient magic levels on the prairies of Iowa, or Illinois, or the Dakotas were far too low to power stones carved with the rune sets that were available at the time."

"So it was a frontier outpost that developed into something more?"

The professor nodded. "It was originally meant to be only a trading post...a place where wizards within the Native communities could interact with and barter with their European counterparts. But when the Scandinavian Muggles and Christianity began making life difficult for the homeland's wizarding populations, many decided to immigrate to North America, and made the area around Elgurland Station their home."

"So it became a Norse colony, then?"

The professor shook his head. "The witches and wizards that came from Europe to North America did so as immigrants, rather than conquerors. Colonialism never happened on a major scale within the wizarding world."

"Why was that?" asked Hermione.

"Well, I'd like to say that it was because the wizarding world is more egalitarian and tolerant of other peoples and cultures, but I can't," the wizard admitted.

No, you certainly couldn't," Hermione murmured to herself.

"The real reason had more to do with the timing of first contact," continued the King's Wizard. "When the Muggle European powers colonized the rest of the world, there was a huge disparity in technology between themselves and the native peoples they subjugated...guns and metal plate armor against spears and bows and arrows. But in 634, when the first Norse arrived in North America, the witches and wizards that they encountered were roughly equivalent in power."

"The Natives had wands too?"

"No, they didn't...but neither did Norse witches and wizards until the Ninth Century," replied the Professor. "It took a few bloody encounters, but after neither side was able to dominate the other the first immigrants joined the Confederation of Native wizard communities, rather than try to defeat it."

"It wasn't just Scandinavian witches and wizards that moved, though, was it?"

"Indeed not," replied the Professor. "The Norsca Line was used to relocate entire wizarding communities from across Northern Europe. For example, many Druidic Old Believers settled in what is now Muggle New England, French wizarding communities formed along the St. Lawrence River, while witches and wizards from the Germanic tribes struck out west from Elgurland and formed their own communities in the Rocky Mountains."

"So this Confederation is the wizard equivalent of the United States?" asked Hermione.

"In style, it is similar, but in terms of territory it is much larger...it also is much more of a collective, with devolved powers residing within Elgurland and the other provinces."

Hermione nodded, then started to focus more on the purpose of her trip as they entered the restricted area marked "Portkey Departure and Arrival Zone." This smaller concourse consisted of a half-dozen departure platforms on one side, and a series of duty-free magical shops on the other.

"Dyrnheim is one of four designated international portkey access points within Norseland," Dr. Thorson explained. "Trying to use an international portkey outside of one of these areas would trigger an alarm within our Ministry and earn you a hefty fine, or maybe even jail time."

Hermione nodded. "You said that we needed to take two portkeys to reach Japan...I assume that the midpoint is another station like this one?"

The King's Wizard nodded. "Ice Station Alaska," he stated, as he pointed to the spot on a nearby wall map. "We'll have to layover there for an hour or so, in order to avoid portkey lag...not that a layover is a bad thing when the salmon are running."

"Salmon?"

The King's Wizard smiled. "It's always good to bring gifts when you visit someone in Japan."

Thinking the idea strange, Hermione asked, "Wouldn't flowers, or a bottle of wine be more appropriate gifts than raw fish?"

The elderly wizard squinted a bit at Hermione, and then shook his head as he removed a piece of rope from his pocket.

"Think sushi."

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**2130 GMT (9:30pm local time)
Plasnewydd Square, Cardiff, Wales**

The Queen's Wizard knocked on the back door of an unmarked lorry, and once the door was opened for him stepped up and inside the container.

This vehicle was far more high-tech than the one used by the Team A lead in Liverpool. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim red running lights that cast a eerie glow over the banks of electronic surveillance equipment. Meanwhile, he had to listen to a talking head within one of monitors scold him for his tardiness.

"My apologies, Mr. Home Secretary," said Harry, as he sat down in front of a camera and a full bank of monitors filled with the faces of COBRA team members down in London. "The Team B lead here in Cardiff took just a little longer than I expected to debrief me."

"Find anything surprising, Agent Potter?" asked the MI-5 Director.

Harry shook his head. "Just that the table manners of some of my former classmates have only gotten worse now that they're Death Eaters."

"No higher level targets of interest at either location, then?"

"No Sir," Harry replied.

"But you are certain that they are all terrorists?"

Harry took a deep breath, held it for a second, then exhaled as he nodded.

"Yes sir. Confirmed the tattoos with my omnioculars."

"Right, then," said the Defense Minister, as he joined in the teleconference conversation. "Major Potter, you and all of your magical "advisors" are

to return to base immediately."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Sir?"

"Fall back, Major," the Defense Minister said. "You've read in the two SAS teams on what they'll face, done the final reconnaissance for them, and now it is their turn."

"You don't want my witches and wizards and me to swoop in at the same time?"

"That's the last thing we want," said the Home Secretary. "None of our magicals are to be anywhere near those two safe-houses when the attacks commence."

"But I don't understand," Harry lamented.

"Yours is not to reason why, Major," the Defense Minister said sharply. "You have your orders."

Harry stared at the bank of monitors for a few seconds, with an intensity that caused the hairs to stand on end on the neck of the surveillance technician that was sitting next to him. The flickering electronic images on the displays indicated that the communication equipment was bathed in just as much magical tension as it rolled off of Harry in waves.

Channeling the most stereotypically exuberant attitude that Harry ever witnessed within the British military, he fired off a crisp salute and yelled out, "Sir, Yes Sir!"

"Calm down, Harry," the Prime Minister said. "This isn't an ideal solution, but it's the best we've got right now. We need to move on these houses before we risk their involvement in another attack, particularly with the Garden Party tomorrow afternoon. And with our relationship with the Ministry of Magic tenuous at best, and with Ambassador Granger on her way to meet with this Supreme Mugwump, we want to make sure that there isn't even the appearance of impropriety in how Her Majesty's Government relies upon magical assistance from you and your people....And that being said, it really would be ideal if you were to be seen in a public place over the next few hours...even a magical public place, if possible."

"Plausible deniability, sir?"

"Exactly, Lord Gryffindor," the Prime Minister replied. "Let's have you keep your nose clean, especially when it doesn't directly involve the Queen's safety."

"Yes, Sir...anything else sir?"

The Prime Minister shook his head.

"Just let us know when you've cleared out your troops," the Defense Minister said.

Harry scowled, then gave another sarcastically rousing "Sir, Yes Sir!"

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2200 GMT (1:00pm local time)
Ice Station Alaska, Nome

The international portkey deposited Hermione and her Norwegian escort within an area similar to (but smaller than) the portkey concourse in Oslo. The two stepped off of one of the arrival pads and walked up to an immigration control checkpoint, set up underneath a sign that said, "Welcome to the North American Confederation of Magical States."

"So, here's Alaska," Thorson said flippantly, as she joined the end of a short queue. "It's GMT -9 here, so it's still this afternoon."

"And the next jump will take us into tomorrow morning," added Hermione.

"Exactly," the professor replied. He then added, "Now if all we were going to do is wait to use that second portkey, we wouldn't have to clear customs."

"But we're not, because we're going to go fishing?"

The professor nodded. "Won't take more than the hour's time, and there is still twice that to kill before the Japanese Ministry of Magic opens for business...unless you'd rather just sit and wait it out."

Hermione thought for a few moments. "No, let's go...it'd be hard for me to claim I have visited Alaska if all I did was sit inside this terminal."

"That's the spirit," Thorson replied.

Once more, all it took was the wave of two Muggle diplomatic passports to get past immigration. As they entered a brightly-lit room with a high domed ceiling, Hermione asked, "This is still a wizard-run facility, right?"

When her escort nodded, she followed up with, "So why aren't they bothered by Muggle passports, much less diplomatic passports?"

Thorson somewhat cryptically replied, "As you gain more international experience, Ambassador Granger, you'll discover many countries and

regions whose magical and Muggle governments aren't as separate as yours."

The King's Wizard appeared well acquainted with the facility as he led his young charge to a magical shopping mall within the terminal. At the far end of this area was a small shop whose sign read, "Ellsworth's Adventures – Guided Tours for the Discerning Wizard Since 1423." The ringing bell attached to the doorway announced their presence to a wizened old man, who looked up and said, "Ah, Ole, what an unexpected pleasure... good to see you again."

"You too, Alex," the King's Wizard replied. "How's business been?"

"Excellent, excellent...just sent a dozen Aussies on a Yeti expedition this morning, and I've got six different ice dragon reserve visits scheduled over the next month. But I bet you're not looking for that sort of thing are you, Ole? And who his your lovely companion? And does your wife Lena know about her?"

The King's Wizard laughed as Hermione's eyes narrowed. "My name is Hermione Granger, Mr...Ellsworth, I presume."

"Yes you may presume, my dear," the outfitter said with a large smile.

"We're just traveling on business, Alex," Dr. Thorson said. "Ambassador Granger has an appointment with the Supreme Mugwump in a few hours, so I thought I'd let you give her a chance to catch some omiyagi."

"Supreme Mugwump, you say?" asked the old man. "Well, them Japanese are crazy about their fish, that's true enough. Pity you weren't here a month ago, the Copper River run was the best in fifty years."

"Yes, Alex, I know, I was here, remember?"

"What?" asked the old man. "Oh, so you were, my mind these days....how much time do you have, you say?"

"Only an hour, sir," Hermione insisted.

"Ah, well then, that rules out the halibut and king crab trips...not that it's any fun to travel with those buggers in your bag"

"I was thinking King salmon, down on Cook Inlet," Thorson suggested.

The wizard nodded. "Just had a client catch an eighty-pounder down there, if it's size you're looking for...but they aren't the quickest fish to find... come on into the back room and we'll take a look."

Hermione and Thorson followed the wizard's instructions, and walked into what appeared to be a dimly-lit office. The outfitter grabbed a clear crystal bowl and placed it on his desk surface. After an *Aguamenti* spell filled the bowl with water, he reached into a pocket and withdrew a large silver fishhook that dangled from the end of a thin silver chain. The wizard looped one end of the chain over his wand tip, then lowered the fishhook into the bowl of water.

As the outfitter stared into the water and entered into a trance, the King's Wizard whispered to Hermione that the wizard was using a method of divination known as scrying to determine where the fish were biting.

A few moments later, the outfitter broke the trance, turned towards the other two, and announced, "There's going to be a tidal blast of sockeye on the Lower Kenai ten minutes from now."

The King's Wizard's eyes went wide with excitement. "What are we waiting for, then?"

Hermione looked at the two wizards, then down to her robes, and asked, "How about a change in clothing?"

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With the charter fee negotiated and Hermione's robes now tucked inside chest waders, the outfitter closed up his shop and held out a fishing rod that had been charmed as a two-way portkey. It deposited the three onto the grassy banks of a large, shallow river, about four hundred miles south of the portkey station. While Thorson's eyes were immediately drawn to the water, Hermione's took in the breathtaking beauty of the rugged Alaskan coastline. There was a cool wind in the air that made her glad for the jumper she was wearing, but the sun was shining and American bald eagles were coasting on thermals overhead.

The two wizards allowed Hermione the time to take in the scenery as they walked fifty yards down the shoreline in opposite directions in order to cast Muggle-repelling charms. The tranquility was broken by the chirp of her satellite phone. She activated it and asked, "Hello?"

"Hey, Hermione, this is Wally," said the voice on the other line.

"Anything wrong? How's Harry?"

"Nothing's wrong and he's fine," the MI-5 ¾ agent replied. "I was just calling to find out why your GPS tracking receiver says you're currently sixty miles southwest of Anchorage, Alaska."

"Because that's where I am, Wally," Hermione replied glibly.

"Care to share?"

"Have an hour to kill in between long-distance portkeys," Hermione explained. "And apparently, my escort is an avid fisherman."

Wally laughed on the other end of the line.

"Have you ever fished before, Dame Hermione?"

"No," she replied. "I've read about it in books, of course, but..."

"Well, that's more than enough reason to have chosen me as your guide," the outfitter said loudly, as he returned to Hermione's location. As she ended the call and pocketed her phone, he reached into a bottomless bag and pulled a number of different rods and reels. After choosing one for the King's Wizard, the outfitter selected a slightly smaller rod for Hermione.

"Got a few minutes to practice casting," he said, as he showed the young witch the proper way to cast out hook and line. It was slow going, and Hermione had yet to get her hook wet on her own when the divined run of large red sockeye salmon began charging upstream.

Hermione was almost too mesmerized to fish, as the surge of fish darted up along the banks in response to their relentless drive to spawn. Her travel companion didn't have this problem, though...with a whoop and holler he cast out his line, and within a minute landed his first fish.

Their guide had been working on detangling Hermione's line when the King Wizard's catch was landed, but she encouraged him to help Thorson. The outfitter happily abandoned Hermione in favor of the sockeye salmon, taking it off the hook and carrying it by the gills as he walked back to a staging area away from the river bank.

After successfully landing his third fish in ten minutes, the King's Wizard turned towards Hermione, noted her struggles, and shouted, "Think of the rod as your wand, and cast a flame whip spell."

Hermione looked at the wizard, then down at the bird's nest of fishing line that had clogged her reel, and cursed.

"Think I'm going to think of my wand as a wand," she decided, as she threw the fishing rod down onto the ground in frustration. Looking down into the water, she pointed her wand towards the largest flash of red she could find and shouted

"Accio Sockeye!"

A look of satisfaction came upon her face as a fifteen-pound hooked-jaw fish flew up out of the water and dropped down onto the shore by her feet.

"That's not very sporting," said the King's Wizard with a disappointed tone of voice.

"But it is much more efficient," Hermione countered. As the fish that she had "caught" flopped around she asked, "Now what?"

"Levitate it back towards Alex, and he'll take care of it from there," the elderly wizard said with a sigh.

Hermione followed these directions and brought the fish back to where Alex had conjured two waterproof rectangular boxes.

"Oh, that's a nice one, miss," the wizard said. "Let's get him comfortable."

She watched as the outfitter grabbed the floating fish, canceled the levitation charm, and dropped it gently into one of the boxes. He then cast a spell Hermione had never seen before...some conjuration that produced a globe of water around the salmon's head and gills.

"It's a bubblehead charm, only reversed," the old man explained. "Gives the fish an hour's worth of water."

"Ingenious," said Hermione. "But why are you casting it?"

"The key to great sushi is fresh fish," the King's Wizard declared, as he walked back from the bank with both his rod and Hermione's. "Can't get any fresher if it's still flopping about when the knives come out."

Hermione watched as the guide packed up the gear and covered the boxed fish with fresh seaweed.

"An awful lot of work just to give somebody a present."

The King's Wizard looked around at the scenery, took in a deep breath of fresh air and said, "Hard for me to think of this as work."

As Hermione watched the bald eagle swoop down and grab a fish out of the water with its talons, she was forced to agree.

Thirty minutes later, Hermione was back at the transit station with a long fidgety box under her arm (she had been warned that there was flavor loss if the fish was magically stunned). The outfitter was keeping one of the other three fish for Thorson until they could be picked up on the return trip to Norway. The other two were presently boxed under his own arms, just in case (he had told Hermione that based on his experiences visiting Japan that it was best to bring two more gifts than you expected to give).

On the way back to the portkey departure area, Hermione spied a small market with a sign in its window announcing the availability of live fish.

"Don't tell me that I could have just bought one of these over at the shop," she said.

The King's Wizard looked over at the storefront window and smiled.

"Okay, I won't tell you."

Hermione pouted. "I thought that you were supposed to be helping me in my mission?"

"But I am," Thorson replied. "How much more appreciative will the receiver of the gift be when he learns that you caught the gift yourself?"

The fish under Hermione's arm swatted its tail hard against the side of the box, causing her to almost lose her balance.

"For your sake," she warned, "it better be a lot."

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2330 GMT (11:30pm. local time)

Thistle and Toad Pub, Gilmerton Close, Edinburgh

The Queen's Wizard had followed orders and pulled his troops out of the areas where the two Death Eater safe houses were located, and taken the extra step of ordering them to make sure they had ironclad alibis for the evening. Not wishing to leave apparition traces near the safe-houses, the Art Clubbers badge-jumped to Holyrood using Wally as an anchor point, then apparated from there. The others flew back to Edinburgh aboard separate RAF transport helicopters.

It had only been a short walk from the helicopter landing pad next to the Palace down to the pub that served as the gateway to Edinburgh's small magical quarter. Katie, Alicia, and Lee used the floo to meet Fred and George at the Leaky Cauldron for a very late dinner, leaving Harry and his Gryffindor dorm mates behind to sample the Thistle and Toad's pub grub and butterbeer.

They had only been there a little while when Ron tried to get his mate's attention.

"Harry?"

"Erm...what?"

"He asked if you wanted to call it a night," said Seamus, who was sitting at the table along with Neville and Dean.

"No," replied Harry. "Wally was going to call with the all-clear, but hasn't yet."

"Oh," said Ron. "So...fancy a game of exploding snap?"

Harry gave Ron an incredulous look. "With all of the things that are...don't you think we're a little too old for that game?"

Ron looked over towards the other three Gryffindors; in unison they all turned towards Harry and replied, "No."

"Okay, then," said the Queen's Wizard, deciding that there was nothing better to do. "First charred face buys the next round."

Ron smiled as he pulled a deck of cards out from a pocket. Between his mate's worries over his globe-trotting girlfriend, and the fears over the purely Muggle military operation against the safe-houses, there was little doubt who would be distracted enough to be buying.

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2345 GMT (8:45am. local time)

Kyoto Station, Kyoto, Japan

The King's Wizard, Hermione, and their three fish arrived at the international portkey station in Kyoto at precisely the agreed-upon time.

The first thing Hermione saw once her eyes adjusted were two men standing in front of her. One was short and bald (shorter than even she was), wore a tall black brimless hat and dressed in a formal male kimono that didn't look all that different from wizarding robes. The other man was slightly taller, much skinnier, and dressed in a western-style day suit (complete with tails). Both bowed low towards Hermione and her escort as they stepped off of the platform. She followed her escort's lead and returned the bows.

The King's Wizard said something to the men in Japanese and gestured towards Hermione. The two men bowed once more, which Hermione parroted. The gesturing and bowing were then repeated as the shorter man said something to the King's Wizard in Japanese. Finally, after a very frustrating few seconds, this shorter man switched to English and said, "His Majesty the Emperor welcomes Ambassador Granger to Japan, and offers his apologies that he could not be here this morning to greet you personally. I am what you would call the Emperor's Wizard, Matsuhisa Yukihiro."

Hermione bowed (didn't know if was needed, but figured it was better to bow too low and too often, rather than not). She then responded with a greeting that had been suggested by the Foreign Secretary earlier that day.

"I am Her Majesty's Government's Envoy to the Wizarding World, Hermione Granger. I wish to apologize for imposing on you and His Majesty the Emperor with this visit, and to express our gratitude that His Majesty the Emperor has offered aid to the United Kingdom in its hour of need."

The bald man nodded slightly, then frowned when his companion whispered something in Japanese.

"This is Mr. Erizawa," Emperor's Wizard said with a rough wave of his hand. "He is my Muggle minder, tasked with ensuring that I embarrass neither His Majesty the Emperor, the Imperial Household, or myself when I make my forays into the Muggle world."

The thin Muggle grimaced slightly, but quickly returned his face to a neutral position and said in heavily accented English, "Welcome to Japan,

Ambassador Granger. The Imperial Household will do its best to ensure that the goals of your visit are smoothly met without incident."

"So are you going to follow her into the Muggle loo to make sure she flushes, like you do me?" the Emperor's Wizard asked gruffly (in Japanese).

Thorson snorted as the question caused the Muggle man's face to turn beet red.

The two Japanese engaged in a terse exchange of words, while Thorson turned towards Hermione and whispered, "Matsuhisa-sensei loves yanking the chain of this minder almost as much as he loves sushi...if you don't mind, I suggest you give the minder your fish to give to the Emperor, then use one of mine for the Supreme Mugwump."

Hermione nodded, happy at the thought of getting the squirming box out from under her arm. The man accepted the gift with a bow of respect

"Only about forty minutes left on that fish-bowl charm," Thorson noted to the Emperor's Wizard. When the wizard raised an eyebrow, the King's Wizard smiled. "Sockeye salmon, and yes, one of these are for you, sensei."

"Sugoi!" the wizard exclaimed with delight. "Then let us meet presently with the Supreme Mugwump, so that this wonderful present might soon meet my knife."

The Japanese wizard and Muggle led Hermione and Thorson through the transit station, which from an architectural standpoint looked rather modern and Muggle. When Hermione asked about this, the Emperor's Wizard explained that they were presently underneath Kyoto's JR train station, and that the magical transportation hub had been moved there so as to facilitate transfers between Muggle and magical modes of travel.

The small group once again breezed through customs, with the diplomatic passports and Erizawa's comments drawing deep bows from checkpoint officials who were dressed more like samurai than security agents.

Two young women were waiting for the party just beyond the barrier. Each was dressed in a high-waisted ankle-length red split skirt worn over a white kimono with long, wide sleeves. Each also had a large flat box in their hands, which they offered to Hermione and Thorson with deferential bows.

The Imperial Household Agency's Muggle stepped up to explain.

"Ambassador Granger, as we will be traveling in and out of Muggle areas of the city, we are happy to offer you attire that will be less... conspicuous."

Hermione looked inside her box and found an outfit somewhat similar to what both of the young women were wearing. With a nod in understanding, she said, "If it's my robes that stick out, I can just switch back to my Muggle business suit."

The Muggle bowed and replied, "We are pleased to offer the Ambassador the attire that is traditionally worn by those that the gods have blessed with magic."

Hermione thought for a moment, then drew her wand. "Thank you, but it would be a lot quicker and easier for me to transfigure my robes into something similar."

The Muggle minder winced slightly. "The young women would be pleased to help you quickly and easily change, Ambassador."

Hermione frowned, then turned to the Norwegian King's Wizard, who was watching the exchange with a bemused expression on his face.

"You will find, Ambassador Granger, that there is a certain flow to doing things within this country. In most cases, it is easier to go with the flow than to swim against it."

The confirmatory nod and chuckle from the Emperor's Wizard convinced Hermione of the correct path through this minor impasse. She nodded with a small bit of resignation, and allowed herself to be led into a private changing room by the two young women.

The fact that Hermione's two young assistants didn't speak of word of English didn't keep them from engaging in a running commentary as they helped her out of her Clan Potter robe and the Muggle clothing that she wore underneath. The Japanese women actually tittered when Hermione's crimson thong was revealed underneath her skirt; she needed to use some rather forthright hand gestures to indicate that she wasn't about to take it off so that they could get a closer look.

Once down to her bra and knickers, Hermione's new outfit was built up piece by piece. At first she thought that she'd look identical to her attendants. But after donning white tabi socks, a white kimono, and the high-waisted pleated red split skirt (that could almost be thought of as wide-legged trousers), the attendants wrapped a white wide belt around her waist, and pulled a white wide-sleeved jacket out of the box.

One of the two women said something to the other about this jacket, and pointed towards the Clan Potter crest on the robe that now lay folded on a chair. The second woman nodded, took the jacket and robe, and excused herself with a deep bow. When she returned two minutes later, the jacket that she presented to Hermione now had the Clan Potter crest woven into the silk fabric in five different places...on the back in between the shoulders, and on the front and back of each sleeve.

"It's beautiful," Hermione said in admiration, as she slipped her arms into each jacket sleeve. She was, however, decidedly less enthusiastic about the final piece of her new outfit.

"Absolutely not," she declared, when she was offered a gold headband that held a bouquet of long-stemmed flowers against the front.

The women frowned, said something to each other, then offered the headpiece a second time. When Hermione shook her head and folded her

arms in front of her, one of the women left the room in order to fetch the Emperor's Wizard. The short bald man entered the private changing room and smiled.

"You are a vision of beauty, Ambassador Granger."

"There's no way I'm wearing that bouquet of flowers on my head," Hermione stated.

The Emperor's Wizard snorted.

"Am I to understand that all Japanese witches walk around wearing flowers on their forehead?"

"Only when they allow my minder to dress them," the wizard said with a laugh. "It is what you call in English a prank."

"Thank Merlin," Hermione exclaimed.

The wizard exchanged some words with the two women (although much of what the wizard appeared to be saying in Japanese sounded to her more like grunts and groans). After reaching some sort of decision, the Emperor's Wizard asked,

"Would it be acceptable, Ambassador Granger, for your hair to be worn braided down the back, and tied with a white sash?"

Hermione looked at the wizard and arched an eyebrow. "Do you happen to know a spell that would straighten my hair?"

The wizard chuckled. "Japanese women do not usually have that type of problem, but I will ask the miko." He then translated Hermione's question into Japanese, causing the two young women to look at Hermione and shake their heads. Their comments caused the wizard to laugh out loud.

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked.

The Emperor's Wizard replied, "It is their opinion that the devils that possess your curls are too strong for their magic, and asked if I would aid them with an exorcism."

Hermione looked at the wizard with disbelief, then allowed her own chuckles to escape past her lips.

"Well," she replied, "if this exorcism works any better and faster than Sleekeazy's Hair Potion, then be my guest."

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Hermione hobbled out of the dressing room atop a pair of very uncomfortable wooden sandals. She found the wizard from Lake Wobegon dressed as a male Shinto priest, with a dark green jacket over his white kimono, and a eight-inch tall brimless black hat capping his six-foot two inch tall frame.

"Think you'll be ducking much?" Hermione asked with a smile.

"No more than usual when I visit here," the King's Wizard replied. "I must agree with my colleague, Ambassador...the kimono only enhances your natural beauty."

"Thank you, Thorson-sensei," Hermione replied. "I rather like the outfit, although these wooden sandals are...now, what would the diplomatic term be?"

"A pain in the arse?" asked the Emperor's Wizard.

"Thank you, Matsuhisa-sensei," said Hermione. "I couldn't agree more."

A red-faced protocol officer led the small group to a bank of lifts. When one of these lifts opened its doors, another young girl dressed in white kimono and red skirt emerged. She gestured towards the lift interior with white-gloved hands, and bowed politely.

Once they stepped inside, the Muggle minder withdrew a white silk scarf from his coat pocket and used it to cover his eyes.

"He can't deal with actually experiencing magic," Matsuhisa explained with a smile.

When the young girl touched part of the lift compartment's wall with a very short wand the doors closed and the lift slowly began to rise. After a short trip that Hermione guessed traversed only a few stories, the doors opened to reveal a solid wall.

"Chotto matte kudasai," the girl said in a lilting voice.

"It's an illusion," Thorson explained to Hermione. "Just need to wait for the all-clear before we can leave."

When a three-note chime sounded, the girl bowed and gestured towards the wall. The Emperor's Wizard winked at Thorson and Hermione before gruffly pushing the blindfolded Muggle through the faux wall. They then followed the Muggle's path, exiting into an empty hallway. Once the Muggle minder removed his blindfold he took on an air of authority and barked out a order to the Emperor's Wizard.

"Let me guess," Hermione whispered to Norwegian wizard. "We're now in Muggle territory, so he gets to take charge."

Thorson smiled and nodded in reply as they were led into a very busy corridor of a very busy train station. As they walked, Hermione remembered her promise to phone home and pulled out the satellite phone from a pocket sewn into the lining of her kimono jacket. After waiting only a few rings,

the Prime Minister picked up on the other side.

"Hello, Prime Minister, this is Hermione...I'm sorry for calling so late at night."

"That's quite alright, Ambassador...I did ask you to call once you arrived in Kyoto...you are in Japan, then?"

"Yes, sir," she said. "We're in transit to the meeting place."

"Good, good...so who are you with right now?"

"Erm...the Norwegian King's Wizard, the Japanese Emperor's Wizard, and someone else from the Imperial Household."

"Excellent," the Prime Minister replied. "And you'll be in their company for the next thirty minutes, at least?"

"I believe so, Prime Minister," said Hermione. "Is there a reason why that's important?"

"Yes, actually, there is," the Prime Minister replied. "We'll talk later about it."

"Erm...okay," said Hermione. "Anything else, sir?"

"No, no...I should let you go, Ambassador. Stay safe over there."

"Yes, sir, I will...good night, sir."

"Good night, Ambassador Granger."

When she heard the click on the other end, Hermione ended the call from her side and pocketed the sat phone. The call had left her a bit frustrated...it was clear that the Prime Minister was keeping something from her, but she couldn't think what that might be.

It wasn't until later that Hermione learned that two SAS counter-terrorism teams had been waiting on her call, as the Prime Minister had refused to authorize the assaults against the Death Eaters until he was certain that his Special Ambassador had an iron-clad alibi, half-way around the world.

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A uniformed driver was waiting for Hermione and her three escorts next to a black luxury sedan. He bowed, then gathered the three boxed fish and deposited them in the boot. Meanwhile, the Muggle minder got into the front passenger seat, and the other three slipped into the back. The Emperor's Wizard leaned forward to give instructions to the driver, then sat back and engaged the glass divider between front and back. Once the barrier was in place he sat back and smiled.

"Ah, finally I can relax a little," he said. He then turned to Hermione and asked, "Is this your first visit to Japan, Ambassador?"

"Yes, Sir," Hermione replied.

"Then you must promise to return when there is better weather," the wizard replied, as the driver pulled the car out from under a protective canopy and into a misty gray morning. "Monsoon season will be with us for at least another week."

"Did I hear you say that we were heading to Kami-Gamo Jinja rather than the Ministry?" asked Thorson.

The Japanese wizard nodded. "The kappas have been acting up again at Tadasu no Mori," he explained. "They're giving the Muggle golfers more of a water hazard that they've wished for...and since the Supreme Mugwump is still the High Priest at that shrine, he's handling the situation himself."

Thorson nodded as the car splashed through puddles on its way north from the station. "Hard to believe that golfers would be out in this weather."

The Emperor's Wizard laughed. "Thorson-san, how many times have you visited Japan...and still you know nothing of our culture?"

The Norwegian King's Wizard caught Hermione fidgeting in his peripheral vision. "Matsuhisa-sensei, Ambassador Granger wishes to display both her keen mind and the ill-effects of an appallingly myopic curriculum at Hogwarts. Would you be willing to answer a few questions for her?"

"Of course, Thorson-san," the wizard said. He caught Hermione's attention, and then asked, "How might I help, Ambassador?"

The frown on Hermione's face that had been generated by her escort's low opinion of Hogwarts was overcome by curiosity.

"My apologies, Sir, but it does seem that this trip has revealed my ignorance of the wizarding world beyond Europe."

"It is the fault of the sensei, and not the student," the Japanese wizard replied. "What has piqued your interest?"

"Well, the idea of kappas attacking Muggle golfers, for sure, but a more basic question involves the relationship between magic and religion in your country...is the Supreme Mugwump really a high priest?"

The Emperor's Wizard nodded. "He is indeed, Ambassador, as am I. Nearly every Japanese witch and wizard is involved in some way with Shinto."

"But...isn't Shinto also a religion within the Muggle world?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that a problem in terms of protecting secrets?"

The Japanese wizard smiled, shook his head, and once more dove into the brief lesson that was always necessary when a Western wizard first visited Japan.

"The magic native to Japan is very different than what is taught in your schools. Shinto magic is closer in style to what your Druids practiced, before the Roman wand wavers imposed their type of magic across Europe and Northern Africa."

The wizard paused for Hermione to process that statement, then moved on. "Shinto magic is used by the Japanese mage...or miko if they are female...to maintain the harmony of nature. It is power given by the kami...you call them spirits...to restore imbalances."

"So what type of imbalances are you asked to fix?" Hermione asked.

"Mainly those between the Muggle and magical worlds," the wizard replied. "For example, the kami recognize the right of even non-magical people to live and thrive...but it is hard for the people of Japan to coexist with our magical beasts...there is so little flat, arable land. So the kami allow balance...we use magic to strengthen buildings against earthquakes, and magic to boost rice harvests, but only in areas outside of where the tengu and other magical beasts run free."

"Don't forget about keeping the devils in bounds as well," Thorson replied with a smile. "Remember that one time you and I chased that oni up and down the mountain side?"

"Yes, Thorson-san, they were good times," the wizard replied warmly.

Hermione then asked, "So you don't live separated from the Muggle world, then?"

"Yes and no," the wizard replied. "We do live amongst the Muggles, but are schooled separately within the shrines. The Shinto mage has a public face that Muggles see when they visit the shrines, but also the private face that we use for magically restoring the balances."

"Sort of like being a secret agent," said Thorson with a smile. "Not that you'd know anything about that, right Ambassador?"

"Erm, right," said Hermione. "So do the Muggles know that some or most of the Shinto priests and priestesses are really witches and wizards?"

"There are many who have faith in the powers of Shinto priests and priestesses," the wizard replied. "But faith isn't the same as certain knowledge, and there are many more whose faith extends only far enough to justify the purchase of good-luck charms and protective talismans at our shrines."

Hermione nodded. "So I'm interested in this golf course, and the kappas...."

The Emperor's Wizard smiled. "Kamigamo Jinja and Shimogamo Jinja are shrines built on the edge of a magical forest known as Tadasu no Mori, which is home to many magical beasts. The shrines are staffed by Shinto mages and mika charged with keeping a harmonious boundary between the two worlds. Many years ago, when the game of golf became popular, the Muggles wished to construct a new course on the edge of the forest. They asked the High Priests, because it was the shrine that owned the forest lands. After much consultation with the kami, this golf course was allowed to be built...although it forced us to relocate some of the magical creatures that called the area home, it provides enough income for the Shrines to support more than two hundred mages and mikos. And if the mages and mikos don't need to use magic to put a roof over their heads or food on the table, there is more time and opportunity for them to maintain the balance elsewhere."

Hermione nodded. "So I gather that the kappas weren't necessarily in agreement with this arrangement?"

The Japanese wizard nodded. "That is a worthy understatement, Ambassador."

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Wednesday, July 11, 0030 GMT (12:30am. local time)

Thistle and Toad Pub, Gilmerton Close, Edinburgh

The vibration of his Art Club badge caught Harry by surprise, even though he was hoping or expecting calls from at least two different people. He begged off the current hand of cards, getting by the protests with the promise that he would yet again buy the next round, and stepped out into the night.

Although he probably shouldn't have done it for security reasons, he eyes immediately shifted to a window across the street where he knew MI-5 ¾ had established a surveillance station. Checking up and down the street, he found a quiet corner and pulled out his mobile.

"Wally?"

"Hey, Harry, I just tried to call you on your badge."

"I know...I'm out where it's less conspicuous to use my mobile...what's going on?"

"Just wanted to let you know that it's over at Cardiff and Leeds."

"Over? As in 'they've gone in and gotten back out' over?"

"Yeah."

"Oh...so have you been authorized to tell me what the hell happened and why I couldn't be trusted to be there?"

"Harry...calm down," Wally pleaded. "You still at the pub?"

"What was the body count, Wally?" Harry asked pointedly.

"Four dead DE's, eight gone missing...all safe and accounted for on our side."

"Bollocks!" Harry swore. "I told them that the Death Eaters would apparate out if given a half-second's chance."

"And they believed you, Harry...turns out that the gas they pumped into the houses didn't knock the bad guys out like it should have."

Harry shook his head. "Wouldn't be surprised if witches or wizards weren't affected...we're immune to most Muggle diseases...so I imagine the houses are crawling with Ministry types by now?"

"Not that I've heard," Wally replied. "They pulled out the bodies and sanitized the sites as quick as they could, but so far, no Aurors or other magicals have come snooping."

"So all that concern about keeping me and the others from going in with the SAS...didn't matter if alibis were the reason, huh?"

"As far as we know now, no."

"But if there was some other reason, like the government not trusting who's side we would be on, or not wanting us to see how the boys in black go about their business..."

"Harry, I think you're overreacting," Wally replied. "Those 'boys' as you call them aren't used to going in with anyone they haven't trained with...Say, I've sent a car along...why don't you pay your tab and head back here to wait for Hermione?"

The Queen's Wizard's eyes narrowed as he spied the black sedan parked with its engine running a few yards down the street.

Thinking that he'd been ordered about and led around by the hand far too much for his liking that evening, he informed Wally that he'd just as soon walk back to the Palace alone.

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**0100 GMT (10:00am local time)
Kamigamo Jinja, Kyoto, Japan**

When the car carrying Hermione and her escorts arrived at the main gate of the shrine complex, the driver was redirected to a location further down the road. The Emperor's Wizard rolled down the divider, and asked a question in Japanese. He then leaned back onto the seat and announced, "The Supreme Mugwump is still on the golf course."

After a short drive, the sedan pulled up to the fanciest looking club house that Hermione had ever seen. The driver grabbed three umbrellas, and opened one for each of the rear seat passengers as they climbed out of the car. Hermione struggled to keep up on her platform sandals as the Emperor's Wizard led them to the golf course's first tee, where nearly sixty golfers were standing underneath large bright umbrellas, waiting for the chance to tee off. The Japanese wizard once again asked for directions from a groundskeeper, then returned to the group.

"The Supreme Mugwump is out on the fourth hole, and the course is closed until he gives the all-clear," he stated. "I said that we have come to help. Follow me."

Hermione looked at a wooden sign next to the tee box that showed the course layout. "Oh, no," she said quietly. "No way I'm going to walk that far in these sandals." She then turned to the Norwegian wizard and asked, "So how come you don't have a problem wearing these geta?"

"Lots of practice," the wizard replied. "Oh, and I guess there's always that charm I use to make them feel like a pair of trainers."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Oh, you...." She pulled the green-kimono wearing wizard behind a large bush and demanded, "Fix...mine...now."

"Yes, Ambassador Granger," the older man said with a smile.

With the charm thus cast, they returned to the first tee, where a brisk pace down the fairway allowed them to quickly catch up with the other two. Ten minutes later, they discovered the Supreme Mugwump standing fifty yards away from a large pond, dressed in formal High Priest robes. There was a golf club in his hand and a caddy by his side.

"Let me approach him first," the Emperor's Wizard said. He then walked the last few yards up to the other wizard and politely announced his presence. After formal greetings were exchanged, the Emperor's Wizard asked,

"What are you doing, Aoki-sensei?"

"Testing my efforts to calm the water spirits," the elderly Supreme Mugwump replied. "They have been quick to anger these past few days, rising up whenever they are showered by golf balls."

The wizard tossed a golf ball onto the ground and, without much thought, lined up his shot and swung. He scowled as the ball sailed over the water.

"It appears that the kami are insistent on helping me lower my handicap," he lamented.

"Sensei?"

The Supreme Mugwump turned towards the Emperor's Wizard. "You don't golf, do you Matsuhisa-san?"

"No sensei...but perhaps one of my companions does?"

The gray-haired wizard looked over his colleagues shoulder.

"Who are they, Matsuhisa-san?"

"The King's Wizard from Norway, and an emissary from the Muggle government of the United Kingdom."

"Muggle government?" asked the Supreme Mugwump. "Is she magical?"

"Yes, sensei...Ambassador Granger speaks on behalf of the British Prime Minister, and is the consort of their Queen's wizard."

"Is that so?" the Supreme Mugwump asked. "Well, this is her nation's sport...perhaps the young witch could aid us?"

The Emperor's Wizard bowed. "I will ask, sensei."

The short bald wizard walked back to Hermione and her escort.

"The Supreme Mugwump wishes to know if you golf, Ambassador Granger."

"Really?" asked Hermione. She watched as the Supreme Mugwump swung his sand wedge and lofted yet another golf ball straight towards the pond. As the ball reached the apex of its flight path, a strong gust of wind carried the ball forward, where it landed forty yards beyond the water hazard.

"I've played a few times with my father," she replied. "Why?"

"The Supreme Mugwump spoke with the kappa that live in that pond this morning, and they promised to behave," said the Emperor's Wizard. "He is now trying, rather unsuccessfully, to test the strength of that agreement, but the wind is lifting every ball he hits over the hazard."

"And he's asking if I can shank a golf ball into the water?" Hermione asked.

When the Emperor's Wizard nodded, the young witch thought about the situation.

"It is true that I am better at hitting water than fairways," she noted. But then she remembered reading about the web-fingered monkey-like beasts in question, and nodded.

"I think that I might be able to help," Hermione told the Emperor's Wizard.

As the others followed behind, Hermione approached the head of the ICW and bowed towards him and his acolyte caddy. When the caddy returned the bow and held the golf clubs out for her inspection, she reached not for a short iron, but for the Supreme Mugwump's telescoping ball retriever.

Once a spell pinned the hem of her garments up against her bared knees, Hermione slipped off her socks and sandals, then walked barefoot up to the bank of the pond. Once she spotted a white golf ball she waded into the water and scooped the ball out of the mud. Hermione then spied a second ball a few feet further down the shoreline, and waded towards it, splashing water in the process.

After making a complete circuit of the pond's perimeter, the young witch returned to a bemused Supreme Mugwump with a dozen balls cradled in the folds of her robes. She conjured a small wicker basket, then dumped the balls into it and offered them to the elderly wizard.

"It appears, at least to my untrained eye, that the Supreme Mugwump has indeed restored balance and brought peace to these links."

The old man smiled and nodded in appreciation of Hermione's ingenuity. As kappa tended to attack those humans who waded along a water body's shoreline, she had tested the passivity of the kappa better than any golf shot could have done.

Once Hermione unpinned her robes, fetched her socks and sandals, and returned the ball retriever to the caddy, she bowed again to the Supreme Mugwump and introduced herself.

"It is rare these days to get magical visitors from Britain," the wizard noted. "What brings you half-way around the world, my child?"

"I bring greetings from Her Majesty's Government, and congratulations on your election to the vaulted position of Supreme Mugwump." She then looked back towards the protocol officer, who had been tasked with holding one of the boxed fish. When he stepped forward she added, "I also have a small gift to offer...omiyagi, I think it's called?"

"Thank you," the wizard replied, as he took the long rectangular box from the Muggle's hands. Once he opened it up and spied the still-flapping fish, he arched one eyebrow and asked, "Is this salmon native to Britain?"

"I am not certain about salmon in general," Hermione replied. "This fish, though, was caught in Alaska, in between portkey jumps."

"A witch with many talents...you catch fish in Alaska, and golf balls in Japan," the old man quipped.

Hermione waited until she heard the Emperor's Wizard's laugh from behind before she allowed herself to smile and nod in recognition of the Supreme Mugwump's joke.

"Come, Ambassador," the elderly wizard said. "Walk with me to the clubhouse. The sushi chef there will do honor to your gift, and you can tell me the real reasons behind your visit."

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Thirty minutes later, a kneeling Hermione Granger squirmed in pain as the Supreme Mugwump silently reviewed the evidence that she had placed before him. They had been shown to a private tatami-matted room within the golf course's clubhouse, and the thin cushions that served in lieu of chairs were meant to cushion knees, rather than bums. Seeing the tell-tale signs of legs falling asleep, the Norwegian King's Wizard took pity on her and caught her attention. Drawing his wand from his sleeve, Thorson pointed it towards his knees and silently jerked his head her way. Hermione raised her eyebrows, and nodded as she mouthed the words, "Yes, please."

The limbering charm that was wordlessly cast instantly soothed the pain in Hermione's legs, and earned the elderly wizard a smile and a mouthed "Thank You!"

Having finished his careful review of the documents and photographs that detailed both the successful and unsuccessful bank robberies, the Supreme Mugwump turned his attention to two stoppered vials.

"These vials...they hold memories, to be viewed in a...you call them pensieves, no?"

"Yes, Supreme Mugwump."

The ancient wizard frowned. "We do not use this type of magic in Japan...did you bring the viewing device with you?"

Hermione's eyes darkened with worry. "No, Sir, I am sorry...I did not."

Waving off her concern, the wizard replied. "Do not worry, child...it is my opinion that the documents and affidavit from your goblins are sufficient to begin an official inquiry."

"Thank you, Sir," Hermione replied. "May I arrange for a pensieve to be delivered here for your use?"

The Supreme Mugwump shook his head. "These memories...they may be reviewed in your country by the team sent to investigate." The elderly wizard then turned towards the other three in the room and began speaking in Japanese.

"Matsuhisa-san?"

"Yes, Sensei?"

"I would be pleased to see you released from your duties within the Imperial Household for a few days, so that you might lead this inquiry."

The Emperor's Wizard looked towards his minder. Though he would have ignored the Muggle's protests had they been expressed, he was pleased to see the man give him a curt nod. The wizard then bowed towards the Supreme Mugwump and asked, "When do you wish me to leave for Britain, Sensei?"

"As soon as possible, Matsuhisa-san," the ancient wizard replied. "I leave selection of the other investigators to you."

"I am honored by your confidence in me, Sensei," the Emperor's Wizard stated. He then added, "Are our eyes to be focused only on the issue before you?"

The Supreme Mugwump sighed, and then replied, "The eyes of the wizarding world have been diverted from Britain for far too long, Matsuhisa-san...go there with sharpened blades and eyes wide open."

"As you wish, Sensei."

The Supreme Mugwump then switched back to English and turned to Hermione. "I have asked the Emperor's Wizard to assemble a team to investigate this issue for me. May I count on the cooperation of your country's Muggle government?"

"Thank you Sir," Hermione replied. "I will do all that I can to ensure that the investigators have a pleasant and productive visit."

With a nod of his head, the Supreme Mugwump clapped his hands together. A rice-papered door slid to one side of the wall, and two beautiful kimono-clad woman bowed low as they placed a huge boat-shaped platter in the room. The women then climbed up onto the raised platform floor, and carried the tray over to the table.

Hermione's eyes were immediately drawn to the tray, where the head of the fish that she had given to the Supreme Mugwump sat as the centerpiece to an ornate display of sushi and sashimi.

Thick slices of dark red salmon were arranged in small fans of flesh, while other pieces of salmon meat sat on small beds of rice as pieces of

sushi. There were also seaweed-wrapped pieces of sushi topped with raw red eggs, leading Hermione to suspect that her catch had been female.

When she heard the men and the room grunt and groan with excitement she thought that they were ogling the two women, but when Hermione looked up she realized that her companion's eyes were zeroed in on the tray of food.

Looking at the eating utensils set on the sides of the tray Hermione became nervous. Though her parents were well-off dentists and she had eaten out quite often as a child, she had never taken to chopsticks, and always insisted on eating Chinese food the way that "normal" English restaurant patrons did.

"We hope that it is not too early for your lunch, Ambassador," the Emperor's Wizard said, as he handed her a table setting.

"It's actually closer to a midnight snack, given the time difference," she replied. She then took hold of the wooden utensils and looked at the King's Wizard with slightly pleading eyes.

"Sorry, Ambassador," he said. "I don't know any chopsticks charms."

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Wednesday, July 11, 0315 GMT
Palace at Holyrood House, Edinburgh

Harry Potter's vibrating Art Club badge woke him from the restless sleep that had claimed his consciousness. He sat up, lifting his head off the opened page of a briefing book, and activated his badge.

"Erm...hullo?" he asked groggily.

"Hey, Harry, it's me...Hermione."

"Hermione? Where are you?"

"I'm back in Oslo."

"Oslo?" Why didn't you call sooner?"

"I've been trying, but you fell asleep, silly," Hermione replied.

"Oh...So when do you think you'll be back home...I mean here at Holyrood?"

"Oh, Harry...you know that home is wherever you are...and I'll be there in a few seconds if you let me use you as an anchor point for a badge jump."

"Erm..sure...go ahea...."

Hermione suddenly appeared in their guest quarters, still dressed in kimono, and carrying a large bag.

"Hey, Honey, I'm home," she said, dropping the bag and holding her arms out towards her boyfriend.

Startled at the sight of the wide white sleeves that hung like wings from her arms, the Queen's Wizard asked, "Hermione, why do you look like an angel?"

"Oh, Harry, you say the sweetest things," his Consort replied, as she wrapped those wings around him. She then added, "These are the robes that witches wear in Japan."

Nodding, Harry sleepily asked, "So how did it go?"

"It went great," Hermione replied. "I did a little fishing, played a little golf..."

"Huh?"

"Sssh," Hermione replied, as she kissed him on the cheek. "We can talk in the morning. Right now we should try to sleep...busy day coming up."

"Okay," Harry replied, as he pulled back from Hermione and plopped down on the bed. He looked once more at Hermione's outfit through heavy eyelids and asked, "So that's what you wear when you're a witch in Japan?"

Hermione nodded.

"How about changing into...what you wear...when you're a witch...in our bedroom?" he asked, yawning in between words.

The Special Ambassador the Wizarding World cocked her head to one side, then smiled. Not even trying to undo all of the knots to her outfit by hand, she banished her Japanese attire into her wardrobe.

"Yea!" Harry said with a sleepy smile, as Hermione walked over to the bed dressed only in her red thong.

"You are too cute when you're half-asleep," she noted, as she pulled down the covers.

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "Too...too...too tired to catch the snitch tonight."

Hermione smiled as she banished Harry's clothes to a hamper and pulled him into bed.

"That's okay," she replied, as she pulled his head to her chest. "Just catch some sleep instead."

Chapter 37: Going to Ground

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***Wednesday, July 11, 3:00am
Somewhere Hidden in Salisbury***

Augustus Rookwood had just entered REM sleep when the mobile sitting on his nightstand chirped. It took some non-electronic encouragement for him to answer the phone.

"Stuff that bloody bird!" yelled Dolohov, as he threw his pillow at the former Unspeakable from across the bedroom.

"Huh?" Rookwood replied.

The answer to this one word question came from the still-ringing mobile. A glance at the Caller ID number cleared his head far more effectively than his bunk-mate's curses. He pushed a button, held the receiver to his ear, and barked, "Report."

"This is Marcus Flint...here at our Recovery Point," replied a weak voice on the other end of the call. "Seven others...Cardiff, Liverpool got visited."

The former Unspeakable cursed.

"What's your current situation?"

"Hit with some sort of gas attack," Flint replied. "Took us a while to move from Rally point to here...doesn't look like we've been tracked or followed."

"When did the attacks occur?"

"Not sure...two, maybe three hours ago..."

Rookwood cursed again, then ordered Flint to lay low until help arrived.

Once he pocketed the mobile, a now much more awake Dolohov asked, "Problems?"

The former Unspeakable nodded as he quickly dressed himself and grabbed his rucksack. "My two remaining safe houses were attacked...I need to find out how and why."

"Bugger."

"You've got that right...I'm heading out to assess the situation. You should wake our Lord and tell him the news."

"Yeah, right," replied the Death Eater. "It's your problem...why don't you tell him?"

Rookwood sighed deeply. "You idiot...there's no time..."

But Dolohov was rather insistent on not being the bearer of bad news. Realizing that he needed to gain more facts before facing Voldemort, the former Unspeakable activated a portkey and disappeared.

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3:10am, Nottingham Caves, Nottingham

It was thought by Albus Dumbledore that almost all of the Dark Lord's focus during Harry Potter's fifth year at Hogwarts had been on retrieving the prophecy from the Department of Mysteries. This was a mistaken belief...while there was a concerted effort to gain the prophecy, even more attention was paid to laying the groundwork for the successful conquest of wizarding Britain.

No small part of this groundwork involved work underground. With Ministry spies and sympathizers in place that could either ignore or bury evidence of magical activity in non-magical areas, Voldemort's Inner Circle had developed a network of hideouts, safe-houses, and re-supply posts. For security purposes, each of the senior Death Eaters worked independently, and kept a portion of the network secret from the others. And a portion of these secret sites were made even more secure when Voldemort memory charmed his subordinates, so that he alone was aware of these locations.

This level of paranoia paid off when Inner Circle members were captured in the Department of Mysteries, and subsequently interrogated with Veritaserum. All of the commonly known locations were compromised, along with those locations known only to the captured Death Eaters. It was only the sites known solely to Voldemort, and to those (like Bellatrix) who evaded capture, that remained secure.

The ability to rebuild the network of magically hidden hideouts was crippled when all of Voldemort's operatives within the Magical Surveillance Office were exposed during the recent failed assault on the Ministry of Magic. The Dark Lord was therefore rather stingy when it came to sharing the locations of the remaining hideaways, and had relied upon newer safe-house locations in the aftermath of Ascot. Only three of the old sites were released by Voldemort for minion use, and designated as Emergency Recovery Points. Each Death Eater was provided a portkey to a rally point near one of these locations. If their primary safe house was compromised, a Death Eater was told to portkey to the rally point, wait there for others who might have escaped, and then travel on foot to the Recovery Point. A pay-as-you-go mobile was hidden at each recovery point entrance; it was this mobile that Marcus Flint had used to contact Rookwood with the bad news.

The former Unspeakable's portkey delivered him straight to the entrance to Recovery Point Gamma, located on a hill slope just above the city of Nottingham. It took a few seconds for him to get his bearings...he was in an abandoned quarry, next to a hanging wall of soft sandstone. A cool breeze struck him from behind. When Rookwood turned towards this breeze, he spied a wand pointed at his heart, held by a wizard standing at the mouth of a hand-dug tunnel.

Once passwords were exchanged, the younger wizard dropped his wand, and led Rookwood past Muggle-repelling charms into the tunnel.

"Mind your step, it's bloody dark in here," Flint said. "One of the Cardiff blokes broke his leg when he fell into the shaft."

The former Unspeakable shook his head in resignation as he reached into his sack and retrieved two Muggle torches. He flipped them both on, then handed one to his companion.

The former Quidditch captain nodded his thanks, then headed deeper into the tunnel, to a spot where the end of a long wooden ladder jutted out from a hole in the ground. Flint pointed out the ladder, swung his arm out and said, "After you."

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The system of hand-dug caves and tunnels underneath the City of Nottingham was the most extensive in all of Britain, with some excavations dating back thousands of years. During the Eighteenth Century, the city's poor both worked and lived within these dark, fetid excavations. Conditions were so horrific for the indigent cave dwellers and tannery employees that the Muggle Parliament passed an Act in 1845 banning the use of subsurface structures as rental housing. Almost all of Nottingham's caves were abandoned at that time...with only a few kept open for use as a modern-day tourist attraction, a rifle range, pub cellars, and (during the Second World War) air raid shelters.

Oh, and for a Death Eater hide-out as well, but this was something that the Muggles didn't know about.

The wooden ladder that Rookwood descended was propped up against the wall of a vertical shaft that opened up into a chamber that was roughly thirty feet long, twenty feet wide, and ten feet high. Charmed wooden torches lit the room, revealing two six-foot high doorways within opposite walls, and a handful of drowsy Death Eaters sprawled out on the cave floor in their nightclothes. It appeared to Rookwood that it was only the pained cries of the injured Death Eater that were keeping these others awake.

The former Unspeakable ignored the pleas for help from the injured wizard as he tried to quickly assess what had happened. The stories were notably identical, regardless of which safe-house the Death Eater had been in.

Thinking with a sense of urgency, Rookwood ordered the men to move farther into the cave network in case room was needed for more arrivals. The best he could do for the injured wizard was splint the leg and dispense a vial of pain-relief potion...Skelre-gro was a proprietary potion that was in short supply within their ranks, and one of the potions that Snape was trying to create on his own using materials gathered during the attack on Diagon Alley.

After promising that the group would not be forgotten, Rookwood touched a reusable portkey and returned to Voldemort's lair.

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The Dark Lord was not a happy camper when he was woken in the middle of the night.

"My apologies, My Lord," Rookwood said, with eyes cast down to the floor at Voldemort's bedside. "But I must report that the safe-houses at Cardiff and Liverpool were attacked tonight, and I fear that this location may have been compromised as well."

"What?" Voldemort demanded. "Who attacked, and how...and how were you made aware of this?"

Rookwood swallowed down some bile, and tried to answer the questions in order.

"It was most likely Muggles, who used some sort of poison gas. Eight of the twelve within these two houses managed to portkey to their rally point, and make their way to Rally Point Gamma. They used the Muggle communication device hidden there to call me, and I just returned from interviewing them."

Voldemort frowned as he thought over the response. Some Occlumancy was needed to quiet all of the voices within his head offering suggestions on how best to torture the minion before him.

"Why do you think that this location may be at risk?" he demanded.

Rookwood paused. He really didn't want to answer the question, but figured that it would be less painful than having the answer ripped from his mind by a *Legilimens* attack.

"My Lord," said Rookwood, "You and I were the only ones that knew where all of the safe-houses under my control were located. We know that my

memory was modified when I flew out of the Rookery on Saturday night. We also know that Muggles may have been involved there. If these Muggles, or the goblins, or Potter...if somebody was able to capture the memories that were scanned by the building's wards..."

"Yes, Rookwood...that does seem to be the only possible explanation...other than the possibility that you have betrayed me."

The former Unspeakable very nervously tried to speak in his own defense. "My Lord...were any of your Inner Circle to betray you, would it not make sense that this location would be a higher-priority target than safe-houses filled with low-level supporters?"

"Indeed," Voldemort replied. "'That is a conundrum."

The former Unspeakable bowed his head down. "Which is why I believe we must consider abandoning this position."

Voldemort stared at Rookwood for a few seconds, until he was able to bring the urge to hex under control. He then nodded, reached into his pocket, and removed his pack of portkeys. He scanned the deck of playing cards until the King of Hearts came up. Holding this card out to the former Unspeakable, he ordered him to take hold, then activated it.

The portkey deposited to two wizards into the alleyway near the Avebury stone circle. Rookwood followed his master out of the alleyway, and into the center of the magical megalith.

"Give me your arm," Voldemort quietly demanded.

Rookwood knew well enough what his master wanted, and braced for pain as he rolled up his sleeve and offered his left arm. Voldemort jabbed his wand tip into the black tattoo and summoned his Inner Circle. They arrived by portkey within moments, in various states of dress and with varying degrees of alertness.

"The locations of Rookwood's safe-house locations have been compromised and subsequently attacked," Voldemort stated matter-of-factly. "We are going to ground. Make arrangements for everyone to abandon their current positions and to fall back to their respective Recovery Points."

"Are we to abandon our provisions in these safe-houses, My Lord?" asked Nott.

Voldemort thought for a moment. "Take what you can. Have your charges use minimizing spells, but only at the last moment before you portkey out."

Snape stepped forward. "My Lord, the potions that I am brewing will not travel well, and many of the cursed and injured under my care won't survive a portkey trip."

"Good point, Severus," the Dark Lord replied. "Yaxley...travel with Snape back to his safe-house. Collect the emergency portkeys of anyone too ill to travel, and obliviate their memories of any of our rally or recovery points."

"As you wish, My Lord," the Death Eater replied. "Does that include Severus?"

The Dark Lord nodded. "Memory charm everyone who stays behind."

Severus Snape didn't like that response one bit, but was smart enough to keep his comments and his thoughts to himself.

"My Lord," said Rodolphus Lestrange, "I have moved my men into position for today's Muggle hunt...should they be pulled back as well?"

"Hmmm...who has portkeys to travel to Salisbury?" Voldemort asked.

Nearly everyone there raised their hands.

"Give them to Rodolphus," the Dark Lord ordered. "Bella, my dear?"

"Yes, My Lord," the female Dark Eater cooed.

"Travel with your husband to Edinburgh. Collect all of the emergency portkeys, distribute the Salisbury portkeys as replacements, then obliviate the lot of all knowledge of our safe-houses and fall-back positions...and yes, that includes your husband."

"As you wish, My Lord."

"Rodolphus," Voldemort stated, "Monitor your Muggle radio for the signal to abort...it will mean that Salisbury is no longer a safe haven. Otherwise, once you have successfully completed your task, portkey with your men to Salisbury and wait there for further instructions."

"Other issues?" the Dark Lord asked.

"My Lord," said Nott tentatively, "Were any of our troops killed or captured during these attacks?"

Voldemort turned to Rookwood and signaled for him to answer.

"Four didn't make it to the Rally Point," the former Unspeakable said. "We don't know their status."

The elder Nott nodded. "These four...they would have had their emergency portkeys with them?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't that put Recovery Point Gamma at equal risk of detection, then?"

Rookwood looked nervously at his master, who didn't look very pleased that he hadn't raised this issue beforehand.

"The portkeys were well disguised, and might be overlooked if their pockets were emptied out," Rookwood replied. "But even if the portkeys are discovered, there's no way for anyone else to know their destinations, and only a fool would blindly take a Death Eater's portkey to an unknown location."

"You speak as if there are no fools within the Ministry," Nott replied, earning a nervous laugh from his audience.

Rookwood replied, "The portkeys take you to the Rally Point, not the Recovery Point itself. Each of my wizards knew how to get from one point to the other, but didn't know exactly where they'd be...and the Rally Point was selected to be easily defended. Perhaps..."

The Death Eater looked back towards his master for input.

"Nott," Voldemort said, "Your cadre is assigned to Gamma...set up a small welcoming committee at the Rally Point to deal with any uninvited guests."

"As you command, My Lord."

There were no other immediate questions, so Voldemort dismissed all but Pettigrew and Rookwood.

"Wormtail," he said, once the three were alone. "You will travel with me to Salisbury, and will remain behind to monitor the location in your animagus form. Should it be attacked, it will be up to you to send the signal to abort Lestrangle's mission."

Peter, eyes firmly on the ground in front of him, acknowledged his master's orders. The Dark Lord then turned to the former Unspeakable.

"I am very disappointed in you, Augustus, but I sense more incompetence than disloyalty."

"Yes, My Lord."

"The idea of Muggles attacking our forces is as intolerable as it is unfathomable," said Voldemort, as he handed the other Death Eater a portkey.

"You are to observe the attack this afternoon. Do not participate. Take note of all defenses and responses, then use this portkey and wait at its destination for further orders...understood?"

"Yes, My Lord," replied Rookwood. "I do not deserve your generous trust in my abilities."

The Dark Lord smiled thinly. "No, you don't." He then held out his wand and cast a memory charm on the former Unspeakable that was much more painful than necessary.

Once his follow-up mental probe determined that he had wiped out all of Rookwood's knowledge of Death Eater hide-aways, he sent his minion along on his appointed task, then used his own portkey to travel with Pettigrew back to Salisbury...there was no way that he was going to leave behind his magical tent when he relocated to a well-equipped location known to no one but himself.

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6:30am, Palace at Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh

Hermione Granger walked over to the large guest-bedroom window while her draft report was printing and watched as an army of caterers placed row after row of crystal and china on white linen-covered tables underneath long white tents. When her badge chirped she turned her attention to a much smaller, fully enclosed white tent.

"Yes, Harry?" she asked, after activating the badge.

"We're done here," the Queen's Wizard replied. "I'm coming up."

"Too tired to walk?" Hermione asked.

Harry waited until the badge jump into the guest bedroom was completed before he answered.

"Too busy to walk," he said.

Hermione nodded. "Construction all set, then?"

"Queen's Tent tube is finished," Harry replied. "Ironrip and his crew think that they'll have two others ready by noon...would have already been done if they didn't have to avoid contact with the caterers."

"They are setting up the tea tent rather early aren't they?"

Harry snorted as he walked to the window and watched uniformed wait staff stack teacups and plates on tables underneath the tents. "Well, service for 8,000 takes a while to prepare if you aren't using magic."

Are we really expecting that many, given the Ten O'clock Attacks?" asked Hermione.

With a nod, Harry replied, "Stiff upper lip, and all that...the Buckingham Palace garden parties were well-attended after the terrorist attacks last year, and there's no way in hell that the Scots will allow themselves to be viewed as any less brave than the English."

Hermione shook her head. "Still wish there had been more time to expand out the ward lines."

A sigh escaped from Harry's lips as he pulled Hermione into a hug. "You've done the best you could do, given all of your other time commitments."

"Still..."

"We can't do everything, and even if we could it's starting to look like they wouldn't want us to."

It was Hermione's turn to sigh.

"You're starting to use that tone of voice again."

"What?"

"That disdainful 'they'...it's the same way you talk about the Ministry of Magic."

"Well if the shoe fits on the Home Secretary's foot..."

"Harry, I'm on the COBRA team as well...have I become part of the problem?"

Shaking his head, the Queen's Wizard replied. "Of course not...it's just that...well, they took you for a ride as well last night."

"Yes, they did," Hermione replied. "But from their perspective, I can understand why...doesn't mean that I have to like it."

"Or stand for it, either."

"Now, Harry," Hermione replied. "Look...we've got another insanely busy day today. You've got the Garden Party to protect, and I've got the Emperor's Wizard and friends showing up in London this morning..."

"So when do we take a good hard look at whether the Muggle government is using us?" asked Harry sharply. "Before or after we help them take back control of wizarding Britain?"

"Harry...you need to calm down," Hermione replied. "That's one of the reasons why I'm so happy that ICW is paying us a visit today...the King's Wizard has had his job for sixty years. That's got to give him some perspective on how to balance between the worlds, right?"

Harry snorted. "Yeah, alright...you will have time this afternoon to join me, right?"

Hermione smiled. "If the alternative is leaving you free to roam about the garden with your harem..."

"Hey," Harry chided. "Just because Susan and Hannah decided to prank you doesn't mean that I'm interested in either one of them."

"Or both," Hermione added.

"Yes, or both," Harry said with a sigh. "As much as I look forward to my birthday this year, all of those contracts to deal with..."

"You could always tell Mr. Patil and all the other patriarchs that you've got a Consort," Hermione said with a grin.

"I'd be better off simply saying that I was already engaged," Harry muttered, as he pulled her close to him from behind.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, turned her head, and kissed Harry's cheek

"Yes, I think that you would too," she replied. "But only if it were true."

Harry raised an eyebrow, but saved the witty response for fear of being accused of some more passive-aggressive behavior.

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7:50am, Ministry of Magic, London

Susan Bones stepped out of the floo connection and into the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, trying to mask her nervousness as she began her day as a pure-blooded intern within the Ministry's Department of Transportation. She joined the flow of other interns and employees making their way from the inbound floos towards the Security Gate. Neville Longbottom was waiting for her on the other side.

"How are you, Nev?" she asked, as if she hadn't just seen him fifteen minutes ago at a meeting with Harry and Hermione up in Edinburgh.

"I should be asking you that, Sue," he replied with a smirk, as they began walking towards the bank of lifts. More quietly, he added, "After all, you were the one that called in sick yesterday, right?"

Susan snorted. "Sounds like I might need to suffer a relapse, depending on how things turn out."

Neville nodded seriously, then tried to lighten the mood. "So is it safe to kiss you or not?"

The Queen's witch-in-waiting waggled her eyebrows as she pulled him into a crowded lift and pressed her ample chest tight against his side.

"Guess you'll just have to risk it to find out, Buzz," she replied coyly, almost purring as she voiced his TPOMS nickname.

Neville's embarrassment and the throat clearing of some of the older ministry workers within the lift car kept the banter from going any further. The car made the short trip up to Level Seven, where Neville "worked" within the offices of the Official Gobstones Club. Just before he stepped off, Neville turned towards the Hufflepuff and hugged her close.

"Take care, okay?"

Susan nodded. "Thanks, Neville," she said, as she gave his hand a squeeze. "See you at lunch either way."

The lift continued its upward path, stopping at the Fifth Level for Special Assistant to the Minister Percy Weasley. He quickly glanced around to see if there was anyone on board that he should either suck-up to or talk down to. Susan Bones fit into the latter category.

"Feeling well enough to work today, Miss Bones?" he asked, as the doors closed and the car began to move.

Susan bit her lip in an effort to remain civil. "Yes sir, Director Weasley...thank you for asking."

"Not a problem, Miss Bones," he replied haughtily. "I make it a point to take interest in everyone that works for me."

"Yes, Director."

Percy's eyes narrowed. "You are aware, I'm sure, of the requirement to document all illnesses resulting in lost time at work?"

"Erm...yes, Sir," Susan replied, pulling out a piece of parchment from her pocket.

The Special Assistant snatched the parchment from Susan's fingers, looking for potential irregularities. The note stated that she was ill the day previous and treated by her family healer for "feminine issues." This caused Percy's face to flush with embarrassment. He returned the note too quickly to realize that Susan's note was signed by "H. Abbot".

"Yes, well, erm...everything appears to be in order," he stammered. "Take care that you give that note to your supervisor."

"Yes, Director," Susan said with a sly grin.

Susan and Percy were the only two within the lift traveling up to Level One, as long as you didn't count the airborne memos hovering overhead. When the doors opened Percy followed the flock as it darted towards the Offices of the Minister of Magic, while Susan headed off to the much smaller area that was home to the rarely used International Portkey Terminal.

Back in the days of relative peace and tranquility, between the fall of Grindelwald and the first rise of Voldemort, the Ministry of Magic's gateway terminal was, if not flourishing, at least used on a fairly regular basis. But after Voldemort's two reigns of terror, and the Ministry's belligerent attitude towards foreigners, the terminal was now about as busy as the Centaur Liaison Office. The size of the facility matched the infrequency of its use... while it once occupied the entire first level of the Ministry, it now had a footprint only slightly larger than the average-sized Hogwarts broom closet (with Cornelius Fudge having commandeered the balance of the space to accommodate expansive chief executive offices whose square footage more closely matched the size of his ego).

At present, Susan's official workplace consisted of a ten-foot diameter target platform and two wooden desks. She shared the immigration control desk with a sixth-year Ravenclaw (who typically worked second shift). The other was used by Susan's supervisor...an elderly wizard who doubled as the overnight watch. It was his shift that was coming to an end with the Hufflepuff's arrival.

"Good Morning, Mr. Jarvis," Susan said as she approached the first desk.

"Morning, Miss Susan," her supervisor replied, as he placed a slip of parchment into the Muggle novel that he was reading. "Good to see you today."

"Thanks, and sorry for needing to call in like I did yesterday."

"No matter," the wizard replied, as he pointed towards a short stack of paperbacks on the opposite desk. "Gave me the chance to finish off that 'Gunslinger' series."

Susan smiled. Her supervisor loved to read serialized Muggle novels about the American Wild West, but could only do so at work, as his snooty witch of a wife forbade him to keep the "filthy" books at their house.

"Oh, that reminds me," she said, as she pulled a slightly dog-eared paperback out of her bag and slipped her excuse in between the pages. "Here's my medical excuse."

The supervisor's eyes lit up at the sight of the Zane Gray novel. "Susan, you know me too well," he said, as he took the book in hand. "Just to be sure...this isn't an attempt to curry favor with your boss, right?"

"Absolutely not," Susan replied with a straight face. "Just think of it as a very thick envelope for my parchment."

The wizard smiled at the unspoken quid pro quo. That smile turned into a frown when a bell clanged, indicating that his shift had officially ended. He looked at the wall clock, then down at the book, and finally back up to Susan.

"Are you sure that you're feeling well enough to work today?" he asked. "I really wouldn't mind covering for you, if you needed to rest...."

The young witch quickly replied, "I'm feeling fine right now Sir, but I won't hesitate to call you back if I suffer some sort of relapse."

"I'll hold you to that, Miss Bones," the wizard said, as he reluctantly slipped the new book into his desk drawer and collected his cloak.

As her boss left the room, Susan sat down at the desk with her own bit of private (and anticipatory) Muggle reading laid out on the desk...the August issue of "Modern Bride." She flipped through pages with one hand, while her wand was clasped firmly with the other...just as one eye was trained on the clock while the other scanned the pages.

Susan had just started in on "100 Romantic Honeymoon Hideaways" when a cascade of bright lights signaled multiple portkey arrivals.

The sight of the five persons appearing suddenly on the platform startled Susan...not having attended the Quidditch World Cup, she had never been exposed to the faces and clothing styles of the wizards and witches now standing before her.

A short bald man dressed in a forest green kimono stepped forward and ran head-first into an invisible barrier before Susan could warn him about the magical restraining field. Three of the other four immediately raised their wands towards Susan, while the other raised his right hand in an open-fingered claw, as if he was about to deliver a slashing strike.

"We are here on official ICW business," the kimono-wearing wizard said loudly as he held out an embossed scroll. "You are obligated to release us immediately."

Susan gave the group a furtive nod, then held her opened hand out in a "wait" signal and looked nervously over her shoulder. When there was no immediate response to the alarm, she turned back and asked, "So why were the salmon running?"

The group relaxed visibly as the Emperor's wizard raised an eyebrow.

"To avoid the water hazard on the fourth hole."

Having received the correct answer to Hermione's unique challenge question, Susan nodded. "Give me a few seconds." She then made her way over to her supervisor's desk, where a set of magically-charged crystals were glowing. She wasn't supposed to know the authorization sequence, but her boss had been just a little too trusting of his favorite supplier of illicit Muggle fiction.

The correct pattern of wand tip touches caused the barrier to come down. The five new arrivals immediately stepped off of the platform. A tall blonde witch and white-haired wizard spread out into a defensive position that covered both Susan and the doorway that led out into the Ministry. A slight South Asian wizard, and the large heavily tattooed Maori sorcerer who had held a claw fist stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the bald Asian wizard.

"I'm Susan Bones, one of the Queen's Wizard's crew, and I just broke enough rules to land me in Azkaban for a few years," the witch said nervously. "They'll be Aurors here soon responding to a silent alarm, so welcome to Britain, and I'm out of here."

The Emperor's Wizard bowed. "I understand. Thank you for your assistance, Miss Bones."

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Special Ambassador, Part 2 (part 2)

Susan ran over to her desk, where she shouldered her bag and ripped the last page out of her magazine. Wand in hand, she activated this hidden portkey just as Percy Weasley and a group of Aurors rushed into the room.

"What is the meaning of this?" Percy bellowed. "You are supposed to be on the other side of the barrier! What have you done with Susan Bones!"

"Is that how the Ministry of Magic treats every official delegation from the ICW?" asked the Emperor's Wizard. He stepped forward and held the Supreme Mugwump's writ in front of a suddenly paled-face wizard.

"I am Matsuhisa Yukihiro, charged by the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards to investigate an alleged serious breach in secrecy," the wizard stated. "Where can we find the official named Percy Weasley?"

The red-headed wizard was too shocked to stammer out a response, leaving it to the Aurors to give Percy up with pointed fingers.

"Not yet...not supposed to..." he stammered. But then the bureaucratic git within him took hold and demanded that the Special Assistant grow a pair. Percy stiffened both his back and his resolve, and declared, "According to ICW protocols, the Ministry has 48 hours at the start of any inquiry period to review the warrant and assemble relevant documentation."

The Emperor's Wizard turned to his South Asian colleague. "Jay?"

The tan-skinned wizard nodded. "What he says is true, but only so long as the Ministry officially accepts notice of the inquiry."

The Japanese wizard turned back to Percy. "You don't look like someone important enough to have that kind of authority...fetch us someone who does."

The Special Assistant to the Minister frowned at the insult. "I'll have you know that I am a member of the Minister's Cabinet, and most certainly do have that level of authority."

"Prove it," snarled the Swedish witch from across the room.

Percy scowled at the King's Witch as he indignantly held his wand tip to the writ.

"I, Percy Weasley, Special Assistant to the Minister of Magic, do hereby accept possession of this writ of inquiry."

The parchment glowed in response.

Sanjay "Jay" Tiwari smiled. "The waiting period has now begun," he intoned. "You must, of course, inform your staff of the magical penalties that will automatically fall upon any Ministry employee that knowingly destroys, hides, or alters any evidence associated with the inquiry?"

Percy took in a deep breath, and let a silent string of curse words worthy of his mum's soap spells play out inside his head.

"Of course," he replied. He looked up at the wall clock and said, "You will be welcomed back to the Ministry on Friday, at precisely 8:26am." Percy then gestured towards the platform. "Until that time, then?"

The Emperor's Wizard shrugged off the attempt to get rid of them. "We will, of course, stay within the country during the waiting period," he declared.

Percy gave a curt nod in reply, knowing full well that he couldn't legally force the delegation to leave.

"Would you like the Ministry to make arrangements for your stay?"

The heavily tattooed Maori sorcerer snorted once more, causing Percy to jump.

"Thank you, Special Assistant to the Minister," Matsuhisa said with a shallow bow. "We will arrange our own accommodations."

The red-headed wizard nodded. "Aurors," he said loudly, "take these people directly to the outbound Floos. Make sure that they each throw enough powder into the fire."

"Yes, Sir," said one of the Aurors. The group formed ranks around the foreign witch and wizards and led them out of the Terminal.

Percy followed close behind, veering off towards the Minister of Magic's office when the party reached the lifts. He then barged brazenly into his boss's office, ignoring the complaints of Scrimgeour's administrative assistant that her boss was in the middle of a floo call.

The former Auror was rather angry when he pulled his head out of the fireplace.

"This had better be important, Wetherbee."

"I'm afraid that it is, Minister," Percy said with resignation.

Taking the writ that Percy held out, the Minister of Magic quickly scanned its contents.

"How were they able to serve you these papers?" Rufus asked pointedly.

"I don't know, Sir," Percy replied. "The barrier was down when we arrived, and none of our people were in the room."

"Who was on duty there?"

"Susan Bones."

"Damn...one of Potter's spies, no doubt," Scrimgeour swore. "And you actually accepted it?"

"Didn't see that I had a choice," Weasley replied defensively. "It was the only way to buy us some time."

Rufus growled, but reluctantly agreed with the assessment.

"Forty-eight hours, right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And there's nasty magic ahead if we try to bury the evidence against us?"

Percy nodded. "What are we going to do, Sir?"

Scrimgeour scowled. "Gather the evidence, for now...meanwhile, Project Arcanum's implementation date just got pushed forward."

"But Sir...we've been having problems finding a vetted wizard that's both powerful enough and willing to do the charm."

Rufus snorted. "Then look harder, and sod the vetting."

Percy nodded nervously. "Knockturn Alley, then?"

Scrimgeour rolled his eyes. "No, you fool...do you actually think you'd be able to find a powerful enough witch or wizard there that wasn't already a Death Eater?"

"Erm...."

"Overseas, Percy...overseas."

"Yes, sir," the Special Assistant replied. Taking the lack of any follow-up statements as a dismissal, Percy left the Minister's office with a worried expression on his face.

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8:50am, Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, 10 Downing Street, London

Senior Advisor/Special Ambassador/Secret Agent/Order of Arthur Member Hermione Granger struggled to stay awake as the Muggle Defense Minister finished his presentation on the previous night's SAS missions. She found the most effective stimulant to be her reconsideration on whether the defense of her colleague's competencies had been premature.

The meeting had started with her report on her trip to Japan, the meeting with the Supreme Mugwump, and the inquiry that was to take place when the Emperor's Wizard and his colleagues portkeyed from Oslo to London. Then, she commented on the MI-5 forensic review of the four Death Eaters who had been killed in the SAS attacks on the two safe-houses, and was asked to explain why portkey destinations couldn't be unraveled without actually using them, and why using a dead Death Eater's escape portkey wasn't a very smart idea. And that discussion led into the Defense Minister's droning, half-hour long recap on the SAS's Counter Revolutionary Warfare mission itself.

"To sum up," the Defense Minister stated, "The CRW teams successfully engaged the enemy, killing four of the terrorists without taking any casualties on our side. That more of the terrorists weren't apprehended is regrettable, but no fault of the troops who acted on inadequate intelligence."

Hermione's ears perked up at the accusation. "Excuse me, Minister," she stated, "but are you suggesting that Agent Potter gave you bad intel?"

"Not as such," the politician replied. "It wasn't that he provided bad information so much as he failed to provide enough good information."

"How so?" asked the MI-5 Director.

"Agent Potter stressed the need to incapacitate the targets before they could magically escape," the Minister replied. "But he failed to inform us that the incapacitating agents used during covert entries would be ineffective against magical people."

Hermione sighed. "And why was he expected to anticipate you needing to know that fact? You never told him that you were going to try and anesthetize the targets...I mean, it's not like he's a mind reader."

"Really?" asked the Home Secretary.

"Okay," Hermione admitted, "maybe he is, but he didn't."

"The SAS doesn't care to share its tactics with just anyone, Miss Granger, and we had no reason to expect that the physiology of magical humans was any different than ours."

"Doesn't seem possible that it would be," muttered the Home Secretary.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione reached into a pocket, retrieved a stoppered vial of pepper-up potion, and swallowed its contents. The standard side-effects took hold after a few seconds, sending long plumes of hot steam out of her ears.

"Don't try that at home," the young witch said dryly.

"We could have used that information in advance," the Defense Minister stated.

"And you would have had it, had you enough sense to trust us," Hermione retorted sharply.

"When have we not asked for your views or not trusted your advice?" asked the Foreign Secretary.

"When you played Harry and myself last night," Hermione replied. "When Harry was told that 'yours is not to wonder why'."

"But that was the military mission...you had no part of that..." objected the Defense Minister.

"But Harry did," Hermione replied. "And if you didn't already realize it, we came into governmental service packaged together."

"And you don't see any need for maintaining an effective chain of command, Dame Hermione?" asked the MI-6 Chief.

"Oh I do see such a need," the young witch replied. "But only when those making 'need to know' decisions are in the know in the first place. And only when you trust us just as much as we're expected to trust you!"

"Now there's some cheek," the Home Secretary whined.

"Would you please explain that statement, Agent Granger?" the Met Commissioner asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry...perhaps I should just leave and try to get back some of the sleep I lost last night."

"No, please, Hermione," the Prime Minister asked. "Have we...have I done something to cause you to lose some trust in us?"

Biting her lip, Hermione thought about her response. She really didn't want to cause more of a scene that she had already, but then again, she was a Gryff for a reason.

"Excluding our magical forces from the planning and execution of last night's attack, Sir," she finally replied. She raised her hands, anticipating the justifications from those that had made that decision, and added, "I appreciate the reasons behind the decision, but springing the news on Harry at the last minute, then expecting him to blindly obey orders...well, that's a problem."

"How so?"

"Harry's got some bad history with boneheaded politicians and authority figures who thought nothing of using him like a pawn on a chessboard in the name of the greater good," Hermione explained. "He's been treated like a child, and told what to do and when to do it by his so-called 'betters,' even as these betters place the burden of saving the world on his shoulders....what happened last night...it just played into the same kind of manipulative control that he's faced for years."

"And that's affected your ability to trust as well, Agent Granger?"

"Yes, Sir," Hermione replied. "It was the first time...up to now, we've had nothing but unwavering support from the Queen and her government...we've been treated like the responsible adults that this war has forced us to become...and it's been brilliant."

"So if you don't get to always play the game by your rules, you complain and want to take your ball home with you?" quipped the Home Secretary.

"Oh, pipe down, Chisholm," said the Prime Minister. "The fact is...Sir Harry, Dame Hermione and all of the other magicals on our side do have their own set of rules that they have to mind...isn't that right, Hermione?"

"You mean the magical secrecy laws, sir?"

"Exactly," the Prime Minister replied. "Chisholm, you might not appreciate the balancing act that we've forced Agents Granger and Potter to make, but it's there nonetheless. What I'm interested in is ways to raise the level of familiarity and trust all around."

"You know," the Defense Minister said, "it would have helped if our CRW lads had been able to see more of what they were up against, rather than just be told."

"But the magical detection and surveillance issues would be a problem, wouldn't they?" asked the MI-5 chief.

Hermione nodded in agreement. "We could set up some demonstrations at Windsor, where the shields are in play, but that's a rather high profile area..."

"What about Camp One?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Sir?"

"The SAS's main training base," the Prime Minister explained. "If you were to erect your shields over a remote training area, the troops could experience coming under spell fire without 'mom' finding out."

"That sounds like a great idea, Sir," Hermione replied, smiling at the feminization of the Ministry of Magic's acronym. "I'm sure that TPOMS would benefit from that kind of facility as well."

A vibrating Art Club badge inside Hermione's jacket pocket caught her attention.

"Excuse me, Sir, but this might be the call we've been expecting..."

When the Prime Minister nodded, she opened her jacket and activated her badge.

"Go ahead Dad, erm...I mean Agent Granger."

"Your guests have arrived at the Leaky Cauldron checkpoint, Hermione."

"Thanks, I'll be there as soon as I can."

The Special Ambassador looked to her boss as she deactivated the badge.

The Prime Minister nodded. "I think that we're done here," he declared. "We'll pick up the issue of Camp One this afternoon. Until then, ladies and gentlemen..."

The meeting thus adjourned, Hermione walked up to ground level, and out onto the street. Two Land Rovers were waiting there, ready to make the short trip down Charing Cross Road.

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The MI-5 ¾ agents stationed outside of the Muggle entrance to the Leaky Cauldron informed Hermione that her father had secured a private room for her guests. She walked inside, and (not finding anyone in the bar) called the publican's name. The bald-headed owner answered back, and came out from the kitchen wiping his hands on his apron.

"How are you today, Tom?" she asked.

"Busy, thank Merlin and thanks to you and your Mr. Potter," he replied. "Don't know how I'd been able to stay open were it not for the take away business that your people have been providing ...can I get you some breakfast? Tea?"

"No thanks, Tom," Hermione. "I was looking for my dad, actually."

"Room One, right around back," the publican replied.

Hermione thanked the bar man and made her way back to the largest of Tom's private rooms, where the five foreign magicals were extolling the quality of English tea as readily as they were dissing the quality of English cuisine.

The King's Wizard rose from the table when he spotted Hermione and moved to shake her hand.

"Well, you're looking far more chipper than I feel, Ambassador...sure you and I were on the same trip?"

Hermione nodded. "The power of pepper-up, I'm afraid...I'll be paying for it later tonight."

The elderly wizard smiled. "Wish these old bones could handle that kind of jolt to the system."

"So how was the trip?" she asked.

"Uneventful," Thorson replied. "Matsuhisa-san and I got a few hours sleep at Dyrheim while we waited for our companions...which I should introduce you to."

The King's Wizard introduced Hermione to Anna Glantz, who was the King's Witch from Sweden, Sanjay Tiwari, a senior bureaucrat from the Indian Ministry of Magic, and Rongo, a Maori Sorcerer.

Hermione's attention (like her father's) was inexorably drawn to the quiet New Zealander, who at 6 foot 4 inches height and nineteen stone would have been an imposing presence even without the geometric tattoos that covered his face like a mask. And then there was his attire...an All Blacks rugby jersey over a beaded flax skirt (called a piupiu) and plastic flip-flops.

"Welcome to Britain," she said, "and thank you for coming to our assistance on such short notice."

"It is we that should thank you, Ambassador Granger," replied the Indian wizard. "There are many who have worried for years about the situation in Britain, but always without the means to do anything about it. You may have provided just such an opportunity."

Hermione blushed a bit. "Well, I was really just the messenger."

"But a messenger that knew, or knew where to find out about ICW regulations, yes?" asked the Swede. "And the courage to seek out an inquiry despite the risk that some of her own actions may be at odds with certain secrecy statutes?"

"Now, we've been very careful about maintaining secrecy," Hermione replied defensively. "It's been a rather tall order to keep a lid on things, given how the Death Eaters have attacked the Muggle world."

"Relax, child," the witch replied. "We are well aware of just how narrowly we dodged an Unforgivable this past week with those multiple attacks... and we certainly don't think that it was your Ministry of Magic that had the level-headedness and creativity needed to come up with the idea of nerve gas as a cover story."

Hermione didn't much care for the idea of being called a child, but not enough to risk offending her guests. The King's Wizard helped by stepping into the conversation.

"Well, we ought to have enough time over the next two days to explore that...no need to get into the specifics right now."

"Two days?" asked Hermione.

"Your Ministry has invoked the right to collect inquiry-related documents over a two day period," Tiwari stated. "We can not start an investigation into the specific charges until this time period has ended."

Hermione looked to Thorson and Matsuhisa for confirmation.

"Sorry, Ambassador, but I'm afraid that he's right," said the Emperor's Wizard. "I forgot about that aspect of the writ when I explained the process earlier this morning...or last night, depending on your time zone."

"Oh, that's alright," Hermione replied. "I know that things have to work at their own pace." She paused, and then asked, "Have you made any specific plans for the next 48 hours?"

"Not really," the Japanese wizard admitted. "We might use the time to gather general observations about conditions within the British wizarding world."

"Perhaps you have suggestions on constructive uses of our time?" the King's Wizard asked.

"Well..." Hermione replied, "this might be foolish on my part, but we've started a kind of summer school for Hogwarts students that were excluded from the Ministry's internship program because of blood status."

"Your Summer Institute, yes?" asked the Emperor's Wizard.

Hermione nodded. "I'll admit up front that it doesn't have official Ministry authorization, but all of our instructors are current or former Hogwarts staff...and given the possibilities that Hogwarts might not open in the fall, it would be the only way these students would get to practice defensive spells, because we know that the Death Eaters are going after them and their families..."

"Excuse me, Ambassador," the Indian wizard said. "You are concerned with possible violations of law regarding underage magic use?"

Hermione reluctantly nodded.

"Then your concerns may be unwarranted," the wizard opined.

"But," noted Hermione, "the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery..."

"Is a bylaw of the British Ministry, not the ICW," Tiwari noted. "It is how your Ministry has decided to enforce the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, which is an ICW law."

"Each magical government is allowed to set its own path to keeping our secrets," Matsuhisa added. "We are not here to enforce Ministry laws...in fact, the ICW can only intervene if the Ministry's bylaws and decrees fail to hide our presence from the world at large."

"So tell me, Ambassador," said Thorson. "Is the use of magic at your Summer Institute making the existence of magic known to the Muggle world?"

"No," Hermione said, relieved that the discussion was going in a safe direction. "The Summer Institute is hidden so well that even the Ministry doesn't know about it."

"There you go," the King's Wizard concluded with a warm smile. "No harm, no foul."

"Is there a reason why you raised the issue, Miss Granger?" asked the Swedish witch.

Hermione nodded.

"We learn so little about the outside wizarding world at Hogwarts...Professor Thorson has written a book on the history of magic, and one of the DADA instructors we had lined up is still hurt and in St. Mungo's..."

"I think that my daughter is wondering if any of you would be willing to give a guest lecture or two," interrupted Roger Granger.

Hermione bit her lip as she nodded. "We would be happy to offer honorariums, and could offer you room and board there...I'm sure that our students and staff would be more than willing to talk about their experiences if you wanted to learn more about conditions here in Britain..."

"That sounds like a marvelous opportunity all around," suggested the Indian wizard.

The Emperor's Wizard looked around the table, and after getting affirmative responses (three head nods and a grunt from the Maori who still hadn't spoke a word since his arrival), accepted Hermione's proposal.

"Is there a way to reach this Summer Institute without magical travel?" asked the King's witch. "I'm certain that our magical signatures were scanned when we floo'ed out of the Ministry this morning, and I'd like to be able to travel without being tracked."

"I've got Muggle vehicles waiting outside," Hermione replied. "Going against the rush, we'd be at Cumberland Lodge inside of forty minutes."

"We?" asked the King's Wizard. "I thought that you had plans to be in Scotland with the Queen this afternoon?"

"I do," Hermione admitted, "but I can get up there quick enough on my own."

The Japanese Wizard then said, "The Emperor asked that I convey his regards to Her Majesty the Queen, and I would enjoy the opportunity to meet the newest royal wizard."

The Norwegian King's Wizard grinned. "Same here, and I'd love to take a look at the rune sets that you're using on those attenuated wards."

"I bet you would," Hermione said with a smile. She looked down at her watch. "What do you think, Dad?" she asked. "Flight times to Edinburgh?"

"Hour and fifteen...hour and a half," Roger replied. "RAF Northrup is not that far from Windsor...we could see if air transport could be arranged during the ride out."

"Excellent," replied the Japanese wizard. He stood back from the table and added, "Are we done here?"

Mr. Granger looked at the half-eaten plates of food and asked, "We could box up your breakfast, if you wanted."

The Emperor's Wizard looked down at the table, then at the others, and shook his head.

"This food is certainly filling, but..."

"But he wishes we that the three of us did some more fishing on the return trip," the Norwegian said with a smile.

Hermione snorted. "We do have fresh fish here too, you know."

The Emperor's Wizard smiled and bowed towards Hermione. "I would be grateful to experience that fact, Ambassador."

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9:20am, Haven's Head, Milford Haven, Wales

The portkey magically attached to the three of clubs deposited Voldemort into a rusted-out shipping container perched on top of a pile of construction debris. He squatted down, with wand outstretched, listening for any sounds of activity outside of the steel box. Hearing none, he carefully pushed the container door open and stepped out into the sunshine of a fine summer's morning.

Fine, that is, unless you were a Dark Lord on the lamb.

This was the second time that morning he had tried to go to ground. His first choice had been a remote cave on the northern coast of Scotland... which would have been a fine place to hide, had it not been for the presence of a squatter who apparently hadn't gotten the memo that said that man-eating quintapeds only lived on the unplotable Isle of Drear. It was the thought of a much more mugglish, more hospitable hideaway that caused the Dark Lord to hastily retreat to his present locale...a rogue waste dump located on a bluff known as "Haven's Head," above the Welsh coastal town of Milford Haven.

From his vantage point, Voldemort could look down onto the coastal community known as the best deepwater port in Britain. But the Dark Lord wasn't there for the views of the docks...he had arrived to make use of a facility that had been created because of those docks.

In the 1930's, the Muggle military had exploited the port's ability to host large oil tankers and built a system of underground storage tanks within the bluffs that overlooked the bay. The tankers could off-load refined heating oil and aviation fuel directly into these tanks through pipelines that connected bluff to bay. While the advantages of underground fuel storage were obvious during German bombing raids during the Second World War, the RAF continued to use these tanks after the war ended to fuel a Cold War-era bomber base. But when this base closed down in the 1970's the tank farm and pipeline were abandoned, and became one of the more larger examples of the coastal structures built to defend Fortress Britain.

It was a ten-yard walk from the container to a concrete blockhouse, and a tunnel that hosted four 12 inch diameter pipelines. The locked steel gate that protected this tunnel entrance had been replaced with repelling and tripwire wards keyed to anyone who wasn't a Death Eater. Beyond this opening, a rectangular, concrete-walled tunnel sloped steeply upwards for fifty yards before leveling off...while stairs had been cut into the floor, a magic carpet (stolen from a Light family manor) provided alternative transport for those who knew how to use it.

A wand touch to a particular rock wall activated a set of charmed, flame-free lights (the first Death Eaters to have explored this tunnel had learned the hard way that blue bell flames weren't good ideas when there was a smell of aviation fuel in the air). Voldemort climbed aboard the carpet (stashed behind a low cinder block wall) and compelled the carpet to climb up the tunnel.

The smell of petroleum grew stronger as the tunnel leveled off to a horizontal drift some hundred yards long. Five different alcoves led to individual storage tanks. The Dark Lord turned off at the second alcove and leaned down close to the carpet so that he could pass through the opened inspection hatch and into the tank proper.

The air began to freshen within the 100-foot diameter, 27-foot high tank just as soon as Voldemort closed the hatch behind him...when the site had been converted for Death Eater use ventilation holes had been blasted into the tank roof. These holes also let in rain and groundwater, and caused the tank to fill a foot deep with water. But the Death Eaters had anticipated this, and built an island of rock and debris in the center of the tank, creating a twenty-foot diameter patch of ground dry enough to pitch a tent.

Voldemort floated over to the island and stepped off the carpet. The magical tent that was strapped to his back pitched itself, once he set the corners down, and he walked inside, eager to wash off the filth and sweat he'd collected along the way. Once he emerged from the shower he toweled off, threw on a lightweight robe, and checked the kitchen pantry. Voldemort pulled out a meat pie, warmed it up on a charmed hot plate, and sat down to a late breakfast.

He figured that there was about three weeks worth of provisions stocked in the tent...five weeks, or so, if he rationed.

As the Dark Lord sat there, alone at the table eating his pie, he wondered if that would be enough time for him to figure out just what in Merlin's name the Muggles were capable of.

Chapter 38: Garden Party

Wednesday, July 11, 9:30am

Official Gobstones Club, Level Seven, Ministry of Magic

Neville Longbottom was "working" at his desk and worrying about his girlfriend when a certain blonde-haired mailroom clerk arrived to hand deliver an All-Ministry memo.

"Hey, Luna, what do you have there?" he asked.

"A memo announcing that an intern up on Level One is a wanted criminal," the witch replied. "Thought I better deliver your copy by hand."

"What? Why?"

Luna smiled serenely. "So you would stop worrying, of course. By the way, I just heard that your Crumple-Horned Hufflepuff was just spotted at Hogwarts."

"My Crumple-Horned Hufflepuff?" he asked. Neville's eyes went wide when he realized what Luna's coded message meant. "Oh...thank Merlin... and thanks for letting me know."

"No problem, Neville."

The Longbottom scion opened his desk drawer and retrieved a Skiving Snackbox. Upon opening the container he carefully selected an individual confection.

"Excuse me, Luna, but I have a sudden need to vomit on my boss's desk."

The Ravenclaw smiled and nodded her head. "Will I see anything colorful if I tag along?"

Neville frowned. "Not particularly...just some partially-digested porridge."

"Darn," Luna replied. "Oh well, say hi to your girlfriend for me then."

Neville smiled. "Aren't you skiving off as well?"

Luna shook her head as she absently-mindedly opened the Velcro'ed flap on the front of her robes and scratched her bared midriff. "The Art Club needs Ron as an anchor within the Ministry, and I need Ron as an ant inspector within my pants."

The young Gryffindor blushed, wondering just how well his candy's magically-induced nausea would work in conjunction with Luna-induced racy thoughts.

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Portkey Control Office, Department of Transportation, Ministry of Magic

Percy Weasley stepped off the lift with a scowl on his face. Lacking a worldwide directory of Charms Masters, he had needed to barter away a "favor to be named later" to a DoM researcher in exchange for the name of a Dutch mage with the skills necessary to implement Project Arcanum.

A magical door chime sounded as he entered the office and brushed by the receptionist.

"I need a portkey to Amsterdam, straight away," he called out to the first wizard he saw.

The older balding man squinted at Percy and sighed.

"You have the proper parchment forms completed, Director Weasley?"

"Of course I do," Percy huffed, as he threw a scroll onto the wizard's desk.

The portkey maker looked the authorization form over, noting that Percy had not only signed it, but gotten the Minister of Magic's countersignature as well.

"Amsterdam, you said?" he asked.

"Yes, yes...it's clearly laid out for you right there on the parchment."

The wizard snorted. "You do know that the Dutch have banned all direct in-bound portkeys originating from Britain, right?"

"No, when did they do that?"

"Two days after we banned in-bound portkeys from the Netherlands," snarked the wizard.

"So how am I supposed to get there?" asked Percy. "This is critical Ministry business!"

"I'm sure it is," replied the portkey maker dryly. "As I see it, you've got two options....use Muggle transportation, or make a connecting trip to one of the portkey terminals that still accept in-bound from Britain."

"Well, that's an easy choice...I'll just make the connecting portkey trip," replied Percy. "It would take forever to get to Holland by Muggle automobile."

The portkey maker was almost certain that Percy thought it impossible for cars to traverse the Channel without a ferry, but rather than give him grief over it, decided to cover his posterior.

"I wouldn't be too sure that Muggle methods would be slower," the wizard offered.

"How could they not be?" Percy demanded. "What are my terminal options?"

"Oslo or Albania."

"That's it?"

"No, but those are the only two places where it'd theoretically be possible to get same day connecting portkeys fashioned."

"Can't you just make me the two portkeys?"

"Of course I can't," the wizard replied with a huff. "We're only licensed to make international portkeys that originate within Britain."

"Fine," Percy replied. "Just give me a portkey to Dyrreheim Station, then."

"Are you certain, Assistant Director?"

"Yes, I don't have any more time to waste."

"As you wish, Sir," the wizard replied. "But I really think you should consider Muggle...."

"Can you make me a portkey to Oslo or not?"

"Harrumph!" the portkey crafter huffed indignantly. He reached into his desk drawer for a length of rope, concentrated for a few moments, then cast a spell that created a brief bluish glow around the object.

"Here you go," the smug wizard said as he handed Percy the portkey. "Have a nice trip."

The Director of Knowns snatched the bit of rope from the man's hand and turned on his heel, whining about how much time it had taken to get a simple portkey made.

"What a git," muttered the portkey maker to himself. "He deserves whatever awaits him in Oslo."

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Longbottom Manor, Oxfordshire

Neville's fingers were working his mobile's keypad just as soon as he tumbled out of the floo connection.

"Come on...come on, Susan...pick up..."

"Neville?"

"Susan? Thank goodness you're safe....you are safe, right?"

"I'm fine Nev...everything went more or less to plan."

"So where are you now?"

"McGonagall made me a portkey to Edinburgh," the witch-in-waiting replied. "Where are you?"

"Back home...just long enough to find a ride up there."

A different voice called out Neville's name. Having heard the chime that announced an authorized inbound floo arrival, his grandmother had joined him in the entryway.

"Neville?" she asked, "Why are you home?"

"Just a minute, Grandmum," he replied, placing the telephone against his ear. "Susan, I have to go...talk to you in a bit, okay?"

"Can't understand why a floo connection isn't good enough for your wooing efforts, young man," Augusta stated, adding, "So what are you doing here in the middle of the day?"

"Sorry, Grandmum, just one more call...promise," Neville replied, as he pressed a different speed dial number.

"Harry?...this is Neville."

"Hey, Neville, how are you doing?"

"Much better after talking with Susan."

"So you're out of the Ministry?"

"Yeah...just got to the Manor."

"What flavor this time?"

"Puking Pastille," Neville replied. "So, Harry, as long as I'm available..."

"There's a helicopter ready and waiting for you next door."

"Thanks, Harry," said Neville. "Be there as soon as I can."

"I'm sure you will," Harry said with a chuckle.

As he pocketed his mobile, Neville noticed that his grandmother wasn't very happy with what she had heard.

"What are you scheming, Neville?" she demanded.

"Can't tell you,...you know that, Grandmum," he replied. "Enough to say that Harry Potter needs my help."

Mrs. Longbottom shook her head and sighed. Having reached the age of majority there was little she could do to tie down her grandson, and she was not-so-secretly thrilled that he was following in his parent's footsteps as a fighter for the Light. But that didn't mean that she wasn't worried about losing him like she had her Frank.

"When do you think you'll be back?" she asked.

"Should be tonight," Neville replied. "I'll owl if it's any different."

"You take care of yourself," his grandmother replied, as she pulled him into a hug.

"I will," he replied. Having grown tall enough to look over his grandmother's shoulders when embracing her, he snuck a peek at his wristwatch while he hugged.

"I have to change," he said. "My ride is waiting for me."

"Flying aboard one of those Muggle contraptions again, I suppose?"

Neville smiled. "Wouldn't do to have my floo travel traced if I'm supposed to be home in bed, right?"

He ran upstairs to his bedroom, thankful that he was a wizard...without magic, there was no way he could have changed into his TPOMS fatigues

so quickly.

Dressed to kill, from his maroon beret down to his polished black leather boots, Neville grabbed his charm-protected never-full rucksack. After making certain that his unconventional (for a wizard) weaponry was all there, he pulled out a single-seated broomstick, closed the bag up, and raced downstairs and out the front door of the manor (making sure that he gave his grandmother a kiss on the way out.). Within seconds, Neville was racing west towards the manor's wards.

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That Longbottom Manor shared a property line with an Royal Air Force base was more than simple coincidence.

As the Royal Historian had explained to Harry and Hermione earlier that week, the Duchy of Cornwall was formed in the Fourteenth Century by separating out all of the English lands that were magical in nature. While the removal of these properties from Muggle eyes and tax rolls helped preserve the wizarding world's secrets, this royal protection came at a price. When a wizarding family accepted the Duchy's protection, they retained control over most of their property...but a negotiated portion of their lands were handed over in more than name only, for use as the Duke of Cornwall saw fit.

For centuries, the Duchy saw fit to work the lands ceded by the Longbottom family with agricultural leases to Muggle farmers. But when the Royal Air Force began to build airbases in the 1930's in advance of World War II, the Duchy donated land to the cause, and RAF Benson was constructed next door to Longbottom Manor.

This proximity was put to good use sixty years later when the Clan Air Force became more than a one-time gathering in the defense of Little Wizarding. Neville's estate gave the Phoenix Teams a place to train where flying broomstick formations wouldn't be noticed (by either Muggles or the MoM). RAF Benson, in turn, provided a home base for those Phoenix Team Muggles who weren't Art Clubbers. The short distance between the airfield's housing complex and the Manor was an easy commute for the Muggle commandos, who typically jogged from one place to the other wearing goggles that cancelled out the repelling wards.

Of course, the TPOMS squadron had faster ways to traverse that distance when necessary. It took Neville about a minute to weave through the trees that stood on the western part of the Manor and to reach the wardline. He pulled up at the end of the forested area, dismounted, and walked straight through the barbed-wire fence (or more precisely, through the illusion that had been set up similar to the barrier at King's Cross). Neville's Phoenix Team partner was waiting for him on the other side.

"Morning, Lieutenant," the Muggle said with a grin, as his partner climbed into the passenger seat of the jeep.

"Morning, Andy," Neville replied. "Surprised to see you ready to go so soon."

"It's the Major's doing," the Muggle replied, as he turned the vehicle around and sped back towards the tarmac. "Once your little witch turned up in Edinburgh, he reckoned that you'd be wanting to head that way soon enough, and passed word along."

"He knows me too well," said Neville.

"No, he just cares about his troops," Andy said, as he pulled up short of a helicopter that was fueled up and ready to go. "Wish there were more of his kind in the officer corps."

Neville nodded as he pulled his flight helmet out of his bag, opened the vehicle door, and followed his partner in a crouched dash against a rotor-generated wash of air.

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Dyrrheim Station, Oslo, Norway

Assistant Minister Weasley was rather excited about his trip to the Norseland, despite the hassles involved with getting the international portkey. He had visited Oslo once before, for an international conference on uniform cauldron thickness standards, but that was as Barty Crouch's assistant. This time he was traveling alone, as the Minister's personal representative, on a mission vital to the Ministry's very existence. That he had been given this responsibility became more of an honor each time that Percy thought about it.

Percy's pride and determination were immediately put to the test when he stepped out of the portkey's array of colors and onto solid ground. Rather than arrive at the main international portkey platform that Hermione had used the previous night, the former Head Boy was shunted to a secured area that looked more like a jail cell than an arrival area.

The frown on Percy's face had only halfway formed when a full-body bind froze it in place. Unable to voice his indignation with unmoving lips, it was only through his darkened eyes that his anger could be displayed as two huge hobgoblins walked through the shimmering wards that spanned across the cell entrance. Each held the sharp tips of their halberds underneath his chin. Following behind the hobgoblins was a stern looking heavy-set witch, dressed in the uniform robes of an immigration and control officer.

"Passport, please?" she asked using the Queen's English.

Percy, of course, was in no condition to satisfy the request.

The witch's eyes twinkled and her lips pursed into a tight-lipped grin.

"It seems like our visitor needs some assistance ...do find his travel papers for me, won't you, boys?"

The hobgoblins howled and nodded vigorously as they rough handled Percy and stripped him down to his tighty whities.

Percy's Ministry of Magic-issued diplomatic passport was discovered within the never-full money belt that he had been wearing underneath his robes, along with a little more than twenty thousand galleons of Ministry funds (to be used to secure the services of the targeted Dutch mage). The passport, money belt and Percy's wand were handed to the witch, who furrowed her eyebrows as she inspected the passport.

"I'll be back shortly," she said, more for the hobgoblin's benefit than Percy's.

Once the witch left the room Percy considered his limited options. Apparition was a wandless, silent spell that he could cast despite the full-body bind, and he was within range of the Scottish coastline. But he would lose not only his wand, but the twenty thousand galleons as well, and that wasn't a viable option (even if there weren't anti-apparition wards in place, which there were). So the Assistant Director decided it best to wait for this mess to be sorted out properly.

Ten minutes after she left the holding cell, the Norse official returned to the cell with her wand in one hand and a fist-sized rock in the other.

"I'm about to partially remove the full-body bind, so that you can answer a few questions," she said. Tossing the rock up in her hand, she added, "Choose your responses wisely, or I'll let the hobgoblins stuff this return-trip portkey into the body cavity of their choice."

Percy's eyes dilated at the thought, and tried (but failed) to nod in understanding, as the immigration official's spell only allowed his jaw, tongue and lips to move. The first words out of his lips, however, didn't help his situation much.

"I am Percy Weasley, a Senior Cabinet Member of the British Minister of Magic who is traveling under a diplomatic passport. Your treatment of me is abominable, completely unacceptable, and worthy of a strongest possible protest filed with the ICW."

The witch's eyes narrowed. "Your claim of identity will only bear out once there's time for any Polyjuice potion you may have taken to wear off. As for your reception... if you are, in fact, Percy Weasley, and currently in charge of the British Department of Transportation, you'll surely realize that it is no different than how all Norseland witches and wizards have been received into your country for the past two years."

"I assure you that I am Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley, and that we treat foreign diplomats far better than you are presently treating me."

The official snorted. "We've got pensieved memories that show otherwise, so by all means, file that protest with the Supreme Mugwump... I'll bet that the new one won't be nearly as sympathetic to your cause as the old one was."

Percy scowled, but knew that his situation was dire enough to justify an alternative approach.

"Madame, I am on a mission that is vital to Britain's ability to preserve the wizarding world's secrets. Surely you don't want to hinder my government's ability to comply with ICW statutes?"

"You're having problems keeping our world's secrets?" asked the witch. "Even more reason why your threats to protest to the ICW are toothless. What exactly is your mission?"

"I am not at liberty to say," Percy replied, looking nervously towards the hobgoblins.

The witch followed Percy's eyes and smiled.

"Boys, give us a few minutes, will you?"

The hobgoblins cackled as they nodded their heads vigorously.

Percy winced as the head shaking caused the halberds to jiggle just enough to draw blood underneath his chin.

Once the witch and Percy were alone in the cell, she asked, "What is your purpose to travel?"

"I just told you that I am not at liberty to say, nor am I obligated to do so."

The witch sighed. "What are your plans within the Norseland?"

"I plan on staying only long enough to secure an international portkey to Amsterdam."

"Why not travel direct?" the witch asked with a smirk.

"I'm sure you know why," Percy responded.

The immigration official gave Percy a calculating look.

"I have a strong sense that it will take a week or three for your application for an international portkey to be processed. During that time you'll remain here in this holding cell as a potential terrorist threat."

"A week or three?" Percy asked. "That's outrag.... I mean, I really don't have that much time."

"Yes, that's what you said."

Percy tried to slump his shoulders, and had to settle for a sigh. He knew what was going to be necessary.

Isn't there some way," he asked, "for the process to be...expedited?"

The witch smiled at Percy.

"I may be in a position to help you," she replied. "Of course, there would be certain fees charged to expedite your transit."

"What kind of fees?" Percy asked.

The witch smiled as she fingered Percy's money belt. "Nothing that you can't afford, given the undeclared funds that you tried to smuggle into our country."

"Undeclared?" asked Percy, "You didn't give me any opportunity to declare how much money I was bringing into the country."

"That's your story," the witch replied with a nod. "You would be within your rights to submit a complaint to my supervisor, and to get a hearing before our Wizengamot on the matter...their next scheduled meeting is in September."

Percy scowled, knowing that his negotiating position was weak.

"So...what will it take to get a portkey to Amsterdam today?"

"Hmmm....a ten-percent penalty on undeclared funds is about right."

"That's more than two thousand galleons?"

"Yes, I think that's correct," the witch replied with a grin. "Don't worry...with that charmed money belt you won't even feel the loss in weight."

"Fine," said Percy, seeing no choice but to give into the bribe.

"Excellent," the official said.

Percy almost cried as the witch cast a transfer spell that sent more than two thousand gold coins flying up out of his money belt and into a charmed never-full pocket on her robes. Once the arc of gold ended, the witch gave the wizard a smile as she buttoned the pocket shut and pointed her wand towards his briefs.

"*Portus*," she intoned, causing Percy's underwear to glow bright blue.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"Gave you what you wanted," the corrupt official replied. "Your shorts are now a time-activated one-way portkey to Amsterdam."

"My shorts?"

"Yes," said the witch, as she fully released the body-bind on Percy and tossed his passport, money belt and wand down towards his feet. "You've got five minutes to get to the International Portkey Departure Area, or else your undies will leave without you."

"Five minutes?" Percy cried out. "How long will it take to get there?"

The witch laughed as she took down the ward guarding the cell entrance. "A minute and a half if you run, but that's just to the immigration desk. Once there, you'll have to present your passport and portkey to the officials at the gate.."

"Present them my underwear?" cried Percy.

The witch nodded. "Hope for your sake that there isn't too much of a queue...and hope for their sake that your shorts are relatively clean."

Realizing that he'd already lost twenty seconds time and guessing that the witch was just evil enough to have done what she claimed, a nearly naked British Undersecretary quickly gathered his possessions into his arms and ran barefoot out of the cell and across the busy station.

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37 Royal Park Terrace, Edinburgh

A smartly-dressed thirty-something mother scolded her three young children to stop short of the street curb as an armored Land Rover passed by. The soldier riding shotgun in the front seat looked out his window at waved at the family.

"Let's all be friendly to the brave army man, children," the mother said quietly, as she smiled at the soldier.

The two boys and one girl nodded heads and returned the hand wave as the army jeep passed by.

"Now hold hands while we cross the street, children," the mother said.

"Yes, mum," the three replied in unison.

As they made their way across the crosswalk, one of the boys watched the Land Rover turn the corner and exclaimed, "Merlin, that was close!"

"Charles!" the mother hissed. "Muggles don't start sentences with the name Merlin! Now let's go...we've got but a few minutes remaining."

"Yes, mum," the boy replied.

The four covered the last two hundred meters of their walk as fast as the children's little legs could take them, and walked up the front steps of a lavish red-bricked row house that backed-up to Holyrood Park. The mother fished her housekeys out of her purse, opened the door, and urged the children to quickly enter the building.

After closing the door behind her, the young woman cuffed the ears of little Charles and hurled out a string of curse words that would have made a Royal Marine blush.

"Oh, lay off, you ugly cow!" the boy sneered.

"Idiots...the lot of them," the woman fumed, as the three made their way to the telly. She walked through the foyer to the kitchen area that sat at the back of the house. A man dressed in black robes was there, looking out a kitchen window with a pair of high-powered omnioculars.

"Have a nice walk, Dear?" he asked.

"No, Dear" replied the young mother, "those three almost got us...."

Rodolphus Lestrangle turned away from the window and watched as a reverse transformation kicked in and the Muggle woman morphed mid-sentence.

"You were saying, Rookwood?"

The former Unspeakable shuttered, glad to be back within a male body. "It went fine until your idiots almost got run over by an army vehicle."

"But you were nice enough to return them to me safe and sound, yes? I do hope it was worth using up the last of our polyjuice potion."

Rockwood nodded. "It was. The entire route was crawling with Muggle police and army."

"And did you show them where they need to apparate?"

"Yes, as well as the guard post they'll need to take out." Rookwood paused, then added, "Those three can apparate, right?"

Lestrangle snorted. "You let me be the one to worry about my men...your job is done here."

The former Unspeakable shook his head. "Not until you brief your group...who knows what kind of stupid questions they might ask about the Muggles?"

Bellatrix's husband scowled. He didn't like having Rookwood around messing with the operation that was on his head, and couldn't wait to get rid of him.

"Fine, then, let's get it over with," he said. He called out for everyone to gather in the sitting room. Lestrangle then opened the basement door and called down to the guard who was minding the shackled homeowner and the real mother and children that had just been doppelgangered.

"Wilson, get your arse up here," he called out. "You can play with that bint later."

The Death Eater guard reluctantly walked up the stairs and joined the seventeen other Death Eaters who had been cramped into this row house for the past day and a half.

"Right then," said Lestrangle, as he rolled out a parchment that contained a hand-drawn map. "Time to fill you in on our plans for the day."

"Our objective is quite simple...kill the Muggle queen and as many of her party guests as we can."

Rookwood thought that there should have been a surprised gasp from the audience at this announcement, then decided that the group was too ignorant as a whole to know that that meant.

Lestrangle held up the morning newspaper that had been delivered to their door and pointed to a front page picture of the taken during the Order of the Thistle ceremony.

"This is the Queen," he stated, pointing to her picture. "This afternoon, she's going to have a little party, and has invited thousands of Muggles to join her for tea and scones just down the street."

The Death Eater pointed towards the map and identified the Palace, its grounds, and the surrounding area.

"We'll be splitting into three groups, all dressed up like Ministry Aurors," he stated. "I'll take six of you and portkey straight into the tented area. We'll find the Queen, kill her, then start creating chaos...we'll get the Muggle crowd good and panicked, and they'll go screaming for the exits....and that's where the rest of you fit in."

Rodolphus turned towards Terrance Hicks, an up-and-coming Death Eater.

Hicks!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You'll be in charge of five others in the second group," he stated. Pointing towards the line of trees that bordered the eastern edge of the party area, he added, "You'll wait until I send up a stream of red sparks into the sky, then direct-line apparate to these trees and massacre the Muggles as they try to escape towards the open lawn."

"Where will we be to see your signal?"

"In the kitchen, fool," replied Lestrangle. "Why do you think I've been spending all of this time looking out the back window with my omnioculars? You can see the tree line from here."

"Right," Terrance replied. "So what if something happens and you don't give us the signal?"

Lestrangle paused, then said, "In that very unlikely event, wait five minutes, then apparate to the tree line and start hurling hexes...our Master wanted massive numbers of dead...one dead Queen is just the pudding."

"Hex until when?"

"Until there aren't any more Muggles to kill, idiot," Lestrangle replied. "That, or green sparks...that'll be the signal to use the portkeys that we handed out this morning. Oh, and you lot will be wearing our concealment cloaks...try not to soil the insides."

"No worries there, Sir," Hicks replied bravely.

"Right," Rodolphus replied skeptically. He then pointed to the main entrance to the Garden Party along the southern margin.

"The other escape route the Muggles will try to use is the front entrance to the grounds. The last three will ambush this area...they just came back from a little tour, and now know where they need to go and what they need to do...right?"

The three Death Eaters who had been forced to impersonate Muggle toddlers all nodded.

"So...any questions?"

"Yes...what about the Muggle guards and their weapons?"

Rodolphus scowled. "You afraid of a Muggle or something?"

"No, but..."

"Look, the Muggle guards will have their fire sticks, but they won't fire into a crowd of Muggles and they can't fire at something they can't see. Stay hidden and you'll be fine."

There were a few muttered comments, but until one of the wizards asked, "So why are we going to wear Auror robes instead of our normal get-up?"

Rodolphus stared at the questioner. "Because I say so isn't good enough for you?" He raised his wand and had a curse on his lips before remembering he needed to limit magic use before the attack.

"The purpose of wearing Auror Robes is to confuse the enemy."

"The Ministry Aurors will be there?"

"No, idiot, but the Potter boy probably will be there," Lestrangle replied. "He'll think twice before ordering the Muggle soldiers to mess with Aurors, and once we start killing them he'll think that it's the Ministry that is attacked, instead of us."

"But won't we cast the Dark Mark?"

"No, we won't cast the Dark Mark," Rodolphus mimicked with a sneer. "Any other stupid questions?"

When met with silence, Lestrangle nodded. "First wave will leave just as soon as we hear Big Ben chime two...and we won't be coming back here, so if you need to play with our Muggle hosts, do it now."

Rodolphus shook his head as a line quickly formed down the basement stairs. He had nothing against debauchery, and recognized it as a necessary component of his carrot-and-stick leadership style, but wished sometimes that his men would be more interested in evil activity performed on a grander scale. He looked up at Rookwood and asked, "Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

Rookwood shook his head dismissively. "Good luck, Lestrangle....I think that you'll need it."

The former Unspeakable then removed a portkey from his pocket and activated it.

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MLE Director's Office, Ministry of Magic

A little more than two hours after Susan Bones escaped from her Ministry internship, Head Auror Gawain Robards was called into his boss's office to provide an update on his investigation. The MLE Director chose not to offer Robards a seat during their meeting...after the painful negotiations conducted on behalf of his subordinate, Oswald wasn't very happy the Head Auror.

"Robards," he said, "I've just spent the past hour and a half trying to get you the Magical Surveillance Office records that you've requested."

"How did it go, Sir?"

"Better than I expected, actually," the Director replied. "It will be an independent review of spell use over the past few months."

"Independent of the Auror Department?"

Oswald nodded. "And that was only after I leaned on my nephew Rufus and offered a wizard's oath that none of my people would be provided direct access to the parchments."

"So when do we get the results?" Robards asked excitedly. "And what kind of results can we get?"

The Director rolled his eyes as he stood away from his desk.

"Follow me, young man," he said, leading the Head Auror out of the door.

Oswald walked down the length of cubicles to a hard-walled office that had stood empty since its last occupant had revealed himself as one of Voldemort's Ministry spies. Pulling out his wand, he touched its tip against the door handle. The restrictive wards recognized the authorized wand signature, and allowed the door to swing open.

"Don't lean into the doorway," the MLE Director warned. "That ward line will give a nasty shock to anyone not authorized entry."

The Head Auror nodded as he took note of both the magically expanded walls and the mountains of parchment scrolls piled high behind a row of small desks. Sitting behind these desks were a half-dozen Ministry house elves, each reviewing a scroll that provided the "what," "where," and "when" of every magical spell detected by the Ministry over the past two months.

"They dumped everything on us, didn't they...tried to bury us in data?" the Head Auror asked.

"It looks that way," Oswald replied. "And these six house elves are all I could get assigned to the task of finding portkey makers in amongst the food warming charms and hair grooming spells."

"Can we narrow the search down to certain weeks, or certain regions of the country?" asked the Head Auror.

Oswald shook his head. "I don't think so...the scrolls were dumped helter-skelter, and have been charmed to be spell resistant."

"So we can't use indexing and data gathering spells?"

Agreeing with a head nod, Oswald said, "A fine example of how to comply with Minister Scrimgeour's direct orders without making our task any easier."

Robards snorted. "So have the house elves found anything yet?"

The MLE Director looked expectantly at one of the house elves, who looked up and said, "No *Portus* spells yet, Mister Head Auror, Sir."

"How many scrolls have you reviewed so far?" Gawain asked.

"Twenty-nine, Sir."

"And do we know how many total scrolls there are?"

"Two hundred sixty-three thousand and forty six, Mister Head Auror, Sir."

Robards swore under his breath.

"You'll be getting interim reports on the research results," the MLE Director stated.

"Directly, or after they've been filtered through the Minister's office?"

"Does it matter if you still get the data you need to complete your investigation?" Oswald asked.

The Head Auror thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Not so long as I can get some assurances that none of the relevant data will be edited out for....political purposes."

The MLE Director nodded in understanding as he shut the. "I'll make sure that your concerns reach my nephew's ears, Mr. Robards...now, you do have other things to do while you wait for the results, yes?"

"Yes, Sir," the Head Auror replied. "Thank you for your help, Sir."

"You're welcome, young man," Oswald replied, pleased that he had once again been able to defuse a politically challenging situation.

The Head Auror considered his next steps as he watched the satisfied wizard walk back towards his office.

Once Oswald turned the corner and disappeared, Robards developed a sudden urge to get an update on the Dementors situation from that week's Acting Director of Magical Beasts and Beings.

And if, during the course of that conversation with Lisa Turpin, the Head Auror were to share a memory or two, and lament about being that close to full access to MSO archives, well...one was allowed to commiserate with colleagues, right?

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11:15am, Palace at Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh

As Neville's helicopter approached Holyrood he was provided an excellent overview of the defensive positions established in advance of the Garden Party. The party tents were pitched on the grounds immediately south of the Palace, with SO14 Royal Protection Group Units stationed at the main entrance (along side a British Army tank), the separate street entrance to the party, and up on the Palace rooftop. Regular army positions were established all along the perimeter of the Palace grounds, and were also dug into the high ground of Salisbury Craggs and Arthur's Seat to the South. The local constabulary formed the outermost defensive shell, and were deployed on checkpoints along the city streets that approached the Palace from the West. During the Party, these police would shut down all vehicular and pedestrian traffic within one-quarter mile of the event.

A temporary heliport had been established on the far end of the Parade Grounds (a wide expanse of lush green lawn behind the Palace), and it was here that Neville and his Muggle Phoenix Team partner were dropped off. The Gryffindor was pleased to discover that both Harry and Susan were waiting for their arrival with a Land Rover and driver. After a smart salute to Harry and a hug for Susan, Neville took aim at the bright red kilts that both his girlfriend and Harry were wearing.

"Should I be worrying over the fact that you two are color coordinated, Major?" he teased.

"I've got one with your name on it, if you want, Lieutenant," Harry replied with a smirk.

"Thanks but no thanks, Harry," said Neville, as they all piled into the vehicle. "So how did you manage to get away from the Palace...would have thought you'd be far too busy right now to take the time."

"Time to brief the troops," Harry replied. "This was on the way, and I figured you'd appreciate the company during a ride up to your posting."

Neville grinned as Susan squeezed his hand and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"We're already deployed, then?" asked Andy.

Harry nodded. "It'll take a few minutes to get there, given the terrain." He then turned towards his friends and added, "A few minutes, at least, for you two to catch up."

Neville took the hint, and spent the balance of the trip up Whinny Hill chatting with his girlfriend.

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When the jeep reached the top of the hill, Harry and Andy piled out, giving Neville and Susan enough privacy for a good-bye kiss before she made the return trip with the driver to the Palace. It took a few minutes to pick their way down the steep north-facing slope to where Lee Jordan's Muggle partner had set up a sentry.

"Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?" Stout Downey demanded.

Harry smiled and turned to Neville.

"You've got honors here, Lieutenant."

"Do I have to sing it?"

"You bet your arse you do!" replied Stout with a grin.

Nevil sighed, then sang out the correct answer in a childish falsetto.

"Sponge Bob, Squarepants!"

As the Muggle Phoenix Team member saluted and allowed them to pass Neville asked, "What happened to all of the Monty Python challenges? I liked those a lot better than these Yank Muggle cartoon references."

Harry laughed. "These are a lot safer, Nev....there's always the chance that a Death Eater would actually know the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow."

"I suppose," Neville groused, as they reached the rest of the squadron.

The magical paratroop squadron had deployed to Whinny Hill, which looked down upon St. Margaret's Loch and the Parade Grounds immediately behind the Palace. There were better views of the Garden Party tents, and shorter sniping distances from the Army's positions, but the TPOMS position provided cover for their brooms, and the best spot to deal with any magical party crashers that tried to drop in.

Neville and Andy's arrival made for five complete Phoenix Teams...an all-Gryffindor line-up of pilots that included Katie, Alicia, Lee Jordan and Seamus. Harry's arrival gave Fred Weasley an anchor point, and he badge-jumped to the TPOMS position from Diagon Alley so that there'd be at least one Art Club badge on the hill. Fred left his brother behind as an anchor point for Diagon in case of an attack there. As for the others...Ron was at the Ministry, Dean Thomas was at Windsor (as an enrolled Summer Institute student who was also helping his Phoenix Team partner Emily Granger with security), and Roger Granger was on guard duty at Charing Cross. In a pinch, though, all but Dean could be summoned in a near-instant through their badges.

"Right," said Harry, once they arrived. "So, the new arrivals should talk with the others after the briefing...they can fill you in on what happened this morning when I tested the ward shunt."

"Still think you should have gone all out and taken the dive, Sir," quipped New Six.

"Yes, well, the water isn't that warm, and a seventy foot drop into the lake is still a seventy foot drop," Harry replied.

The Gryffindor pilots all nodded. The anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards that enveloped the Palace and its immediate surroundings included a shunt that would cause any would-be intruders to materialize over the loch, some 500 yards southeast of the Palace.

"So, just to be clear," Harry added. "Wands and stunners only if the wards trip and uninvited guests show up over the water, unless you're ordered otherwise."

"Aww...can't the gunnies pick off the bad wizard birdies as well, Sir?" asked New Six.

Harry shook his head. "Not unless ordered to do so, sergeant.... we can't discount the possibility that some idiots at the Ministry might try to crash the party."

"Yes, Sir," the soldier said.

"And take care of your aim...we will have wands on the ground down there."

Alicia Spinnet led the other squadron members in a good laugh. "No chance of mistaking you for a Death Eater in that outfit, Major Potter."

Harry scowled at Alicia for a second, then joined in on the laughter. She and Katie had transfigured the squadron's camouflage outfits to match the colors of the weathered rocks that surrounded him. The Queen's Wizard's crimson and gold tartan kilt stood in stark contrast.

"I'm sorry," Alicia said, "You look very handsome in that skirt."

"Would look better flying overhead on a broom, though," Katie added. "We'd get to see whether Harry was going traditional, or not."

"Now Lieutenants," said New Six with mock seriousness. "Within the British Army it is considered bad form to cause your commanding officer to blush."

"But on the Gryffindor Quidditch team it was par for the course," Harry replied with a grin, adding, "Just be sure to switch over to tartan if you go airborne."

The Queen's Wizard then asked, "Are you set for lunch?"

Sergeant Beemer nodded. "We can wait until after the party is over, Sir."

"Nonsense," Harry replied. "You've got some time now...Dobby?"

Harry's ADC popped up a few feet away from them, wearing a pair of omnioculars around his neck and full elf-sized kilt that matched Harry's tartan.

With an exaggerated salute, the house-elf announced, "ADC Dobby is here, Major Harry Potter, sir."

Major Potter returned the salute. "Everything set at the gate, Dobby?"

"Yes sir, Major Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby replied. "Dobby has the perfect place to check for Dark Marks."

"Great," Harry replied. "I'll swing by later...but in the meantime, would you please bring the squadron some of those box lunches that are set out under the tent?"

When his ADC's eyes bulged out a bit, and he bit his lip, Harry knew that something was up. "What's wrong, Dobby?" he asked.

"Sorry, Major Harry Potter, sir, but...but does Major Potter sir know what is in those white boxes?"

"Erm, not really," Harry replied. "Please tell me."

"Yes, Major Potter, sir...those boxes be containing white bread and cucumber sandwiches." Dobby then leaned even closer to Harry and loudly whispered, "Dobby does not want to say bad things about Major Potter's Queen's Muggle cooks, but they forgot to put the crust on the bread!"

"Hmmm," said Harry, "Not very filling, I agree...then Private Dobby, will you see to it that my squadron is fed a proper lunch?"

The ADC jumped up and down as he nodded, giving the pom-pom on his knit cap quite a workout. "Yes, sir, Major Harry Potter, sir."

"Oh, and bring an extra box, for me, will you?" asked Harry. "I'd take a ploughman's lunch over cucumber sandwiches any day of the week."

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The TPOMS squadron was halfway through their lunch when Alicia's Phoenix Team partner thought to ask about something about Harry's ADC.

"Major Potter?"

"Yes, Coley?"

"What kind of binoculars did your aide-de-camp have around his neck?"

"Magical ones," Harry replied. "They're called omnioculars."

"And the marks that he'll be looking for, they're tattoos on the left forearm, right?"

When Harry nodded, the sergeant added, "So those omni-whatevers give you x-ray vision?"

"That's right," replied Harry. "They're specially modified...normal omnioculars don't allow you to see through clothing."

"Hold on, Harry," said Fred. "So Dobby is going to be able to see every guest like they were walking around starkers?"

"More or less," the Queen's Wizard replied.

"Harry!" Katie exclaimed. "You can't be serious!"

"I'm deadly serious when it comes to the Queen's protection...I'll not have marked Death Eaters crashing the party if I can help it."

Shaking her head, Alicia said, "So it was considered too invasive to have guests scanned by soldiers using thermal imagers, but it's not too invasive to have Dobby getting a naked eyeful?"

Harry sighed. "That's exactly why Dobby's the right man, erm....right house-elf for the job....do you think he'll care about seeing 8,000 naked human bodies?"

"No, but..."

"He's a house-elf, Alicia...he won't make a big deal of it."

"But that doesn't mean..."

"Look," Harry said with a bit of exasperation. "Would you get all hot and bothered if you were asked to look at 8,000 naked house elf bodies? Could you even tell the difference between the males and females?"

"Erm, probably not..."

"How about 8,000 nude goblins?"

"Now, that's downright unsettling."

Harry grinned. "I'm sure that they'd think the same were the roles reversed."

After a pause, Neville asked, "But what about the playback feature?"

Furrowing his eyebrows, Harry said, "Oh, yeah...didn't think of that."

"Sure you didn't," New Six said with a grin. "So by the end of the day, you'll have naked pictures of everyone with an invite....got a guest list handy?"

"Dare I ask why you ask?"

"Well," the Muggle warrior replied, "I'm wondering whether it'd be worth my time to volunteer to review the tape afterwards...just in case the little guy missed something."

"Oh, you are a perv, aren't you New Six?" stated Katie.

Harry chuckled. "Not that you'd have any interest in monitoring Full Monty's, eh Katie?"

"Harry!"

"You did know that Sean Connery is on the guest list, right?"

Alicia laughed. "The old James Bond bloke? What's he...a hundred and two?"

"Watch it, erm...Lieutenant," said Sergeant Colbert. "There's only one Bond...all the others that came afterwards are pale imitations."

"Nothing pale about that new one in the chair scene, except maybe his hair color," quipped Katie. "So is he coming, Harry?"

"Who?"

"Daniel Craig," said "Blade" Easton.

Harry frowned. "Don't think so...he's English. But Obi-Wan will be there."

"Ooooh, baby!" said Katie. "I'll volunteer to examine his light saber for dark marks!"

"Star Wars fan, Katie?" asked Harry.

"Of course," she replied. "Just because I'm a witch doesn't mean I've stopped going to the Muggle cinema."

"Thought Sir Alec was dead?" said New Six, shaking his head in disgust.

"The younger Obi-Wan," Harry replied. "Ewan McGregor."

New Six rolled his eyes. "You kids...turning your backs on the great actors of the day."

"Great in your day, maybe," Alicia replied. "And shouldn't it be 'You higher-ranking kids'?"

"Ma'am, yes, Ma'am," the Muggle replied with a rakish salute.

"She does have a point, though," said Blade.

"How's that?"

"Well, if you got some x-ray glasses on your hands, who'd you rather ogle...Princess Leia or Padme?"

"But...in that slave outfit, with the ear-muff hair...Princess Leia was hot!" protested New Six.

"Yeah, she was hot...twenty-five years ago," Blade noted. "But we're talking today...a fifty-year old Carrie Fisher or a twenty-something Natalie Portman?"

"Hmmmmmm..."

"Well, don't get your hopes up," said Harry, as he reviewed the short-list of VIPs that were to be admitted to the Queen's private tent. "Neither of them got an invitation that I can see."

Katie made a reach for the list. "Oooh, can I see that, Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard smiled as he snatched it away from Katie's grasp. "Need to know, Lieutenant Bell," he said with a grin.

"Yes, Sir."

Harry's badge flashed with a call from Hermione that kept him from sinking any further down into flirty trouble with his troops.

"We just deplaned, Harry," she stated.

"Great...our cars are waiting for you?"

"Right in front of us," Hermione replied. "Got a few minutes to ride in with us?"

Harry looked at his troops and smiled. "Let me know when you've reached the shed."

After deactivating the badge, he said, "I'm heading out...I'm going to do my best not to do any magic, just so my Muggle comm gear keeps working. But if all hell does break loose, well, that's why Fred is here. I want him to be the squadron's comm specialist...with his Art Club badge, he'll be able to contact me and the others even if magic fries all of the electronics."

"Right," Fred replied. "So they answer to me, then?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No Fred, they'll talk to you if their radios fail."

The Queen's Wizard's badge then lit up with word that it was safe for him to badge-jump.

"Stay safe, you guys."

"Sir, Yes Sir!" replied the Phoenix Teamers.

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Harry badge-jumped to Hermione's anchored position within an airport shed. Not wishing to keep their guests waiting, they kept the welcome snog modest, and were soon on their way with the ICW delegation towards the Palace.

The short trip gave both Harry and the group of foreign magicals scarce time to size each other up, but first impressions were positive all around. Along the route, Harry pointed out the different layers of security that were in place, along with the location of Gilmerton Close and the MI-5 ¾ observation post that sat opposite.

Once the group arrived at the Palace, Harry passed out lanyards and security credentials to the guest witch and wizards, then led them straight to the State Apartments, where the Queen was preparing for the Party. She seemed genuinely pleased to meet the foreign witch and wizards, and to have the opportunity to personally thank both the Emperor's Wizard and King's Wizard for responding to her request for aid. The Queen wasn't startled at all by the imposing presence of the Maori sorcerer, and greeted him with a few words in his native language. This struck Harry as odd, until Hermione reminded him that his boss was still the Queen of New Zealand and its Head of State.

When the group of foreign magicals accepted the Queen's invitation to stay for the Party, she called on one of her Muggle retainers to provide them with appropriate "Potter Plaid." Neither the Emperor's Wizard nor the Maori sorcerer were all that interested in changing out of their native garb, and expressed those sentiments once their audience with the Queen had ended. Harry was sympathetic.

"Look," he said, "I'm not thrilled with wearing this costume either, but it's a security issue...I'll be more than happy to take you up to the roof and point out for you all of the snipers who have standing orders to shoot anyone wielding a wand that's not wearing our tartan."

The Emperor's Wizard smiled. "So it's the use of a wand that is objectionable, rather than using magic itself?"

Harry nodded. "We want to make it as easy as possible to identify the magicals on our side."

"But what if my Maori friend and I don't use wands?"

Harry pursed his lips, and turned to Hermione.

"Sounds like a viable exception to me," she replied.

"Excellent," replied the Emperor's Wizard.

"So if I learn how to do wandless magic, I can get out of wearing kilts?" asked Harry.

Hermione smiled. "Did you really need that kind of incentive?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "No, but every little bit helps."

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While the King's Wizard, the Swedish witch, and Bengali wizard were being kitted out in tartan, Harry briefed the ICW on the Order of Arthur, and Hermione badge-jumped to the Round Tower to retrieve copies of the Official Secrets Act and the Treaty of Carlisle. She considered these documents to be a good place to start if the ICW had questions about how Harry and Hermione had handled the wizarding world's secrecy statutes.

When Hermione returned to Scotland there was still a bit of time before the gates opened for the invited Garden Party guests. The group therefore decided to split up. The King's Witch and Bengali wizard were given use of a meeting room to begin their document review, Hermione took Thorson on an inspection of her wards, and the Queen's Wizard led the Japanese and Maori wizards to the Palace's rooftop for a bird's eye view of the grounds and their established defenses.

Harry's tour started with the Muggle sniper and SO14 observation posts established along the roofline. Matsuhisa and Rongo both raised an eyebrow at the level of interaction between the Queen's Wizard and the Muggle security men, but held off asking questions until the three were standing apart from the Muggles.

"Are all of these Muggles card-carriers, Sir Harry?" Matsuhisa asked.

"Please, it's Harry," the Queen's Wizard asked. "And the only one that's aware of the wizarding world, as far as I know, is that spotter over there with the thermal imaging equipment attached to his helmet."

"But they were all addressing you as the Queen's Wizard?"

"Yes they were," Harry explained. "But they think that means that I'm a Muggle magician, rather than an actual wizard."

"Why, then, did they act so deferential?"

"Because it's...well, it's rather complicated," Harry replied. "The Muggles that are part of the Royal Protection Unit all think that I am an undercover MI-5 agent, posing as the Queen's Wizard."

"So you're pretending to be a Muggle secret agent who is posing as a Muggle magician?"

Harry replied, "No, I really am a MI-5 agent...at least on paper. Haven't gone through their secret spy school or anything, but the position is the only way a scrawny teenager like me can get any respect from this crowd."

"And why, exactly, do you need their respect, if I might ask?"

Harry paused, then replied, "Because I'm in charge of the protection of the Queen against magical attack, and since we can't expect the Ministry of

“Magic to come to our aid, I can’t do that job without the help of Muggles.”

“So...I’m sorry Harry, but I am just trying to understand,” the Japanese wizard said. “You are using Muggles to fight against magical threats that they know nothing about?”

“Not quite,” Harry replied. “I’m using Muggles to help fight against magical threats that they’ve been told are Muggle threats.”

“But how?”

Harry began to explain about thermal imaging equipment, electronic sensors, and the Muggle terrorist threats within Britain that existed independent of Voldemort, when he felt a tug on his kilt.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Harry said, as he took a piece of parchment from an invisible hand. “Thank you, Private.”

“Yes, Sir, Major Harry Potter, Sir!” whispered the invisible house elf before disappearing.

The Queen’s Wizard opened up the parchment and learned, via a chain that included the Head Auror, Lisa Turpin and Luna’s knickers, that a half-dozen house elves within the MLE now had access to the records of the Magical Surveillance Office within the Ministry. Thinking it best not to discuss the message with his guests at that time, Harry decided to raise the issue with Hermione after the Party and pocketed the memo.

“Are we keeping you from something, Harry?” asked the Emperor’s Wizard.

“No, no...just a message delivered by my Aide-de-Camp.”

While Matsuhisa’s magic had enabled him to detect the Dobby’s presence, he chose not to ask why a house-elf was working for Harry as a military aide.

“So,” the Emperor’s Wizard said, as he turned back to a view of the tents below, “you really expect to fit thousands of Muggles within that small area without magic?”

Harry smiled. “Well, to be honest, there will be a few witches and wizards within that number, but yes, that’s the general idea. They won’t be down there all at once, though...we convinced the Queen to open up portions of the Palace that aren’t normally available to the general public. We’ve also had a military band set up within the Palace courtyard...between that and the tours, we hope to have a fair number of guests protected by the Palace walls at any point in time.”

Matsuhisa frowned as he looked down at the Palace’s stone walls. “Do you expect the structure to protect them from magical attacks?”

“No...more like I hope that they’ll be protected from being seen and targeted using magical attacks,” Harry replied. “And if there are party crashers, and magic starts flying about, there will be that many less people in need of a memory charm.”

The Emperor’s Wizard nodded, impressed with Harry’s planning. “The tents are within Ambassador Granger’s wards, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Harry replied. “So that should keep the bad guys from popping directly into the crowds...but that said, we don’t have any “Lines of Death” set up to keep a Death Eater from apparating just outside of the ward line and either casting spells through the wards, or walking through them and getting to the crowd that way.”

The Japanese and Maori wizards considered Harry’s words as he pointed out the perimeter of the wards. There were already foot patrols in place along these boundaries, involving both thermal imagery device-wearing army troops and police K-9 patrols.

The Emperor’s Wizard then asked, “Is there anything we can do to help, Harry?”

The Queen’s Wizard thought for a moment, then nodded. “If any of you would be willing to mingle down there during the Party, we could always use a few more defensive shields in case of an attack. Other than that.....”

Harry looked up at the sky and frowned. The afternoon rain showers that the Muggle meteorologists had predicted hadn’t materialized yet, and he had thought that a good downpour might keep the guest numbers down, or at least more inclined to take cover under the tents or inside the Palace.

“Either of you two happen to know a good rain charm?” he asked.

The Shinto shaman looked over at the Maori sorcerer and they both smiled.

“Rongo should be able to help you there, Harry,” Matsuhisa replied.

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A dispirited cheer rose from the long queue of guests when the wrought-iron gates to the Palace grounds swung open at precisely one o’clock that afternoon. A heavy rainstorm had come almost out of nowhere to soak the crowd as they huddled beneath umbrellas. No one in line picked up on the fact that the most intense rainfall came from a low-hanging black cloud that (unlike all of the other clouds) inexplicably stayed firmly in place over their heads.

The rain had caused only a few of the guests to abandon the line...if the threat of terrorist attack wasn’t enough to frighten them away from the event, then a little inclement weather certainly couldn’t. Those that did pass through the gates, however, found that the rain decided to follow them, and (exactly as Harry had hoped) did make it a point to cram into the tents, and to linger during the Palace tours.

The Palace staff positioned at the head of the line were protected by their own small white tent, under which each guest was required to produce their official invitation and picture identification card. Once past that checkpoint, the guests were escorted past the watchful eyes of the Royal Protection Unit, as well as a small, waist-high metal box and a heavy black curtain. Behind the curtain stood MI-5 ¾ agent Helen Wall, brought in for the day to hold the same dowsing rod that had been used to locate Hufflepuff's Cup within the Muggle landfill. Within the metal box that was warded with a weak notice-me-not charm stood Dobby, who was getting an eyeful of human flesh as he held the special omnioculars to his eyes.

These magical sensors provided overlapping coverage...the omnioculars were great for spotting certain tattoos, but couldn't be set to detect magical objects at the same time. In turn, the dowsing rod that Steve's mum held was great at blindly catching magical objects from beneath the curtain.

There were more than a few people with magical objects on their person that gave Agent Wall's dowsing rod a sharp jerk as they passed by the curtain. Whenever this happened, Helen gave a signal to a card-carrying colleague, who isolated the targeted guest from the others and politely escorted them to a separate, closed wall tent for a little chat with the Headmistress of Hogwarts, who greeted those who were recognized as Hogwarts alumni and quizzed the rest.

Remus Lupin was stationed within this separate tent to cover Minerva's back, and provided Harry an anchor point when the Queen's Wizard badge-jumped to the gate just a few minutes before the Queen officially arrived at the Party. He appeared within a small curtain-walled changing room.

"Bit of a tight fit, isn't it?" asked Harry.

The lycanthrope shrugged his shoulders as he led his former student out into the tent proper. "It's beyond prying eyes."

Harry nodded as he looked around. They were standing at the back of the tent, about twenty feet behind Headmistress McGonagall, who was seated at a table in front of the tent entrance. She was presently explaining to a witch and wizard who were on the guest list why they needed to either change into Potter Plaid or check their wands at the gate for the duration of the Party.

"So, have there been any Muggles here yet?"

"Yes, one," Remus replied. "A Muggle man came through wearing a charmed signet ring that he didn't know was magical."

"What kind of magic?"

Remus smiled. "Fertility and sex selection charms...poor man probably hasn't a clue why all of his children are boys and why condoms break every time he tries to use one."

"The kind of ring a wizard Head of House wears to ensure an heir, then?"

"Minerva thinks so," Lupin replied.

"So what was the Muggle doing with that ring, and why would it work on him?"

"We think he's part of a clan whose magical line died out a few centuries back," explained Remus. "And the man was probably born with just enough magical core to unknowingly charge the ring."

"Sort of a Muggle-born squib?"

Lupin thought for a moment. "Something like that."

"So what did you do?" asked Harry.

"We let him pass," replied Remus. "The ring was relatively benign...at least to us...and not really a security threat."

As Harry and Remus were talking, a mousy-looking middle-aged witch emerged from a changing room wearing horned-rimmed glasses and a Potter Plaid ankle-length skirt and shawl. The scowl on her face disappeared just as soon as she spotted Harry wearing the same tartan.

"Oh, my word, it's Harry Potter!" she exclaimed, as she walked towards him.

"Erm...yes?" asked Harry.

"How exciting," the witch exclaimed. "I thought that this was just a rude prank, but to see the Boy-Who-Lived in the same plaid...is it really the Potter Clan tartan?"

Harry sighed...fan girls were bad enough, but fan spinsters?. "Yes, it is...Ms...?"

"Litella," the witch replied. "Emily Litella."

"So what brings you to the Garden Party, Mrs. Litella?"

The witch grabbed Harry's arm. "It's Miss, but you can call me Emily."

Harry nodded. "I apologize for the necessary change in wardrobe, Miss...erm, Emily, but we must not have recognized your name on the guest list as someone who was magical."

"I'm not surprised, Harry....oh, I'm sorry, is it okay for me to call you Harry?"

Sporting a tight-lipped grin, Harry nodded.

"Well, you see, Harry," the witch continued, "I was raised in London as a half-blood, but Papa was French, and simply insisted that I attend Beauxbaton instead of Hogwarts."

"How interesting," Harry responded politely. "And now, you've become involved in the Muggle world?"

"Oh, yes," the witch replied. "As a child I became enthralled with Muggle literature...loved it so much that after Beauxbatons I received a Muggle University degree in English at Aberdeen, then became a writer of children's stories."

"I see...and it's your work as a Scottish author of Muggle children's books that brought you here?"

"Why I imagine that it is," the witch replied. "This is my third invitation, but the first, of course, with you as Queen's Wizard. I was so excited, but also a little afraid given the attacks, so I brought my wand along, just in case."

Harry followed the witch's hand as she pointed towards her hair, which was rolled up in a tight bun and pinned in place with a wand. Realizing that it was almost time for the Queen and Prince to appear, he then said. "Well, it was very interesting to meet you, Miss Litella, and I appreciate your cooperation with our security."

The witch's cheeks flushed. "Thank you, Harry. Would you....could I get your autograph?"

Remus was failing miserably in his attempt to contain his giggles. Harry did his best to ignore his former DADA Professor and remember that this sort of thing was now part of his job as Queen's Wizard. He pulled a ball-point pen out from the inside pocket of his Argyle suit jacket and signed the witch's invitation. But then the witch opened her purse and pulled out a black Sharpie marker and asked, "And the shawl, as well?"

Harry grimaced, but took the marker from her and reached towards the loose end of the garment.

"Oh, Harry....if you don't mind....could you sign where all of my friends could see?" the witch asked.

"And where would that be?"

The witch smiled as she pointed to the patch of tartan that covered her chest. "Front and center, if I could be so bold?"

Remus had to turn his back and cast a silencing spell on himself. Figuring it was the only way to get rid of the spinster, Harry took a deep breath, lightly grabbed the length of shawl that draped across the witch's breasts and held it taut, so that the pen could mark the wool cloth without pressing down against the witch's bits.

"There you go," said Harry, noticing that Miss Litella had closed her eyes and held her breath in anticipation of physical contact.

The woman opened her eyes, looked down at her shawl, and sighed. It wasn't exactly what she wanted, but it would do.

"Thank you, Harry," the witch said, much too breathlessly for his liking. Too flustered to ask for her marker back, the woman turned and walked out of the tent with a Cheshire Cat-sized grin on her face.

Remus Lupin wordlessly cancelled the self-applied silencing charm and asked, "Oh, Harry, will you autograph my kilt too?"

Harry switched the grip on the marker to something more like a knife grip and gave his friend and mentor a murderous look. Acting as if the Headmistress (who was within earshot) could still give him detention for foul language, Harry bit his tongue, and promised that he'd be more than willing to give Remus his autograph "at a later time and place of my choosing."

As the Queen's Wizard stepped back inside a changing room to badge-jump back to the Palace, Remus wondered whether he had just asked to be pranked in a very big way.

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At precisely 1:30 pm, a military band played "God Save the Queen" and the monarch and her consort stepped out of a side door along the south wall of the Palace. More than a few guests noticed that the heavy rains stopped just as soon as the Queen appeared and considered it a fortuitous coincidence. The Queen's Wizard, who stepped out right behind the Queen, knew better.

The Royal Company of Archers, acting as the Queen's ceremonial bodyguard whilst at the Palace, formed two separate corridors in front of the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh by linking arms and long bows together. These corridors formed a "meet and greet" line for each of the Royals, so that they could say a few words to a very small number of preselected invited guests.

The corridors formed separate circuitous routes around the tented area, ending up at the small enclosure known as the Queen's Tent, where the Royals would spend almost all of their time during the event with the First Minister, the First 007, and forty or fifty other VIP's. Harry and the Japanese wizard followed behind the Queen at a polite distance, while Hermione and the Norwegian wizard did the same within the Duke's route. Despite the different routes, and the seemingly variable amounts of time spent by the Queen talking with her selected subjects, both she and the Duke arrived at the Queen's Tent at precisely the same time. Once inside, Harry made note of this synchronization, to which the Queen simply replied, "Years of practice, Lord Gryffindor."

Rongo, the rugby shirt-wearing sorcerer, watched this process from the roofline. Once the Royals were safely under roof, he got back in touch with

the clouds, and encouraged them to give the Palace grounds a good soaking that forced almost all of the guests to run for cover.

While the Queen and Duke made the rounds inside the tent, the Japanese wizard pulled Harry aside and pointed to the tent walls.

“This material is canvas, isn’t it?”

“I think so,” Harry replied.

“Has it been charmed?”

The Queen’s Wizard nodded. “Beefed up shields and fire suppression charms.”

“Good,” Matsuhisa replied. “I was going to offer to work with the material myself, but it’s always more difficult for me to commune with dead plant matter.”

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know much about your style of magic...it sounds a bit like what our druids used to use.”

The Japanese wizard nodded. “Very much so, Harry...both Rongo and I work with the elements as well as the spirits within plants and animals.”

Harry might have been as enthusiastically interested in learning more as Hermione would have been, but did wonder if there was something there that might constitute “The power the Dark Lord knows not.” But that conversation was for another, less stressful time, and Harry excused himself to scan the crowd of VIPs and do a radio check with his forces, both Muggle and magical.

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Rodolphus and his crew were huddled around the radio within the kitchen of their uninvited guest house, when the top of the hour was reached and the BBC announced the time with the toll of Big Ben’s bells. “That’s it, then,” he said firmly. “The attack is on.”

Turning to his troops, he promised to kill anyone who didn’t follow their orders, grabbed hold of a small wooden hoop along side the rest of the primary attack team, and activated the portkey.

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Hermione and Harry were within the Queen’s Tent, engaged in a rather playful conversation with Prince Harry and his girlfriend Penelope (who had traveled up for the party) when two loud gonging noises sounded, one after the other.

“Bollocks!” Harry quietly swore, as he drew his wand from his jacket sleeve.

“I’ll check the wards,” Hermione announced, crouching down to lower her visibility as she popped away. He then looked for the Queen. She was hard to find, given that Secret Agent Steve and five other burly security men had drawn their guns out and surrounded the monarch and her four witches-in-waiting, who had woven their strongest shield spells together into a protective shell that enveloped the Queen.

This sudden reaction to the loud noise created panic within the rest of the tent. Steve tried to calm them down when he loudly announced that there had been a possible breach in security, and that given recent events they were being overprotective of the Queen and other members of the Royal Family. He then asked everyone to stay put, and wait to be escorted out of the tent.

As Steve was making his announcement, Harry calmly hit the “all call” button on his badge, put his hand up to his Muggle earpiece and barked out, “All right people, what have we got?”

“Harry, this is TPOMS,” Fred replied over his badge. “We’ve got...five...make that six splash-downs, I repeat, six splash-downs...I think that one more disappeared on the way down...and they’re wearing Auror robes.”

“Auror robes?” asked Harry. “Merlin...are they all stunned, then?”

“I think that we got them all but the one who disappeared mid-air,” the former Gryffindor replied.

“Roger that,” said Harry. “Wally?”

“Yes Harry...confirm seven arrivals and six splash-downs from CCTV.”

“Local radar?”

“Checking...air space is clear, Major.”

“Hermione?”

“Looks like they all used a single portkey...shields are holding and not under present attack.”

“What about inside the ward line?”

“Give me a second,” Hermione said. “I’ll go to the roof and see.”

“There’s nothing except a lot of nervous guests,” Wally chimed in, based on the video coverage.

“Get them under cover,” Harry yelled. “Either to the Palace or inside the tents!”

“The Royal Archers have already reformed ranks and cordoned off the evac route,” Wally reported.

“What about the Queen, Harry?” asked Hermione.

The Queen’s Wizard looked over at Steve. Without spell fire, and with the Auror Robes, this could be a false alarm.

“We need a positive identification on the party crashers,” Harry decided. He then called Ron on his Art Club Badge.

“Hey Ron, we just had a half-dozen wizards bounce against the Holyhood wards dressed in Auror robes,” he said. “Can you run up to the DMLE and ask Robards if he sent them?”

“You got it, Harry.”

Not wishing to wait very long for an answer, Harry then got another bright idea.

“Dobby?” he asked.

His aide-de-camp immediately arrived at his side.

“Yes, Major Harry Potter, sir?”

“There are some wizards floating in the lake. I need you to take the omnioculars and see if you can tell if they’re Death Eaters in disguise.”

The house-elf’s eyes went wide at the thought of the responsibility that he’d just been given. He was so excited that he forgot to salute as he disappeared with a pop.

Harry quickly spread the word that the kilt-wearing house-elf that just popped over to the loch was friendly. He then looked up, heard some of the shocked comments from the Queen’s guests, and realized that he had just jumped all over the magical secrecy laws.

It was a quickly passing thought, all things considered.

Ten seconds later, a dripping-wet house elf popped back inside the tent.

“They all be having the bad mark on their left arms, Major Harry Potter, Sir,” he replied.

Harry swore, then conveyed the message using both his badge and Muggle communication gear.

“We’re evacuating the Queen’s tent now,” he announced.

“Roger that,” said Wally.

“Remus, Tonks...get to the front gate with McGonagall,” Harry ordered. “Everyone else...watch for others that may have arrived outside the ward lines.”

“You got it, Harry,” replied Remus over his Art Club badge.

“Fred!”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Pass word along to the TPOMS gunnies that they’re authorized to shoot anything in that lake that does anything more than float.”

“Copy that, Major.”

Harry looked around the tent, and almost cursed at the fact that the magically strengthened tent walls kept him from surveying the scene.

“Hermione, are you on the roof yet?” he asked.

“Just,” she replied over the badge.

“I can’t tell what’s going on so long as I’ve got the Queen’s back...need you to be our eyes and ears.”

“Understood, Harry,” she replied. “The Royal Archers are moving people into the Palace’s through the back door.”

“How long do you think it’ll take to clear the grounds?”

“I’d say five minutes, not counting anyone presently under a tent, unless some curses start to light fires under their bums.”

“Well let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Harry replied.

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As the evacuation got underway outside of the tents, Harry and volunteer witches and wizards who had been posted in the other tents began to

execute the evacuation plan. Harry turned towards a long buffet table and pushed it back with a mild banishing charm. Tea cups and saucers crashed to the ground as a large, goblin-excavated sloped tunnel was revealed. When a second spell magically pushed another nearby table backwards, a stack of carpets came into view. Harry grabbed the carpet at the top of the stack, and threw it down on the lip of the opening,

The Queen's Wizard was about to call for Steve when Prince Harry got in his face.

"What can I do to help?" asked the Prince.

"Are you armed?" Harry asked.

Prince Harry nodded, and opened his jacket to reveal a full shoulder holster.

"Great," Harry replied. He then motioned towards the carpet and added, "Climb aboard, Cornet Windsor, you've got the point."

The young prince nodded. "C'mon, Penelope," he said, as he dragged her towards the open hole. He sat down on the carpet, leaned back, and said, "On you go."

"How?"

Harry didn't give the Prince time to explain, choosing instead to pick the young Muggle woman up and dump her into her boyfriend's arms.

"Mind your head," he ordered, as he pointed his wand at the couple and magically nudged them. Given the mirror-smooth polished surface of the goblin-excavated tube and the liberal use of lubricating charms, the mild banishment charm was enough to send Prince Harry and his girlfriend flying down the hole and out of view.

"Where...where did they go?" asked the Emperor's Wizard, who was now by Harry's side.

"Down a slide and into an old air raid shelter underneath the Palace," Harry replied, as he grabbed another carpet and threw it down onto the edge of the hole.

"Steve!" he yelled.

"I'm there, Harry," the MI-5 ¾ agent replied. The tight circle of guards surrounding the Queen opened up as Agent Wall dashed towards Harry and dove head first onto the waiting carpet. His inertia was enough to power the carpet ride without magical aid.

"We've got rug duty," two of the other guards said, as they took up Harry's position next to the pile. A few moments later Steve called up using his badge.

"Shelter is secured and the landing zone cleared," he said.

"Right then," said Harry. He turned towards the witches-in-waiting. "Hannah, you're up."

The Hufflepuff nodded as she ran over and dropped down on the carpet in a prone position. Padma Patil was right behind her, replacing Harry as the magical mobilizer. Her banishment spell caused Hannah to scream as she rocketed out of sight.

"Calm down, Padma," Harry said, as he shot a spell down the hole that slowed down Hannah's speed. "We don't have crash helmets to dish out."

"Sorry, Harry," she replied, trying to center herself with a deep breath.

By this point the next carpet was already ready to go, and with three armed guards securing the landing zone it was time for the Queen to evacuate.

"Your Majesty?" Harry called out.

The monarch nodded as she strode over to the hole and allowed the two Muggle guards to help her sit down onto the carpet. She leaned back, then turned and looked up towards her Wizard who was squatting down by her side. Despite the tense situation, she gave Harry a smile.

"Lord Gryffidor," she said with a wink. "We are pleased to note your adherence to Regimental standards."

"Erm...what?" he asked, crouching down to her side.

The Queen chuckled to herself and shook her head. "God bless and protect you, Sir Harry."

The Queen's Wizard nodded, and sent his boss on her way down the chute. It wasn't until later that he realized that by squatting down next to her, he had provided an upskirt view underneath his kilt.

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Terrance Hicks had assigned one of his crew to call out the time as he kept Lestrangle's omnioculars to his eyes and waited for Rodolphus's signal.

"Four minutes," the wizard called out.

"Damn," Hicks swore. "Looks like the boss has bugged things up...second and third groups, prepare to jump."

"You sure?" asked the timekeeper.

"Of course I am," Terrance replied. "Unless you want to be the one to explain to our Lord why we ran away without trying to kill a few Muggles."

"There's always the five downstairs," somebody suggested.

Hicks scowled at the coward. "Everyone apparates to their assigned positions at five minutes or I'll come after you myself, got it?"

"Yes, Sir," the Death Eaters replied.

"Make ready, then."

The others followed Hicks's lead as he checked his gear. He had few more toys than the average Death Eater...a spare wand, a shield amulet, foe glass, and a length of charmed climbing rope (all graduation gifts from proud parents when he took the Dark Mark). The young Death Eater smiled as he folded up the omnioculars and placed them in a robe pocket...if Lestrangle had fallen they would make a fine addition to his kit.

Pulling the hood of his concealment cloak over his head, Hicks drew his wand and started to focus on his destination...last thing he wanted to do was splinch. When the timekeeper called out five minutes time since the first group left, Terrance and the other eight wizards disappeared from the kitchen.

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Hicks's group apparated in a spread-out line parallel to the trees. His arrival point was the furthest north (and closest to the Palace). As soon as they hit the ground each crouched down into a ball, hoping to maximize their level of concealment as they assessed the scene presented to them.

Instead of the chaos and panic that Lestrangle had promised, Hicks spied the almost completed orderly evacuation of Muggles out of exposed positions and into the stone-walled castle. With no sign of the first team of Death Eaters, it was supposed to be up to Terrance to decide whether or not to open fire on the crowd. But a Muggle K-9 unit patrolling the ward line down from his position caught scent of one of his wizards, and started to bark aggressively. The nearest Death Eater got spooked and fired a silencing spell at the dog.

That his canine partner's bark had been quieted even as he was straining against the leash was all that the Muggle needed to call in the contact as he unleashed his partner. The dog closed the few meters' distance between himself and his target and leapt into the air.

A *Reducto* spell hit the German Shepherd, leaving little more than bits of bone and fur. A second curse felled the dog's partner just as the Death Eater was spotted by soldiers using thermal imagery equipment, and struck down by Muggle snipers using electronic sighting scopes.

The combination of dog barks, Death Eater's death cries, and gunfire was enough for Terrance to realize that his cover was blown. Looking for any available protection, he was bright enough to cast his eyes upwards. As another of his men fell to gunfire, Hicks quickly pulled his rope from his belt and tossed it up towards an overhanging tree branch. The rope animated and wrapped itself securely around the branch, then pulled the young Death Eater up into the foliage.

As a third not-quite-concealed-enough Death Eater fell to sniper fire, Hicks climbed further up into the tree. That he himself wasn't hit by a high caliber head shot was due lucky coincidence...he disappeared into the branches and foliage at roughly the same time that the two surviving members of his team activated their emergency portkeys and bugged-out. The Muggle spotters who were tracking the group assumed that Hicks had also retreated, and the fog of battle conspired to keep the former Slytherin safe for the moment.

When the young Death Eater found a tree branch that overlooked the Garden Party grounds he was dismayed to see just how few Muggles there were left to shoot at. His clearest shot was at a half-dozen Royal Archers, who were holding the evacuation route open next to the Queen's Tent (not that the Death Eater recognized it as such).

With no better target available, and a strong desire to prove himself worthy of stepping into Rodolphus's potentially vacant shoes, Hicks let loose an *Incendio* spell.

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Inside the tent, Harry heard a loud "whoosh" as a fireball smashed against the eastern exterior wall. He could feel the heat on the side of his face as he turned and took note that the fire-suppression charms had worked.

"Queen's Tent under attack from the East," he yelled into his microphone.

"Copy that, Harry," replied Hermione from the roof. "I think that the spell originated from the trees, where those other tangos popped up, but I can't see for sure."

"Great...tree-climbing Death Eaters," said Harry. Wondering if the leaf canopy could mask body heat, he asked if anyone visuals on the spell source. Nobody responded with a positive spot. Not that that kept the Royal Archers from returning fire as they covered their dead and wounded. Four men demonstrated that their longbows were more than just window-dressing as they notched arrows aimed in the general direction of the attack.

Within the tree, Hicks scrambled to cast a protective shield to stop the projectiles. He had been smart enough to use a defensive spell developed in direct response to the use of Muggle longbows in the Middle Ages. The Death Eater was amazed at just how accurate these Muggles were, despite the visual cover, and was forced to maintain his shields under the onslaught. As he looked for an opening to switch over to offensive magic, he pulled his emergency portkey out just in case.

Meanwhile, Harry turned back towards the huddled mass of V.I.P.'s. He had planned on moving most of them above ground, using the Royal

Archers route, but that option was now cut off. Figuring that the crowd stack up in the shelter as easily as within the tent, he called out, "Everyone queue up on me...we've got an escape route here."

As the Muggles complied with the Queen's Wizard's orders, he asked, "What's going on with our tree climber?"

"The Archers are firing into the tree with bow and arrow," Hermione replied. She cast a detection spell, then added, "Looks like it's one wizard, presently using a projectile shield."

"Can't we get something a little more powerful heading his way?" asked Harry.

"Too much of a chance of collateral damage without a firm visual," Wally replied. "And it looks like we've got a developing situation at the front entrance."

"Oh, Merlin," Harry replied.

There was a light tap on his shoulder. "Perhaps I can help?"

Harry turned to the Japanese Emperor's Wizard and thought. As much as he wanted to jump out of the tent and attack the Death Eater positions, he had to guard the tunnel's surface opening from attack (as it led directly to the Queen's present position).

"If you're willing, that'd be great," Harry replied. "Just remember...no invisibility or concealment spells....the snipers are keyed into that sort of thing."

The Emperor's Wizard smiled. "I may not have to leave the tent."

Harry squinted at the Japanese priest, wondering how he would pull that trick off. He then focused his attention back onto the tunnel mouth, where a Baroness was trying to maintain her modesty as she sat down on a carpet.

"Oi!" he yelled. "You didn't see the Queen grabbing hold of her hemline, did you? Move it!"

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While Harry was herding gentry, the Emperor's Wizard was looking for a patch of bare ground. Seeing nothing but plush red carpet inside the tent walls, he ran to an edge and pulled back the rug to reveal a section of yellowed (but still living) lawn. Placing both hands on the bared ground, he concentrated on all of the living things below. Ignoring the nematodes and insects, Matsuhisa pushed his senses farther out, until they met tree roots. Quickly calling out to the spirits within the trees through their roots, he asked for aid in dealing with the evil perched within the tree branches.

He got a favorable responses from the tree spirits, especially when Matsuhisa promised to stop the arrows from flying after the threat was neutralized.

A thick branch next to Terrance Hick's hidden perch suddenly animated, sweeping sideways and striking the wizard in the back of the head. The Death Eater lost the grip on both wand and portkey as he tried to hang on to a branch, but fell towards the ground anyway. Not content to strike once, the tree's lower branches came to life and caught the wizard in their grip. The tree spirit then asked the Japanese wizard what he wished to do with the captured evil doer. Matsuhisa thanked the tree spirit and asked the spirit to use its own judgment.

The Japanese wizard pulled back from his connection with the tree spirit before learning of the Death Eater's fate. Hermione, however, was able to watch with morbid fascination as the tree limbs folded back on themselves and crushed the doomed Death Eater in a lethally smothering hug.

"I think that tree just ate the Death Eater," she reported to Harry.

"Well I hope it chews its food," he replied grimly.

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By this point in the attack all of the sloping tunnel slides that connected the large white tents to the bomb shelter underneath the Palace were seeing heavy use. Harry had gotten the idea of escape chutes from the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, right down to the use of sliding carpets. The initial stacks of pre-positioned carpets within each tent were quickly exhausted. With no time to get carpets back up the tunnels for reuse, Potter Plaid-wearing witches and wizards within each tent were transfiguring table linens into rugs. With all of the panic and confusion within each of the tents, none of the Muggle guests noticed the difference.

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The "developing situation" that Wally had reported involved the remaining three Death Eaters in Rodolphus's crew, who had decided that Hicks's spell fire was their signal to let loose. They did a direct line-of-sight apparition from a hiding place underneath the Craggs to a sandbagged British Army machine gun emplacement directly across from the south entrance to the grounds. The four regular army soldiers who were stationed there didn't know what hit them as they fell to severing curses and bone-crushing hexes aimed at their necks and heads respectively. With all of the activity on the other side of the fence, nobody noticed as the Death Eaters transfigured their robes into rough approximations of Muggle army uniforms and took the places of the fallen Muggle soldiers. From their new vantage points they were but twenty meters away from the tent that stood at the gated entrance to the Garden Party.

Despite orders to wait until their surprise attack could cause the most damage, one of the Death Eaters got nervous and fired at two Muggles who had run out of the entrance despite warnings from the palace security agents to stay inside the fence line. While the Death Eater's flame spell turned the couple into burning lumps of flesh, it also revealed their location. Remus and Minerva McGonagall, who had moved from their initial postings to a defensive position within the tented entrance, saw the spell and fired off curses at the Death Eater position. They were forced to

shield, and the magical battle within this part of the party was now on.

MI-5 ¾ agent Helen Wall had also been at the front gates, and used her Muggle comm gear to call in for magical reinforcements. Within moments, the ICW witch and wizards had made their way towards this entrance (excepting Rongo), and were standing shoulder to shoulder with Minerva and Remus as they erected defensive shields in front of the gates.

The three Death Eaters were casting wide-area effect spells, hoping for multiple casualties with single casts. But once they discovered that this Muggle gathering was actually being defended by more than one witch or wizard, they switched over to point curses that stood a better chance at breaching the magical shields.

At the first sight of a sickly green *Avada Kedavra* spell, the defending witches and wizards dove for cover, and yelled for everyone else to do the same. The King's Wizard and Swedish Witch then began conjuring granite slabs, while McGonagall reached the same endpoint by transfiguring tables and chairs into stone.

Steve's mum had the presence of mind to act as a forward observer and call in the location of the Death Eater's position. There was some confusion when it was realized that the spot was supposed to be a British Army position, but after a call to Remus confirmed Helen Wall's report, the order was given out for the Army to retake its lost ground.

The Challenger 2 Main Battle Tank that was parked in front of the main Palace gates responded to the order, and fired up its 12-cylinder, 1,200hp engine. By the time the tank had pivoted and started south down Queen's Drive, the coordinates of the Death Eater's position had been downloaded into the digital firing control computer that targeted its 120mm rifled main gun. With an armor-piercing projectile preloaded, all the Muggle gunner needed to do was wait a few seconds until the tank could cover the distance between Palace and point of fire.

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As the tank lumbered down the street it approached a natural history museum whose striking profile was dominated by a football-pitch sized oblong white tent roof. Clinging to the top of one of the huge poles that supported this structure was a concealed Death Eater who had been instructed to observe, rather than fight.

Voldemort's orders for Augustus Rookwood were tested as he spied the Muggle tank approaching the Death Eater's position. He suspected it very capable of blowing this last group of Death Eaters to pieces, and had a clear shot at the tank...but that shot would likely reveal his position, and what he had seen and needed to report to his lord was far more important than the lives of three Death Eaters.

He held his wand and watched as the tank recoiled from the blast of its main gun and the last attackers were all killed within a blast of fire and smoke.

Rookwood held his breath, not in hope of survivors, but to avoid breathing in the thick black smoke that rose from the blast zone. This smoke provided him cover, but also kept him from gathering any more information from the field of battle...not that there was any more battle to see. Deciding it time to make his escape, the former Unspeakable drew the portkey to Salisbury from his pocket and thought about taking a parting shot.

The Dark Lord had told him to not to be involved in the attack...but what if there was a target of opportunity destroyed just before he portkeyed to safety?

Hoping to add a little more to the positive side of the ledger when he made his report to Voldemort, Rookwood turned to the north and raised his wand against the building that was supposed to be the new shining symbol of Muggle Scotland. It only took a short series of blasting and incendiary spells to set the unwarded Parliament building into flames.

Rookwood activated the portkey and disappeared from the rooftop before anyone realized where the spell fire had come from.

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With the last of the Queen's Tent occupants evacuated and the tunnel sealed, Harry Potter had left the protective cover and was tending to injured Archers when word came from Wally that the Scottish Parliament building was on fire. He got confirmation from Steve that the Queen was safe, and from Hermione that there was no immediate battles being fought. So, as soon as Muggle medics arrived to take Harry's place he decided to see for himself and badge-jump to the rooftop.

By the time he got there, Rongo had made arrangements for a cloud to move over the Parliament building and release a smothering deluge of rainwater

"Wow," said Harry. "It's wonderful to see you take that kind of initiative."

The heavily tattooed sorcerer turned to Harry and smiled.

Thinking of possibilities, and the fact that the fire had only lasted a few minutes, he asked, "Is there any chance you could arrange for a thick fog cloud to envelop that building?"

When the Maori turned to Harry and silently arched an eyebrow, the Queen's Wizard decided to elaborate.

"If there's fog too thick to see through, we could go in and magically repair the building and the Muggles would be none the wiser."

The sorcerer tilted his head in thought, then nodded his head and smiled. Raising his hands towards the rain cloud, he then silently asked it to

extend down towards the ground.

Harry and Hermione watched with fascination as the cloud complied.

“Thanks, that’ll be a great help,” said Harry.

The Queen’s Wizard then turned his attention to the south, and to the field of battle below. He winced at the sight of bodies being covered in sheets by Palace security as medical personnel evacuated the wounded, and his grief was only partially countered by calls to Steve and the other Art Clubbers to gain assurances that the Royal Family and all of his witches and wizards had escaped harm.

As that call took place, Harry spied Army lorries as they rumbled up the road that ran in between the Parade Grounds and the lake. Once the vehicles parked next to the Loch Margaret, Remus, Tonks, and a large group of masked Muggle troopers spilled out and made their way to the shoreline. Under the cover of the TPOMS squadron from above, and from a perimeter of SAS sentinels on the ground, the two Art Clubbers cast another series of stunning spells on the six Death Eaters who were presently floating in the water. No account was made for the fact that three of these six bodies had been floating face down.

Gaffes were used to fish the bodies out of the water. Regardless of whether the Death Eaters were alive or dead, Remus and Tonks *Accio*’d clothes, wands and anything else the Death Eaters had been carrying until they were stark naked. The troopers then threw the bodies into the back of the lorries and climbed in themselves. The vehicles barreled down towards the helipad, where they threw the marked Death Eaters into a cargo helicopter that immediately lifted away from the Palace grounds.

Harry ordered the Phoenix Teams to evacuate their positions and return to the Palace...while there was always the chance that somebody else would bounce against the wards, there was a better chance that the stunning spells that they had used in that area would attract the Ministry’s attention.

Worrying that there could be Obliviator squads stupid enough to try and apparate within the Palace grounds, Harry got on his badge and had Ron give the Head Auror’s office a set of apparition coordinates within a Palace outbuilding located beyond Hermione’s wards. The Ministry personnel who were stupid enough to recklessly leap onto the scene found themselves surrounded by a group of heavily armed MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ c-mugs, alongside four international witches and wizards. This mixed escort guided the Ministry people at gun and wand point across the street to help undertake repair work within the fogbank.

The Obliviators were taken aback by the fact that the ICW Delegation was working in conjunction with Harry and the Muggles, and made sure to report that fact when they later returned to the Ministry.

Perhaps to no one’s surprise, the Minister of Magic’s office considered this information far more worrisome than the fact that there had been another massive Death Eater attack that day.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Lord High Steward, Part 1 (part 1)

Warning: There is brief mention of off-camera sexual assault in this chapter.

Chapter 39: The Home Guard, Holland, and Hogsmeade

Wednesday, July 11, 3:00pm

Palace at Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, Scotland

That Rongo the Maori Sorcerer wasn't much of a talker didn't mean that Harry Potter suffered for lack of conversation as the two monitored the aftermath of the Garden Party assault from the Palace rooftop.

Hermione had returned to London to brief the Prime Minister, and was using her Art Club badge to ask for updates as she presented a hastily assembled brief. Wally used Harry's MI-5 ¾ issued earpiece to ask for advice as he led the Muggle incident commanders who were minding the Ministry Obliviators and sanitizing the field of battle. Chatter over the handset of an EMP-hardened walkie-talkie that hung around Harry's neck tracked the Army's evacuation of the Queen to Balmoral Castle via helicopter gunship. And the mobile phone with "push-to-talk" capabilities that was clipped to Harry's sporran was constantly going off, as the TPOMS squadron and those who were repairing the Parliament building phoned in.

Rongo found the cross talk across different platforms amusing, and took pity on the Queen's Wizard by pointing towards whichever device was screaming for Harry's attention at any point in time.

Chirp-chirp

"Harry?"

The distracted wizard followed Rongo's finger pointing, and pulled his mobile from his belt.

"Potter here...go ahead Fred."

"We think that we're done repairing the party-mint building, but...can you get the fog lifted so that you can check our work?"

Harry turned towards Rongo, and got a head nod confirmation that he had heard the request.

"Copy that...should have what you need in a few seconds."

As Rongo communed with the clouds and arranged for the fog to lift, Harry looked across the street to where Rookwood's *Reductos* had done damage. The revealed structure appeared to be whole, but did not look quite right. All of the odd angles and "organic" asymmetrical elements of the complex that had been compared to "a scattered heap of leaves and twigs" were gone, and replaced by rectilinear lines and boxy shapes.

Harry swore under his breath. Or at least he thought it was under his breath, until Hermione frantically asked over the the open line on his Art Club badge, "What's wrong, Harry?"

"They've fixed the Parliament building a little too well, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

"Hold on, Hermione...Fred?"

"Yeah, Lord G?"

"What in Merlin's name are you doing over there...it doesn't at all look like it's supposed to."

"It isn't?"

"No, it isn't...weren't you using *Reparo* s?"

"Erm...yeah, we were, but we thought they weren't working right, because there were all of these curves, and odd angles and loose ends."

"Fred?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"There were supposed to be curves, odd-looking angles and pieces hanging out in strange places."

"Really?"

Harry sighed, and called Wally with a request to have somebody who knew how the Parliament building was supposed to look like sent across the street. He then turned towards Rongo, only to find that he was already bringing the clouds back down.

"Thanks," said Harry. At the sight of the Maori's head shaking, he added, "Yeah, I thought it looked better after Fred's improvements as well."

Lord G?"

"Go ahead, Wally."

"The Japanese Wizard that's been fixing up the trees has something he wants you to look at."

"Roger that, Wally," he replied, as he reached for his rucksack. "Alert air control that I'm going to fly down."

"Going to ride side-saddle on your broom?"

Harry snorted as he looked down at his bright red kilt. There was ample opportunity to tease Wally, but it wasn't the right place or time.

"Just do it, Wally."

The Queen's Wizard ignored the witty retort as he pulled a full-sized broomstick from his never-full rucksack, shouldered the pack, and swung a leg over the broom handle.

It was a more of a controlled fall than flight as Harry swooped down to the Emperor's Wizard's position in front of the man-eating tree. As he jumped to the ground, he asked, "What's up, Sensei?"

Matsuhisa chuckled at the younger wizard's salutation and pointed towards a wand that lay at the base of the tree.

"I was repairing the arrow damage when I spotted that."

Harry nodded.

"Wonder if it was dropped by our tree climber?"

"Would you like to find out?"

"Erm, sure...do you have a way to determine spell usage from a wand?"

"No," the Shinto priest replied, "But I can ask the tree to spit out its food."

Harry looking up at the tree's limbs and decided, "Let's make sure that the ground is cleared of evidence first."

A sweep of the area revealed nothing of interest, other than a Muggle candy bar wrapper that, according to Matsuhisa, displayed a weak magical aura. Thinking that rather odd, Harry badge-called Tonks, who had been sorting through the personal effects of the dead and captured Death Eaters at Edinburgh Castle. She jumped to Harry's location and confirmed that the attackers also had charmed candy wrappers in the pockets of their robes. Afraid that it might be a touch-activated portkey to the bottom of the sea, Tonks levitated the wrapper into an Auror-issue evidence bag.

"Are you ready for the...how do you say that which a cow chews on?" asked the Japanese wizard.

Harry snorted as he and Tonks took more than a few steps away from the tree trunk.

"Cud," he then replied.

Not wishing to be in the splatter range himself, the Emperor's Wizard moved to the back side of the tree to avoid the mass of pulpy flesh and shattered bone that fell to the ground.

"Thanks," said Harry, as he tried not to flinch at the smell. He picked up a stick and started to poke at the body, before realizing where that stick likely came from. Harry paused, and nodding up towards the tree asked, "Would it be upset that I'm using this branch?"

The Japanese wizard smiled thinly and shook his head. "It is polite of you to ask, but the spirit within the tree has no sense of ownership or connection to its severed parts."

"Good," replied Harry, as he poked into the collapsed chest and fished out a pair of omnioculars.

"Looks like the protective charms on the object worked a little too well for this bloke," Tonks noted. She then used *Scourgify* on the omnioculars before lifting them up to her eyes.

"Are they still operable?"

"I think so," Tonks replied, after twisting the various knobs and levers. She then added, "It would have been nice if they'd been....yes!"

Tonks passed the viewing device over to Harry and said, "There's recorded playback...shows what the DEs were looking at before they attacked."

The Queen's Wizard immediately put the viewing device from his eyes.

"Palace in the background...Parade Grounds in between..."

Harry lowered the omnioculars and looked to the East.

"From one of those houses beyond the grounds, I'd wager," he announced. The charmed field glasses were then raised once more, and Harry

fiddled with the adjustments until the omnioculars offered a magnified field of view.

"Damn," he muttered. "Some of those houses have swing sets in their rear gardens."

The Queen's Wizard threw the omniocular's carrying strap over his head and yelled "Up!" at his broomstick. One leg was over the handle before Tonks had the chance to grab his arm.

"Where do you think you're going, Harry?"

"Need to find out which house, Tonks...Death Eaters and children's toys aren't a good combination."

"But it could be a trap!"

"You think that they'd use a nearby location for a safe house to escape to?"

"Erm...."

"That's what I thought."

"But...it could be a booby-trap. Don't go half-cocked on your own...you've got people."

"And they're all busy...well, most of them are."

Tonks rolled her eyes and hiked her Potter plaid skirt up to her thighs.

"Scoot up, then, and at least pull-up short so that I can check for trip-wire wards," she demanded, as she jumped onto the broom behind Harry.

Expecting the need to also placate the Emperor's Wizard, Harry turned...and spied a snow monkey standing where Matsuhisa had been.

Too anxious not to take the transformation and the monkey's jump onto his shoulder in stride, Harry shook his head and warned Wally that he was making another flight. He then told both Tonks and the monkey to hold on tight as he sped across the Parade Grounds.

With the wind rushing past his ears, the Queen's Wizard didn't hear Wally's frantic calls out to the Muggle defensive units not to fire as he buzzed by their heads.

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3:30pm, Amsterdam Central Station, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Percy Weasley's treatment in the hands of Dutch immigration officials had less to do with where he was from than how he arrived...wearing only Y-fronts.

More than a few foreign wizards had heard wild stories about beautiful Dutch Muggle women with loose morals, and traveled to the Netherlands in search of a good time. Having arrived at the portkey terminal dressed only in his shorts, Percy just seemed more eager than most.

The Dutch magical community didn't care for the stereotypical stories...it led to Dutch witches being harassed almost as much as their Muggle counterparts, and created all sorts of breach of secrecy issues within Amsterdam's Red Light District. But there were many within the country who profited from this type of "vacation travel," so the Dutch Ministry of Magic had long ago come upon a practical compromise. Sex-starved foreign wizards were allowed into the country, but only if they paid a dear price.

There were port arrival tariffs, visa processing fees, costly medical examinations, mandatory tuition payments for a "Muggle sex world orientation" class, required currency exchanges as horrific exchange rates...the list went on and on. Sex-junket wizards had to wear a magical tracking bracelet, so that they would be linked to any attempts to magically coerce Muggle women, or to memory charm prostitutes into thinking that they'd already been paid. And most dear, from a financial standpoint, was a 5,000 galleon "departure deposit," refunded only if a wizard left the country within the visa-permitted time window and through a sanctioned immigration station.

The Special Assistant to the Minister's Diplomatic Passport only helped so far...he would have been able to avoid almost all of this hassle, but only if he had voluntarily answered questions about his reasons for travel whilst under *Veritaserum*. That wasn't an option for him, so three hours and several thousands of galleons later, Percy was escorted out into the Muggle part of Amsterdam's Central Station, dressed in an ill-fitting (and terribly overpriced) tracksuit and trainers.

Percy headed straight towards the head of a rank of cars for hire, handed a written street address to the driver, and climbed into the rear bench. The focus he gave towards the Muggle buskers and bicyclists that he spied out the side window was lost when the red-haired wizard realized that the car was heading towards the Red Light District, despite his written requests. He complained loudly, only to be told that the street address that he'd given was in the very heart of the Gedoozone. That shut Percy up, enough that he didn't bother to argue when the driver demanded twice what was recorded on the fare box.

The small row house looked like most of the others on that street...except, of course, for those buildings that had large street-level windows framed with red neon, and scantily-dressed women trying to entice customers from the other side. A man on a mission, the Special Assistant to the Minister resolutely ignored the ample display of Muggle flesh and focused instead on the small sign that was placed in the house's window:

*Vanderwood and Son, Charms Masters
Fine Hiders of Infidelity Since 1325*

Wondering what exactly the sign meant, but taking note of the name and words "Charms Masters," Percy knocked on the door, and was quickly shown into the study of the a white-bearded wizard who looked almost as old as Dumbledore.

The Dutchman quickly sized up Percy and asked, "Muggle vows or magical?"

"What?"

"Was your marriage ceremony Muggle or magical, son?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Percy huffed. "I am not married."

"Then why in Merlin's name are you trying to keep your whoring secret?"

"Who said that I...there must be some misunderstanding, Sir, I am Percy Weasley, Senior Assistant to the British Minister of Magic. I am here on official business...and certainly not here to do any sort of *whoring*."

"What business is that, then?"

"The Ministry has need of someone who can cast the *Fidelius* Charm."

"So it's the Minister of Magic who has been cheating on his wife, then?"

"No, no, no...the Ministry has need, not the Minister."

"Well, why didn't you say that, then?"

"I thought that I just did."

The old wizard rolled his eyes.

"Not that it matters," said Percy, "but why did you begin this conversation by asking how I might have been married?"

"Because there's a price difference, my boy."

"How is that?"

The wizard snorted. "Do you know anything about how the *Fidelius* Charm works?"

"Of course I do," Percy snapped back. "It keeps something secret within the body of a Secret Keeper."

"So you can cast it, then?"

"If I could, then I wouldn't have needed to travel this far, would I have?"

"So why can't you, boy?"

"Because...well, it doesn't matter, really."

"Don't they have Charms Masters in Britain? Flitwick is still alive and kicking, isn't he?"

"Erm, yes...the Ministry needs to keep its need to protect a secret...well, secret."

"Right, well...let me give you a free tutorial, then," huffed the wizard. "The main reason why any old 'Joe the Wizard' can't cast the *Fidelius* is that it requires a tremendous amount of effort and intent to pulled the secret away from the rest of the world, and to bury it within a single person. The more people that know what's to be kept secret, and the more magic there is that would resist it, the harder it gets."

"So...if I wanted to keep secret the fact that I've cheated on my wife, it'd be more difficult to do so if there were magical marriage vows getting in the way? Or cost more if I told my friends first?"

The wizard let out a deep sigh. "Finally, I thought I'd have to write off all of Britain as hopeless idiots."

"Here, now," huffed Percy. "There are many, many brilliant people working at the British Ministry of Magic."

"I see, so you're not representative, then?"

"Erm, right."

"Thought not," the wizard said with a smile. He took a moment to write something down on a slip of paper and handed it to Percy.

"I'm too old and set in my ways to travel with you for this job. Go to this address and ask for Peter, my son"

"Your son?" Percy asked dubiously. "Your son can help us with a complex *Fidelius*?"

"Ask for a demonstration, if you don't believe me," snapped the old man. "Have him protect the secret that you're in control of your own bowel

movements, and see what happens.”

“Erm...right...your word is good enough for me.”

“Good day then, Sir.”

The old charms master shook his head in disgust as the British wizard left the room, and pulled out his mobile phone to inform his son that he was expecting a 30% referral fee for the easy mark that he'd sent the boy's way.

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4:00pm, Scottish Parliament Grounds, Edinburgh, Scotland

As the Headmistress of Hogwarts didn't have an Art Club badge, or M1-5 ¾ -issued comm. gear, or a mobile phone, it took a few minutes for the Queen's Wizard to find her within the cloud-encased Parliament grounds.

It was the distinct sound of her voice dressing down a former student that guided Harry to her position.

“I will not have my reasons for being here questioned, Mr. Conners.”

“But Ma'am, it does seem strange for you to have been invited to a Muggle party...”

“No stranger than me finding you in a broom closet with Dicky Knowles in your Seventh Year,” countered Minerva. “But maybe my comparison is off...perhaps we should ask a few of your colleagues for their opinions...or perhaps your wife?”

“Now that's just uncalled for...”

“Then let's ask Mr. Potter,” Minerva said with a smile, as the Queen's Wizard appeared from the mist.

“Ask me what, Headmistress?”

The Ministry official who had been standing almost toe-to-toe with McGonagall turned away, and shook his head.

“Nothing that matters,” he muttered. “Professor McGonagall and I were...”

“You mean Headmistress McGonagall?” asked Harry sharply.

“Erm, yes...Headmistress and I were just discussing the deployment of my witches and wizards,” the man quickly replied. He then added, “So you're the Queen's Wizard, and in charge of this mess?”

“That's right,” Harry replied. “And speaking of mess, I've got something for you.”

“You telling us what to do? Oh, that's rich...”

“Maybe he should ask Dickie, then?” McGonagall said sweetly.

A pained look came over the Obliviator's face. He sighed, and then asked, “What is it, boy?”

“The correct address is Sir,” Minerva stated. “Unless Mr. Potter would prefer the use of one of his other titles?”

Harry snorted, but didn't take the bait.

“Here's the situation,” he stated. “We found the Muggle house that the Death Eaters used as a staging area for this attack.”

The Ministry official's eyes lit up. “Right, tell us where and we'll be off.”

“Hold on,” Harry replied. “They didn't use any spells that we can tell, and the Muggles were kept in the basement nearly the whole time.”

“They're still alive?” asked Minerva.

Harry nodded his head slowly, with a hard steely gaze that left no doubt about his anger. “They left the family in real rough shape, but yeah...they're all alive. Three toddlers and a mum and dad.”

“We'll still need to interview them,” the Obliviator stated.

Harry nodded. “Just as a heads up, the husband and wife thought that it was the terrorists that did the Ten O'clock Attacks that were holding them hostage.”

“Well it was, wasn't it?”

“No, I mean yes...well...they believe that it was the pretend Muggle terrorists that were used as a cover story,” Harry replied.

“And they didn't see any magic being done by the alleged Death Eaters?”

Harry shook his head. "Not that they recognized as such."

The Obliviator sighed. "So why are you gracing us with this information?"

"Because they were able to give good physical descriptions of the Death Eaters that were holding them," Harry replied. "Unless you wanted to return to the Ministry without anything to say about who was involved and how many?"

After chewing on his lip for a few moments, the Ministry official looked in the rough direction of the fog-hidden Palace.

"And you're certain that there's nothing for us to do across the street?"

Harry nodded. "Just some broken dishware and tattered tents left over from when the guests all ran away."

"And none of these alleged Death Eaters that tried to crash this party were killed or captured?"

With a shrug of his shoulders, Harry asked, "Were you working the other night after the Ten O'clock Attacks?"

"Of course I was, didn't sleep for two days."

"And did the Muggles kill or capture any of those attackers?"

"Not that we could determine."

"And do you really think it's possible for Muggles to fight against wizards?" Harry asked sharply. "I mean, c'mon...I'm only a Hogwarts student who got lucky because our wards held."

"And what about those wards?" the official asked.

"Ask Percy Weasley," Harry shot back. "He experienced them first-hand down in London."

The Obliviator crew chief arched an eyebrow. He didn't care much for working under Dolores Umbridge, but Percy Weasley would have been even worse. Nodding to himself, he asked, "But what about these repairs?"

"I think they've got them done right this time," Harry replied. "Tell you what...I'll have someone bring you and your crew around to the Muggle house, and you can check on things here when you get back."

Deciding that it might just be the best way out of a bad situation, the crew chief accepted Harry's offer, and was led away to gather his witches and wizards for the short trip down Royal Park Terrace.

"So, Harry...you actually trust them alone with that Muggle family?" asked McGonagall.

The Queen's Wizard held up his hand, and waited until the Ministry official was out of earshot before responding.

"Of course not...Sensei and Tonks are there to make sure the Ministry folks don't overdo it."

"And why aren't you still there?"

"Because if I stayed there any longer I'd have lost my control and gone medieval on our prisoner's arses," Harry said softly.

"That bad, then?"

Harry nodded. "The bastards made the little kids watch."

"Oh, I see...perhaps, you'll tell me where the prisoners are so that I can express my displeasure in medieval ways?"

Harry shook his head in disgust. "We need to keep the moral high ground, as much as I'd like to retaliate...and I need to ask you to take a walk with me."

"Why is that?"

"I've got to brief the Scottish First Minister," replied Harry, "and since the two of you got along so famously the other night..."

Minerva snorted, "You'll need to provide a little more incentive than that...perhaps if I get the real story along the way?"

That snark managed to brighten Harry's foul mood a bit, and he held his arm out for the Headmistress.

"But everything that I said was true," he hissed in mock protest.

"But that doesn't mean that you said everything, does it?"

"And what makes you think that I was less than forthcoming?" Harry asked with a slight grin.

"Years of experience?"

Yes, well...you do have me there.”

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4:30pm, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Percy Weasley’s new destination was one of the many “Coffee Shops” in Amsterdam that were known far more for their hash-laced brownies than hot drinks. Not knowing this fact, it took almost no time at all for the red-haired wizard’s fears and concerns to fade into a cloudy haze, once the younger Vanderwood insisted on sharing a few “snacks” while they discussed the Ministry’s needs. It only took slightly more time for Percy to be enticed up the stairs to a private room by the dread locked young Charms Master and his blond girlfriend. The British wizard was deftly stripped down naked, relieved of his money belt, and subjected to a rather thorough *Legilimens* scan that sliced through impaired mental defenses like a knife through butter.

Armed with the knowledge of exactly what Percy wanted, and how much he’d be able to pay for it, the young Charms Master and his girl did a cost-benefit analysis. They decided that a quick trip to Britain with Percy would be worth far more than what he had on his person, so they planted a fake memory of a very good time into Percy’s brain, returned his belt and clothing, got him to sign a lopsided magically-binding contract, and dragged him down the stairs.

Within minutes, Percy and his new best friend Peter were in a taxi heading towards a ferry terminal on the Dutch coastline.

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Palace at Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, Scotland

Harry filled in the missing details about the Muggle family that lived on Royal Park Terrace as he led the Headmistress across the street and back onto the Garden Party grounds.

The involuntary hosts for Rodolphus Lestrangle’s crew had been traumatized and abused over nearly thirty hours of captivity. The victims really had initially thought that they had been held hostage by Muggle terrorists...until Harry flew to their rescue upon a broomstick. Having the Emperor’s Wizard reveal his animagus form by morphing back into his human form had also been a shock for the Muggles. But these magical revelations had worked to their advantage, as they supported Tonks’ reliability when she asked the mother and father whether they wanted to have their family Obliviated. The parents had declined, asking only that their children be made to forget the entire experience.

Harry then went on to say that the husband and wife were able to identify some of their assailants from pictures of the dead or captured Death Eaters, and that they picked out Rodolphus Lestrangle and Augustus Rookwood from a book of Death Eater photographs.

As the Queen’s Wizard told this story, a series of motor coaches drove up and parked along the south edge of the Palace grounds.

“What are they here for?” asked the Headmistress.

“To carry our guests away while the Ministry folks are down the street,” Harry replied. Leading the Headmistress into the Queen’s Tent, he then grabbed a rug and dropped it down onto the lip of the goblin-excavated tunnel.

“And what is that?” Minerva asked.

“The fastest way down to the First Minister,” Harry replied. “Ladies first?”

McGonagall snorted, but had come to trust Harry enough to sit down onto the rug. Harry, in turn, didn’t trust McGonagall to sneak an up-kilt peek, so he made sure to mind the hem as he squatted down and sent her down into the bomb shelter.

There was a buzz in the basement as Harry rode down the tube using his own carpet. The Garden Party guests who had spent more than ninety minutes below ground were queuing up to climb a stairwell that led up to the main level of the Palace.

“How long will it take to get them all to the coaches?” Harry asked the MI-5 ¾ agent who had been guarding the base of the slide.

“If they stay cool about it, no more than ten minutes,” replied the secret agent.

“And have they been cool about being down here?”

“Cool as cucumbers,” the man said with a smile. “The First Minister was surprisingly brilliant...helped organize everyone into small groups, and then enlisted the pop stars and gentry from the Queen’s Tent to help hand out bottled water and biscuits.”

“Did he really?” asked Harry. Looking around the magically-expanded area, he asked, “So where is he now?”

“Other room,” the guard replied, pointing towards a guarded doorway on an adjacent wall. “Your clan folk had been in there with the Royal Family, and he wanted to have a word with them.”

“Thanks,” replied Harry. He then led McGonagall over to the secured area, and walked inside after flashing his MI 5 ¾ identification. Fifteen witches and wizards dressed in Potter plaid were there, mixed in with a dozen c-mugs and MI-5 ¾ agents. The witches and wizards looked almost as pleased to see the Headmistress as the First Minister was to see Harry.

“Well hello, there, Major Potter,” the First Minister said brightly. “We’ve some food left over, if you like?”

Harry shook his head. "Wish that there were time...you requested a briefing, sir?"

The First Minister nodded, and gestured towards one corner of the room.

"So things are safe enough topside to evacuate, Major?" he asked, once they were apart from the others.

Harry nodded. "The Parliament building has been repaired, and the obliviators have been taken down the street and out of range of view," he said softly.

"Obliviators?"

"The witches and wizards whose job it is to erase the memories of any Muggles that saw magic being used. We needed to keep you all down here until they were out of the way."

The Scot snorted. "So they're gone for good?"

"Wish so, but probably not," Harry replied. "Once the evac is finished we'll bring them back for a sanitized look-see."

"What of the Queen?"

Harry looked at his watch and replied, "Should be landing at Balmoral in a few minutes."

"And the latest casualty count?"

The Queen's Wizard frowned a bit as he drew a piece of paper from a coat pocket.

"Five civilians dead, twenty-seven injured. Amongst the security forces...the Yard have three dead, including a K-9 unit, and four injured. The three BA troopers stationed across from the front gate are missing and presumed dead...the Army also lost a two-man sniper team when a portion of the Parliament Building's rooftop collapsed underneath their feet."

"What about the Royal Archers?"

Harry looked up from his notes and nodded slightly. "Good news on that front, at least. Turns out that our magical burn salve works on Muggles... one of the medics told me that four of the injured wouldn't have survived without it. So they all came through, with only eight still injured enough after the salve to send to hospital."

The Muggle nodded gravely. "That is good news...so what of the terrorists?"

Harry frowned. "Ten dead, three captured. At least three more got away."

"And have the prisoners been interrogated?"

Harry shook his head. "We've kept them stunned and unconscious up at Edinburgh Castle. Once we rid ourselves of the Ministry of Magic we'll bring them back down here for questioning."

"Why here?"

"Because the Queen won't be returning anytime soon, and we've got wards in place that will keep the prisoners from magically escaping."

"And have you identified their dead?"

Harry nodded. "All were marked Death Eaters...from first looks all low-level troops. One of the attack leaders was in the first wave, but managed to pop away before he splashed into the pond. Don't know about the other"

"So their leaders were the first to retreat?" asked the Scottish leader. "Rather cowardly."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Harry replied. "Might have only postponed the inevitable... Voldemort will probably decide that this was a failed attack."

"Why wouldn't he? Surely you wouldn't consider this attack to have been successful?"

Harry stared at the Muggle, trying hard not to wear his incredulity on his sleeve. "I failed to protect the Queen's guests, despite our plans and preparations."

The First Minister scowled. "Well, don't let the Queen hear you say that...we both thought just the opposite. You were put in an impossible situation. Eight thousand people cramped together in a public setting, for a well-publicized event? We should have known better...and how many more would have died had your plans not been in place? Had there not been those slides, or your wards, or your people?" He pointed towards the door and added, "Those people out there...the people in here, for that matter...we all owe our lives to you and your people."

"Yes, Sir."

"So what's Whitehall's response to all this?"

"A work in progress, Sir," Harry replied. "Hermione's having a devil of a time keeping COBRA from passing out pitch forks and going on witch

hunts.”

“Taking an offensive approach is wrong?” the First Minister asked.

“Not so long as we’re certain of our targets,” Harry replied, with a glance across the room. “There are thousands of witches and wizards in Britain that have nothing to do with these attacks, or with the stupid policies of the Ministry.” He then gestured towards the others in the room wearing Potter plaid and added, “This lot is a prime example. Without their help during the evacuation, things would have been far rougher.”

The Scottish leader snorted. “I’ll give you that,” he replied. “They were helpful down here as well, and Her Royal Majesty was quick to make me aware of these same points before she left.”

“Good,” replied Harry.

“So what is the appropriate response to all this, then?”

“We’ve established a...well, call it either a full blockade, or a quarantine. All transfer points between the Muggle and magical worlds are locked down. No witches or wizards in or out.”

“Based on what I’ve learned the past few days, that won’t keep their movements in check, though.”

“That’s right, but it’s better than nothing,” Harry admitted.

“So why did you bring your Headmistress along?” asked the First Minister.

“To brief the Magicals the same that I’ve been briefing you,” Harry replied. “And with Gilmerton Close shut down, she’s their ticket back into the wizarding world.”

“And we’ll let them go because we trust them?”

“Of course we trust them,” Harry replied sharply. “Well, at least I do, and they are wearing my tartan, right?”

The First Minister snorted. “Pity that we’re letting them go, then. They could be a big help to our side of this mess.”

Harry bit his lower lip, emulating Hermione’s favorite way to think.

“Couldn’t force them to help,” he finally said. “But that doesn’t mean that they wouldn’t volunteer.”

Raising an eyebrow, the First Minister asked, “How so?”

“Well,” replied Harry, “we’ve already got sympathizers working on our side. There’s people inside the Ministry keeping us in the know...and then there’s the volunteers that are still up on the coastline doing Dementor patrols.”

“Not to mention your TPOMS squadron,” the First Minister added. “So...fancy mustering this lot into the Paras?”

Harry turned back towards the small crowd of witches and wizards that were presently huddled around the Headmistress. Half of them were parents of his classmates, like the Abbotts and Patils. None of them looked like Paratroop material.

As a new box took shape on Harry’s mental org chart, he shook his head and said, “Don’t think that active military would be best, but...perhaps some sort of volunteer reserve that could be called on to help as needed?”

The First Minister’s eyes lit up. “Like the Home Guard?”

“The Home Who?”

“The Home Guard, during the Second World War,” the First Minister explained. “A kind of civilian defense corps.”

“That might work,” agreed Harry. “They’d need a leader, though...I’ve got enough on my plate already.”

“Looks like they’ve already got one,” commented the Scottish politician, as he nodded towards the Headmistress. “Of course, she’d need to coordinate with someone high on our side of the fence.”

Harry smiled, “Volunteering for the job, Sir?”

The Muggle politician snorted, then looked back towards McGonagall.

“Well it’s not like London has asked for my help otherwise, is it?” he asked. “Co-leaders of the ‘Scottish Home Guard’...nice ring to it, don’t you think? Now, how we would get hold of Minerva or my troops if they disappear into your world, that’s a question...they know how to work mobiles?”

Harry snorted, and wondered whether the First Minister’s possessive pronouns and the use of the Headmistress’s first name were good or bad things.

“Some of them likely do,” he replied. “Whether they’d work in high-magic areas is the question...not too many cell towers around Hogwarts.”

“Maybe your Headmistress would have an idea, then?”

Harry smiled. "Might want to get her on-board with the idea of co-leadership first, Sir."

"Well, then, time to make my recruiting pitch, then, isn't it?" the First Minister replied. "Can you stay long enough to help me with questions?"

Harry nodded, and decided that he might have to radically revise his opinion on the First Minister...and maybe even his general opinion on politicians.

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5:30pm, En Route to Balmoral Castle, Scotland

The voice of the latest (and least wanted) member of Harry Potter's entourage broke a few brief seconds of radio silence.

"Major Potter, Sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"We're five minutes from landing...if you care to look out the cabin window, I can start identifying units for you."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Harry replied with a sigh.

They'd been in the air for a little over thirty minutes. The Ministry of Magic's Obliviators had finally left Holyrood Park, the Garden Party guests had been evacuated, the ICW delegation flown back to London, and the Parliament building restored to its former "glory." Harry had orders to join the Queen at Balmoral Castle (not that he wouldn't have followed her without the orders), and had planned on simply badge-jumping using Steve as an anchor. But as TPOMS was also deploying there, it was suggested that he ride with his squadron, so that he might get an aerial view of the Estate and its defenses.

Unfortunately, from Harry's perspective, a tour guide came along for the ride. The pimply-faced junior officer from the Royal Scottish Regimental HQ had been "loaned" to TPOMS, as a liaison between Harry's group and the regular Muggle army. This eager beaver had been briefed in on the contingency planning for a possible Royal evacuation, and was determined to show the extent of that knowledge from takeoff to final approach.

The similarity between this Muggle soldier and the older brother of two in his squadron wasn't lost upon Harry. Nor to Fred, who had coughed out the name "Percy" into their shared comm. system more than once.

"The bulk of the Army's deployment involves the 51st Highland Brigade, with elements of the Black Watch thrown into the mix," the aide stated as they began their descent.

"Black Watch?"

"The Royal Highland Regiment," chimed in New Six, from across the cabin. "Top shelf active regiment, with troops drawn mostly from Scotland. They've been in Iraq for a few years now, but they rotate units in and out to keep them fresh...must have pulled the poor bastards who were home on hols."

Harry nodded. "So this Highland Brigade?"

"Territorial Army," said Stout, joining the conversation. "They're reserves and part-timers for the most part. Not nearly as well-armed or well-trained."

"Sir, the 51st does have civil defense within its ORBAT, and has trained for just this sort of thing," the junior officer stated.

"What's an ORBAT?"

"Erm, Order of Battle, Sir?"

"The ORBAT identifies the brigade's standing missions," added New Six.

"Oh, thanks," Harry replied. He then looked down as they passed over some of the higher peaks of the southern Cairngorms. "So what are those domes and dishes down on those hilltops?"

"That's 2nd Signal Brigade, Sir," replied the aide. "They're tasked with providing emergency and disaster recovery communications across the country."

"Also looks like they're sharing space with field radar units," added Stout.

"So we'll have to ask for permission to fly up here as well?" asked Harry.

"Yes, Sir," the aide replied, as he looked curiously around the cabin. He'd never seen such a strange squadron...half-officers, half-enlisted, half young, half older, more than a few women. And they were led by a boy younger than he was...a boy with the rank of Major that was asking the most basic of questions about the armed forces. Had it not been for the pips on Harry's uniform and the respect shown by the older enlisted men under his command, the junior officer would have pegged Harry to be more likely a Firstie at Sandhurst.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"If I might ask, exactly what kind of airborne unit is this?"

Harry turned away from the cabin window and shared a smile with his squadron. He then gave the junior officer a stern-looking gaze and asked, "Lieutenant, do these maroon berets, or the patches on our sleeves mean anything to you?"

"Yes, Sir," the Muggle soldier replied. "You're with the First Paras, Sir."

"That's right, Lieutenant...the *Parachute* Regiment. So how do you think we go airborne...flying on broomsticks?"

"Erm, no Sir...sorry Sir."

"Any other questions, then?"

"Erm, no Sir," the young Muggle replied sullenly. But then he quickly regained his composure, and picked up his running commentary on the Castle's perimeter defenses.

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A badge-call from Steve once they had landed at Balmoral informed Harry that he was to attend to the Queen. He would have badge-jumped, were it not for the fact that Lieutenant Longbottom's presence was also required. So he decided instead to get some use out of the Percy-wannabe and ordered the aide to help the rest of his squadron find a mess tent. The junior officer resisted Harry's dismissal until New Six and Stout stepped up and stared down the lieutenant with suggestions that the boy follow their commanding officer's orders.

A Household Staff member that Harry knew from Buckingham Palace was waiting at the Castle's front steps. The elderly groomsman raised half an eyebrow at the slightly disheveled mishmash of tartan and combat fatigues worn by the two young men, but held his tongue...he knew what had happened in Edinburgh, and had become accustomed to the terribly informal relationship between the Queen and her Wizard.

The Castle's rooms and hallways were bustling with a thick mixture of military and civilians that the three needed to make their way through en route to what the groomsman called "The Bunker."

When asked about their destination, the servant explained that Balmoral had been earmarked in the 1960s as a royal refuge in the event of a nuclear war. A Cold War-era evacuation plan had been dusted off and enacted that brought most of the Queen's extended family to the Estate. He noted further that there was a select group of Muggle Civil Servants and Members of Parliament who had been flown up from London, and that the Household staff were having fits trying to find suitable accommodations for them all...despite the fact that there were sixty-seven rooms in the Castle and more than 100 outbuildings on the Estate.

Harry's thoughts about why Civil Servants and MPs had been brought to Balmoral were put on temporary hold when the elevator that took them several levels below ground opened its doors, and a blur of tartan shot through to envelop him in a bone-crushing hug.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed as she buried her face into the nook of his shoulder.

"Erm...hey, Hermione, hey Susan," Harry replied with surprise, noting out of the corner of his eye that Neville had been similarly attacked by Potter-Plaid and pigtails.

"What are you doing up here?" Harry asked, once he lifted Hermione off the ground and carried her out of the elevator cab.

"Do I need a reason to be by your side, Major Potter?"

"Of course not...it's just...you and the P.M..."

"Plans were enacted that sent some of the other COBRA members off to secured remote locations," Hermione replied, squeezing his arm. "The Foreign Minister is traveling up as part of that plan, and we'll teleconference after dinner."

"So you've been posted to Balmoral instead of Number10?"

"No, I'll just have a longer commute," she said with a smile. "Do you mind?"

"What? I'd be daft if I did," Harry said with a firm squeeze around Hermione's waist.

The sound of Harry's Muggle escort clearing his throat brought his mind back to business.

"Lord Gryffindor, if you would be so kind, then?" the groomsman asked, gesturing down the hallway with his arm.

"Erm, right...thought we'd been through this...I'm Harry, right?"

Hermione smiled and pinched her boyfriend's arm.

"Given the occasion, Milord, the title fits."

"What occasion is that, then?"

A sparkle came to Hermione's eye as she recalled how Harry had teased her during their first Royal audience. She gave him a sly smile and

said, "You'll see."

oo00000oo

Thirty minutes later Harry Potter left his audience with the Queen with a set of keys in his sporran and a shocked expression on his face.

"I can't believe she just did that," he muttered, as he rode the elevator back to ground level with Hermione and Neville.

His consort snorted. "Well, you have to admit...it does solve the TPOMS lodging situation rather nicely."

"So she could have just offered to let us sleep there for the night," Harry countered. "Didn't have to give me the bloody building...or the 10,000 acres of land that goes with it!"

"Thought that this was just an exchange for the Gryffindor lands that were turned into Windsor Park and Castle?" asked Neville.

"But I didn't ask for it...didn't need it..."

"But that didn't keep you from telling the Queen 'Yes, Ma'am, thank you, Ma'am', right?" asked Neville.

"Yeah, but...10,000 acres? I don't even know how big that is!"

"About fifteen square miles," Hermione replied, quickly doing the math.

"It's big, but not obscenely big," Neville offered. "Our family lands cover 6,400 acres, for comparison."

"And Longbottom Manor is huge!" Harry explained. "And why did she decide to give this to me now?"

"Have you already forgotten how the Queen answered that question, Harry?" Hermione asked with a smile.

Harry shook his head as the elevator doors opened to the Castle's main floor.

"Yeah, yeah...'You'll see,' she said...made me think that she was channeling you, Hermione." Harry muttered. "So how long before I see, then?"

Hermione smiled as she took hold of Harry's hand, led him outside, and pointed to two waiting Land Rover Rapid Deployment Vehicles.

"You'll see just as soon as you gather your squadron, Major Potter."

"Right, then," Harry said firmly. "You're in on this surprise as well?"

"You'll see."

The TPOMS commander sighed, allowing Hermione to have her bit of fun. Neville was dispatched to go find the others while Sir Harry and Dame Hermione walked hand-in-hand towards the Landys.

"So who else is along for the ride?" Harry asked.

The answer came when Hermione led Harry around the back of one of the Land Rovers and gestured towards a pair of Potter-Plaid wearing snoggers who were doing a bit of opportunistic groping.

"Oh, hi there, Harry," called out Luna, as she nonchalantly pulled her hand out from underneath Ron's kilt. "Thanks for the 'his and her' skirts!"

"Erm...sure," Harry stammered. "Checking for ants in Ron's pants?"

As the youngest male Weasley blushed from embarrassment, Luna shook her head and shrugged.

"Oh, Ronnie isn't wearing any pants right now, but you can't be too sure, can you?"

"Erm, hello, there Harry," Ron said, pulling his own hands free for a slipshod salute.

Harry snorted. "I'd say 'at ease' but that would be rather redundant, wouldn't it?"

Ron replied with an even deeper blush, allowing Harry to add, "So when did you two arrive?"

"When Hermione did," stated Luna. "Five o'clock is quitting time in the mail room, and she gave me the nicest hug when we side-along apparated."

"Did she, now?" Harry asked with a smile and a glance towards his girlfriend.

"Just close enough to get our...*cough* ...fellow MI-5 agent...*cough* ...here," Hermione muttered. "Of course, if her boyfriend knew how to apparate, he could've done it himself."

"Oh, that wouldn't have been any fun...Ronnie and I have plenty of other chances to hug," Luna said brightly. "You, and I on the other hand..."

"Yes, well we're all square now, aren't we?" Hermione said quickly. "And you might want to get some last hugs in now, because boys and girls will have separate dorms tonight."

"Oh, poo!"

"Oh, poo is right," added Harry.

Hermione gave Harry a sidelong glance, smiled, and whistled a bit of "Love Shack." It was horribly off-tune, but he still got the idea.

"So Luna, are you going to be staying with us, then?" he asked.

Luna nodded and shrugged her shoulders. "Somebody needs to ride on Ronnie's broomstick, right?"

"Better her than me," Hermione muttered under her breath.

Ron tried to change the subject, asking, "So where is this forward position that we've been assigned to?"

"Ask her," Harry replied, with a nod towards Hermione.

She gave the two-word response of the day.

"You'll see."

The arrival of TPOMS squadron and the pesky Muggle junior officer kept Ron from pressing the issue.

"Which Landy will you be using, Major Potter?" asked the attaché.

"Hadn't decided...why?"

"Because I'll need to ride by your side, of course," the Muggle said matter-of-factly.

"Oh, that won't be necessary...Lieutenant," chimed in Hermione. "I'll be by the Major's side."

The junior officer gave Hermione's civilian dress a once-over. The woven pattern of the long skirt she was wearing matched that of the non-military issue kilt that Harry still wore, but there were no other signs of rank.

"I am Lieutenant Bravard, Ma'am, the Major's new attaché. You are...."

"Somebody with a security clearance much higher than yours, Lieutenant," Hermione said with an arched eyebrow and a flash of her laminated MI-5 credentials. "And somebody who is traveling with Major Potter and his troops to an area that you most certainly haven't been cleared to visit."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, I'm afraid that it is," said Harry with a smile. "Now why don't you run along and make yourself useful someplace else? I'll come looking for you if I need your assistance."

"But, Sir?"

"Dismissed, Lieutenant!"

"Yes, Sir," the young man said with no small amount of dejection.

Once the Muggle soldier was out of earshot, Harry said, "Thanks for the excuse, Hermione...that boy was starting to get on my nerves."

"Boy, Harry?" Hermione quipped. "He's at least a few years older than we are."

"Doesn't feel like it right now," Harry said with a sigh.

"Sounds like the ants are getting to Harry, Hermione," opined Luna. "Do you want to check, or should I?"

Hermione smiled. "Oh, I'll take care of that later, thanks."

"Promise?" asked Harry with a smirk.

Hermione waggled her eyebrows, and took a step closer to Harry so that she could grab hold of the pleated front of his kilt.

"Unless you'd rather have that inspection now?"

Wolf-whistles and catcalls from the members of TPOMS squadron kept Harry from fully considering his options, so he gently pushed Hermione's hand away from his kilt hem and gruffly ordered his troops into the back of the vehicles.

It wasn't until Hermione and he climbed into the front cab of the lead Landy that he whispered an answer into her ear.

"Later would be brilliant, thanks."

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There were a number of checkpoints between the Castle grounds and the highway that connected Balmoral with Aberdeen. Once they turned onto the two-lane road Harry noticed only military traffic.

"Blocked off civilian access, then?" he asked.

Their driver nodded. "Probably only for a few more hours, Major...until all of the troops are where they should be."

"And where is it that we should be, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"You'll see," she replied with a grin.

A mile away from the Castle's main entrance road, the Land Rovers turned north along a secondary unpaved path that climbed up out of the wooded valley of the River Dee and into heath-covered moorlands. They crossed armed checkpoints at the start of this rough road, and came upon another checkpoint at a crosspath four miles farther along.

That this latest roadblock was in a barren area of moorlands caught Harry's eye, but not as much as what was guarding it...two dozen members of the Black Watch, dressed in desert-pattern camouflage and armed to the teeth with automatic weapons, two machine gun emplacements, armored vehicles, and a tank.

"Good afternoon, *Major*," said the soldier that popped his head into the Land Rover's cab.

Harry was in too pissy a mood not to respond to the sarcasm in the man's voice, so he took note of the man's rank and said, "It is a good afternoon, isn't it, *Sergeant*?"

The soldier snorted, which made Hermione turn a little cross. After demonstrating her reason for being with a flash of her MI-5 badge, she asked, "Do you have a problem, soldier?"

"No, Ma'am," he replied. "It's a lovely day to be sitting here out in the open, waiting to be attacked by *witches* on *broomsticks*. Makes perfect sense that I'm here, instead of home with my girl after eight months in Basra."

Harry shook his head. "You've been told, then?"

"Yes, Major. We're to defend the Queen against you lot."

"You lot?"

"Well, sir, not you personally...you're supposed to be one of the good wizards, right?"

"That's right, Sergeant," Harry snapped. "I'm the Queen's Wizard, *Major* Harry Potter...do you have a problem with that?"

"Erm, no Sir...sorry Sir," the soldier said with his eyes cast down. "Just seems rather ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, you say?" roared a voice from behind the Landy.

Harry popped his head out of the opened window and spotted New Six and the other "real army" members of his squadron bearing down.

"You miserable piece of excrement," shouted New Six. "Did you even ask the Major for permission to speak freely?"

The sergeant and the other members Black Watch squadron took note of the demeanor of the men from Sport and Social, and made to back up their man. Deciding it was time to live up to his command rank, Harry stepped out of the Landy and ordered New Six and the others to stand down.

"I think that the Sergeant and his men need a little bit of reassurance that there's a real reason why they are here to guard against witches and wizards," he announced.

"Good idea, Major," New Six said with an evil grin. "Turn him into a newt...that'll get his attention."

The soldiers on both sides of this mini-confrontation laughed, with only the TPOMS members knowing that Harry could actually fulfill that request.

"Hermione...don't suppose we have wards established here?"

"No...can only put the ward line so far out."

Harry nodded. "Too bad, that makes it out of bounds for me to turn the Sergeant here into a flobberworm. So how far to my new Lodge?"

Closing one eye in a squint to aid her estimate, Hermione replied, "About four miles to the west."

"And does the view change between here and there?"

"Not really, why?"

"Because brooms won't trip the Ministry's sensors, and these men need to get an idea of what they might be up against."

"Oh, Harry, you aren't thinking...."

"So what else is new?" he replied with a grin. "Captain Weasley?"

"Yes, Sir!" Ron shouted.

"Break out the brooms."

"Yes, Sir!"

The members of the Black Watch Squadron who had been ordered to defend the crossroad filled the valley with laughter at Harry's orders.

Three minutes later, some of these same men were filling their pants as a full squadron of airborne assault broomsticks buzzed two feet over their heads at one-hundred and ten miles per hour.

"Ahh...that felt good!" announced "Seeker" as they left the checkpoint behind and headed up the valley in a stacked V-formation.

"Harry...slow down! And the secrecy statutes..." whined Hermione.

"Won't mean a thing if a group of Death Eaters pops in front of those boys, will it?" Harry retorted.

"Seeker?" asked a voice coming through their charmed headgear.

"Go ahead, Lee...erm, I mean 'Rasta'."

"So we're heading to a position that is forward of those blokes?"

"Looks like it, Rasta."

"In the direction towards where that tank's gun was pointed?" added Stout.

"Got a problem with that?" asked Harry.

"No Sir, just wondering."

"No worries, Sergeant Stout," chimed in Hermione. "We'll be free to use our wands up there for defense."

"And where exactly is there, *Chequers*?" asked Harry.

The question had been posed enough times in front of the troops for them to all respond in unison on Hermione's behalf.

"You'll see!"

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The Queen's Wizard didn't think there was much at all to see as they followed a one-lane cart path up the valley. Nothing rose above the level of the heath, other than the stone walls of two abandoned buildings passed along the way. Harry was beginning to question the Queen's generosity, but kept those thoughts to himself so long as he had a live mike within his flight helmet.

They followed the valley until it came to a point and started back down on the far side of a large hill to their left. Hermione pointed towards a small monument of rocks and told him to land, explaining that the squadron needed to be keyed into the wards that began at that point.

"What wards are you talking about, Hermione?" Harry asked, as he followed her instructions.

"Those that protect Glengairn Lodge, Harry."

"And where is that, then?"

Hermione pointed up to the top of hill on the north slope of the valley, where a lonely looking stone building stood sentinel.

"That's Glengairn Lodge?" he asked.

Hermione nodded just before she hopped off the broom and removed her helmet.

Harry took a good, full-circle glance at their bleak-looking location. There was a fine view of Ben Avon and its sister peaks to the west, but not much else. He removed his helmet, so that he could ask in confidence, "That's it, then?"

His girlfriend chuckled. "Oh ye of little faith...don't you know by now that looks can be deceiving? Come here, you."

The Queen's Wizards followed orders, and allowed Hermione to wave her wand over his head a few times.

"Take a few steps up the hill, and see if your opinion still holds."

Harry did so, and witnessed a dramatic change in landscape as he passed through the slight shimmer of a ward line. Halfway up the hill, the heath gave way to lush green lawn, and a manicured landscape of flowering bushes and shrubs. The forlorn-looking stone structure had morphed into an impressive ivy-walled estate house.

“Whoa...what’s that?”

“Well it could be home, if you want,” Hermione replied brightly. “But for now, we can just call it Glengairn.”

Harry thought that “Glengairn” had a nice ring to it, but that “home” sounded even better, especially when Hermione said it. He began to stride up the hill, only to have her stop him.

“Hold on, Harry...let me get the others through,” she asked. “I want to see the look on your face when we get up there.”

“Why?” he asked. “Can’t imagine that the view could be any better than this one.”

“You’ll see,” Hermione said with a wink.

Harry anxiously waited for Hermione to complete her spell work.

“So you built this illusion into the wards?” he asked.

“No, that’s beyond me, I’m afraid,” Hermione admitted. “It’s a hyped-up notice-me-not charm built into a perimeter ward. The goblins think it’s been here for hundreds of years...all I can do is control who is affected by it.”

“How did you manage that?”

“With the land-owner’s permission,” she replied.

“But I thought that I own all this, now?”

“Not until the papers that you signed are filed,” Hermione noted. “And you certainly didn’t own these lands two weeks ago.”

“So you had the Queen’s help?”

“Well, she was the land owner.”

“And you kept this a secret from me?”

Hermione chuckled, and nodded. “It was supposed to be a birthday present, but given present circumstances it couldn’t wait.”

“Wow,” said Harry, amazed at what his Queen and Consort had accomplished.

“Save the wows until we get to the top,” Hermione instructed.

“Yes, Dear,” he replied with a grin.

Once everyone was inside the ward line Hermione grabbed Harry’s hand and took the lead up the hill. They stopped twice along the way, just so that Harry could smell the flowering bushes and touch the green grass to reassure himself that it was all real.

“So where is the front door?” he asked, taking a new look at the building.

“Around the other side,” Hermione replied. “View is better facing north.”

“How could it be any better?” Harry asked.

Hermione decided not to give her stock reply, as they had reached the building and were following a flag stone path around to the other side. Instead, she waited until she could sweep her arms out towards the valley below and simply say, “That’s how.”

“Holy shi...”

“Language, Harry!”

“And you didn’t swear the first time you were here?”

“Not as far as you know.”

“Sweet Merlin on a Manticore!” shouted Ron, who had been close behind Harry and Hermione.

“There, see Harry? And it was Ron, too...if he didn’t see the need to curse then surely you shouldn’t.”

Ron was too shocked to notice the insult. Neither were the other magical members of the squadron once they shared the vantage point.

Luna didn’t seem too concerned, though. Neither did the Muggles.

“So this is our forward position?” asked New Six.

“Yes.”

And there's something down there we'd need to defend against?"

Harry snorted.

"Pull your wizard glasses out and take another look."

All of the Muggle squadron members took the hint and put digital binoculars up to their eyes.

"Whoa...what the hell is that swimming in that lake?" asked Coley.

"Why that's Lenny, of course," said Luna.

"That thing has a name?"

"Doesn't every Giant Squid?"

"So let me guess," said New Six. "You all recognize that hamlet below us?"

"Yes," Harry replied with a wavering voice. "It's called Hogsmeade."

10:00pm, Harwich Port, Essex

Peter Vanderwood paid no mind to Percy's dry heaves over the port rail of the Hook to Harwich ferry...his focus was already divided between the approaching coastline and the bottom of his beer bottle.

"Damn," he scowled, "I wonder if there's still time for a final round."

"Aren't we there, yet?" Percy asked weakly.

"Your country, mate...you tell me," the Dutch wizard muttered. "Stay here," he ordered, as he headed back below decks.

"Not going anywhere," Percy replied, as he hung for dear life to the railing.

The North Sea hadn't been all that rough during the six hour transit, but the Minister of Knowns had gotten the munchies and stuffed himself full of Muggle fast food right before they had boarded the ship. The greasy cheeseburgers and chips didn't last long in his stomach once the anchor was raised and the first pint of duty-free beer went down. He'd been puking at regular intervals ever since.

There was a dark green bottle in each of the Dutch wizard's hands when he returned a few minutes later.

"Hey, I thought to get you a beer before I closed out your tab," Peter announced.

"No thanks," Percy whispered.

"Right then...I'll have to drink twice as fast."

"When are we getting off this cursed Muggle ship?" whined Percy.

"Once we pass inside the frontier wards, or I finish my drinks...whichever comes last."

"But the wards...I'm a high-ranking Ministry official.. Won't be a problem if you're with me."

The Dutch wizard looked at the green-gilled English wizard and laughed.

"So you say...forgive me if I don't think you look much like a high-ranking Ministry official right now."

"But I am!"

"So go then...I'm not keeping you."

"Have to take you along."

"No way in hell that I'm letting you side-along apparate me onto shore," the young wizard scoffed. "Although once we're there...don't suppose you know of any floo connections in Harwich?"

Percy frowned. "Don't know anything about Harwich...we floo to specific places, not Muggle cities."

"How stupid is that?" asked Peter. "Never mind, I already know the answer." He thought for a moment, then said, "Taxi into London shouldn't cost more than a couple hundred quid...I've got enough, and you probably have just enough galleons to pay me back."

"Taxi?" asked Percy.

"A Muggle car for hire, you idiot," the Dutchman replied.

I know what a taxi is," Percy complained. "Just want this trip to be over."

Peter Vanderwood ignored Percy's whining as he took a long final draw from the second beer bottle. He then carelessly tossed the empty bottle overboard and wiped his mouth on his jacket sleeve. Looking out towards the fast approaching shoreline, he said, "Have to be within three miles now, let's see...we'll apparate inside that Muggle fort on that point of land, okay?"

Percy groaned.

"What a helpless bugger," Peter muttered. Grabbing hold of his two bags stuffed with duty-free whisky, he asked, "Think you can manage to switch your grip from that handrail to my waist?"

Percy nodded and lurched towards the Dutchman's side.

"Oi, keep your face pointing away from me," Peter yelled. "Don't want you spilling your guts on the single malt."

When Percy complied with this request, the Dutch wizard rechecked that they wouldn't be spotted by the other passengers, then apparated out into the night.

10:30pm, Balmoral Castle, Scotland

The Queen's Wizard had returned to Balmoral Castle, and was in SO14's control room with Steve when his Art Club badge began to vibrate. Not wishing to disturb those monitoring the different video displays (or to openly advertise the capabilities of his Order's emblem), Harry stepped into an adjacent loo.

"Go ahead, Hermione," he said, once he activated his badge.

"Are you ready for bed yet?"

Harry looked at his watch.

"Yeah, I guess so...not that much going on right now."

"Good," Hermione replied. "Are you someplace...private right now?"

"Yeah, actually, I am...why?"

"Because I'm already under the covers, I don't fancy you using me as an anchor point with your boots still on, and I want to see you dressed in my housewarming present."

"Oh," Harry replied, with some confusion. "So you're at Glengairn?"

"That'd be a bit crowded, with your squadron quartered there, wouldn't it?"

"The Love Shack, then?"

"Harry...I'm under the covers."

"Yeah, but where...Balmoral? London? Windsor?"

"Does it really matter more than the fact that there's barely anything between me and those covers right now?"

Harry snorted. "Well, when you put it that way..."

"That's right, so pull out that present and get cracking."

"Right...hold on."

Pulling his ever-present rucksack off of his shoulder, Harry opened the flap and pulled out a small package that Hermione had given him as a "housewarming present" that afternoon. It had been something that she hadn't wanted him to open in front of the squadron.

When he unwrapped the small box he saw why.

"So what do you think, Harry?"

Harry frowned as he pushed past folded tissue paper and pulled out a small triangle of tartan fabric fixed with a few pieces of string.

"Hold on, I'll tell you once I've canceled the shrinking charm."

Hermione giggled over the Art Club badge.

"Harry, they haven't been shrunk."

Really? Erm, what are they then?"

"Harry, you can't tell me that you haven't seen a thong before."

"A thong? For me?"

"Why not?" Hermione asked. "You seem to like them well enough when I'm wearing them."

"Yes, but..."

"Are you telling me that you aren't going to make me happy and wear my gift?"

"Erm, no...of course not...wouldn't you rather me arrive under the covers starkers, though?"

"And what if there's an emergency and we have to badge-jump to the Queen's defense?" Hermione asked. "You wouldn't want to duel naked, would you?"

"Erm maybe...but not in front of the Queen, and only if you were my naked opponent and we were shooting chocolate sauce at each other."

"Hmmm...hold that thought for another night, mister, and get dressed."

Harry shook his head in disbelief, and then cast a worried glance at the door that led back into the control room.

"Are you doing this just to get my mind off things?"

"No, I'm doing it to get your mind onto me."

"And the pillow talk is part of the deal?"

"Is that a complaint? Because if it is, I hear that some of the other agents are sleeping out in Balmoral's mews tonight."

"Erm, yes Dear...I mean, no Dear...I mean...hold-on," Harry said with no small amount of exasperation.

The Queen's Wizard quickly stripped down. Or at least tried to...he was still getting used to fastening and unfastening his kilt pins and straps.

Once he was down to only his dragonhide wrist holster and wand, he grabbed hold of the skimpy shorts and managed to slip them on after a few tries getting his legs into the correct gaps.

"Hermione, this looks silly," Harry whined, checking out his look in the mirror.

"Guess they look too silly for me to wear, then?"

"Of course not...you've got a cute bum."

"And you don't?"

"Hermione...."

"Hey, are you a Gryffindor, or not?"

Harry snorted, grabbed his rucksack in his other hand, and jumped...into something that looked quite like a Gryffindor dormitory. Only it wasn't.

"Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard flinched at the sound of a feminine voice that wasn't Hermione's.

"Parvati?" he asked, as he quickly covered his barely-covered bits with his rucksack and spun around.

He had it half right...both Parvati *and* her twin sister were sitting on a four-poster bed with drawn curtains, wearing skimpy little night gowns with a tartan pattern that matched his thong.

"Harry, what are you doing here?" Padma exclaimed. "What are you doing here dressed like that?"

"Not that we mind, mind you," Parvati said with a grin. "Hermione never told us how cute your bum was."

Motion in the corner of Harry's eye caught his attention before he could explain. Susan Bones's head poked out from the curtains of a different bed and she sleepily asked, "What's going...Harry?"

"Hold on a second," Harry asked, as he nudged Hermione's "ray" on his Art Club badge.

"Harry?" came a voice over the badge. "Where are you?"

"That's what I'd like to know," he replied. "And while you're telling me where I am, maybe you can talk loud enough to explain to Susan, Parvati and Padma why I am here?"

"Susan...Parvati?...oh, bugger!"

A moment later, Harry heard the silence-charmed curtains pull back from the bed behind him.

Two moments later, he found himself being dragged arse over teakettle backwards.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, as his limbs got tangled up with his girlfriend's.

"Hang on," his new bedmate asked. She then leaned over Harry's body, giving him a close-up view of the matching thong that she was wearing, and poked her own head out of the curtains.

"Sorry, girls, he was supposed to pop up under the covers, not outside of the curtains."

"Oh we don't mind too much, do we girls?" Parvati asked brightly. "You can make it up to us by telling us all of the juicy details in the morning."

"Okay...no," Hermione replied.

"So is he spending the night, then?" Padma asked with a sly smile.

"Would you mind if he did?"

"I wouldn't, but Hannah might be surprised when she goes off-duty in the morning."

"Unless she is supposed to be part of the juicy details?"

"Of course she isn't," Hermione huffed. "Good night, ladies."

"Good night, Harry!" Parvati shouted across the room, earning her a chorus of giggles.

Hermione swore under her breath, and pulled her head back inside the curtains. Her boyfriend was sitting on top of the covers with a bemused expression on his face.

"Oh, Merlin, Harry, I'm so sorry...this was supposed to be a way to get your mind off things and I've..."

"Succeeded beyond your wildest dreams?"

Hermione let out a deep breath. "I'm never going to hear the end of this one, am I?"

"Probably not," Harry replied with a smile, as he unfolded his legs and stretched out on the bed. Shifting uncomfortably, he then reached back and adjusted the string that made up the back of his shorts. He patted the pillow next to him and asked, "So where did you bring me, anyway?"

"Still in Balmoral," Hermione said softly, as she took the hint and stretched out next to Harry. "In the tower...they converted the top part into a room for the witches-in-waiting to use."

"Thought that it looked familiar...this is where I first met the Prince. Weren't we were going to use the Love Shack that we set up outside of Glengairn, though?"

"Yes, well...I decided to let Ron and Luna use it for the night."

"Ron and Luna?" asked Harry. "What in Merlin's name for?"

"So that Ron can do something other than get jealous of you and so that Luna can do Ron."

"Oh," Harry replied. "That actually makes sense, I guess...so why here, then?"

"Well, Hannah has the night shift by the Queen's chambers, so she offered me the use of her bed, and I thought since you've never been able to see the witch's dormitory at Hogwarts, that..."

"You thought that you'd sneak your boyfriend into your pretend dorm room for a romp?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Well, maybe not a romp so much as...a cuddle?"

Harry nodded.

"Scoot up then, and let's get under the covers."

Hermione smiled, and quickly complied, turning away from Harry so that she could fall back into a tight spoon. Once she reached for Harry's hand and pulled it down to cover her midriff, they lay quiet for a few moments.

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Hannah does know not to pile into bed in the morning, right?"

"Hmmm...would you be upset if I asked her to join us?"

"Is this some sort of boyfriend test, Hermione?"

"Maybe," she said with a smiling tone of voice.

There was a second lull in the conversation.

"Harry?"

Her boyfriend's response came in the form of deep, regular breathing.

Hermione sighed, and wiggled even closer to Harry.

"If only it had been a fiancé test," she whispered. "You would have passed; you know...not that I could ever say that out loud, for fear of being hypocritical about not jumping off of deep ends."

Hermione never saw the smile that formed on Harry's lips in response.

Chapter 40: A Busy Morning

Thursday, July 12, 5:00am, Haven's Head, Milford Haven, Wales

The Dark Lord went against his better judgment and crawled out of his hidey-hole in the early-morning pre-dawn in search of some good news. He could have gone straight to the hippogriff's mouth and portkeyed to Rookwood's or Rodolphus Lestrangle's separate hiding places, but with the way things had been going...well, there was a reason why he hadn't given Rookwood a portkey that transported him to Milford Haven. And so he chose a different path (both figuratively and literally).

Voldemort took care not to do magic or otherwise draw notice towards him during the fifteen-minute walk from the bluff down into the nearest Muggle neighborhood. That the gaunt nose-less reconstructed wizard went unnoticed had more to do with the lack of people out at that early hour than any non-magical stealth skills he possessed. A modest bungalow with a small pile of folded newspapers on its front steps provided exactly what he was looking for...a relatively risk-free source of news. He cautiously approached the house and scooped up the papers under an arm. The loud bark of a neighbor's dog kept him from overstaying his visit. He walked briskly back to the curb with wand and hand, then down the street and back up to the bluff, where the magic carpet waited to ferry him back up the pipe chase and into his isolated lair.

The week's worth of *Western Mail* that had accumulated while the Muggle homeowner was on holiday didn't need to be sorted out by date...the one whose headlines screamed "TERRORISTS CRASH QUEEN'S GARDEN PARTY!" was clearly the most recent. Voldemort snatched the paper up and did a rush read of what was (for him at least) very bad news.

A second, more careful reading allowed the wizard to read between the lines.

The Muggle Queen and Harry Potter lived, which meant that Lestrangle had somehow failed.

The Muggles believed that the attack was performed by Muggle terrorists. This suggested that the Ministry had been able to clean up or cover up after the attack. But then Voldemort remembered the Muggle bullet hole in Alecko Carrow's head, and wondered whether it might have been Potter and the Muggles who were doing the covering up. And if it had been the Muggles who had successfully repelled the attack, and actually killed six of his men (as the paper had claimed), then it was Potter who might have the escape portkeys that they had all carried.

And if Rookwood had been one of the wizards who had been killed or captured?

Voldemort cycled through Occlumency exercises that kept his temper (and more importantly, his magic) under control. This gave him the time and temperament required to review the limited options before him. Harry Potter was just brave enough and stupid enough to activate a blind portkey to see where it led. Which meant that there had been purpose behind the paranoia that had led him to steal newspapers from Muggle stoops...the cave in Cornwall that had been Rookwood's portkey destination really could not be considered secure.

He had to assume the worst, and plan from there. Writing off Lestrangle and his men meant that the cursed and wounded wizards under Snape's medicinal care now comprised the bulk of his fighting force. The potions that were needed to bring them back to health would take at least one more week to concoct and administer, under optimal circumstances. And if the Muggles were to overreact to the attack and lash out against the wizarding world, their targets would be those that were the most visible...not those who had gone to ground.

There was more than enough food in the magical pantry to last the week, but Voldemort took no chances, and prepared a meager ration of egg and bacon for breakfast.

5:45am, Balmoral Castle, Aberdeenshire, Scotland

Harry woke to the sensation of a hand rubbing small circles on his back.

Hmmm...feels good."

"Sssh...go back to sleep, Harry...we've still got forty-five minutes before Hannah will want her bed back."

This response led the Queen's Wizard to recall where he was and how he got there. With eyes now opened and a mind now cleared, he flipped over to face his girlfriend and immediately began to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked.

Harry paused, so that he could permanently archive the memory...his bare-chested girlfriend, sitting cross-legged in bed, dressed only in a Potter Plaid thong. The hand that hadn't been rubbing his back had been used to sort e-mail on a BlackBerry that sat high on her upper thigh.

Pulling her other hand to his lips, he gave it a tender kiss and asked, "Do you know just how sexy you are when you multi-task?"

"Hush," Hermione chided, pulling her hand back. "You weren't sleeping very well, so I thought that..."

"Yeah, thanks."

"So go back to sleep, already."

Harry shook his head as he reached for his wand.

"No, I can't imagine that my mailbox is any less full than my bladder." He then transfigured his own tartan thong into less-revealing boxers and asked, "Think my transfiguration will last long enough for me to make it to the loo?"

"I don't think that any of the witches-in-waiting would mind if it didn't."

"Right, so it's the jacket too...it's almost long enough to cover," Harry replied, as he pulled his TPOMS field jacket out of his sack and slipped his arms into the sleeves.

"It's the door behind Padma's bed, next to the hearth," Hermione said with a smile. "Don't get lost along the way."

"Maybe I should have you lead me there and back?"

"Tempting...but that's exactly the sort of thing that Parvati would expect of us."

"So why disappoint her?"

"Go!" ordered Hermione.

"Yes, Ma'am," Harry said with a cheeky salute, as he grabbed his bag and slipped out through the curtains. Treading lightly across the room so as not to wake the others, he made it to the loo without incident.

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The stream of hot water that beat down on the Queen's Wizard's shoulders was far less effective than Hermione's comforting hand when it came to keeping his spirits up. His nightmares had melded the good and bad of the previous day...both the Garden Party attack, and Hermione's unguarded thoughts about their relationship. What came out was a replay that focused on the Muggle family that had been abused and held hostage in Edinburgh. Or to be more precise, on their situation...in Harry's dreams, it had been Hermione and he who had been held hostage, Hermione who had been used and abused by the Death Eaters, and their children that had been forced to watch helpless as their mum was violated. The despair and helplessness that he felt during these dreams began to creep back into Harry's thoughts, and kept him from even noticing the fact that in those dreams he was not only married to Hermione, but the father of her children.

Any ideas he had brought into the bath about returning to Hannah's borrowed bed and ravishing his girlfriend flowed down the shower drain along with the gray water. Righteous anger rode in on the back of an adrenaline rush, as he roughly towed off and stepped into his kilt. By the time he'd fastened his belt and slipped into his dragonskin boots, Harry had decided that some combination of physical activity and physical violence would be needed before he either went off on the captured Death Eaters, or activated one of the their confiscated portkeys with both wand and gun blazing.

The solution came when Harry pulled the magical scabbard that held a third weapon from his rucksack. With a determined grin he slipped the leather harness over his shoulders, pulled the Sword of Gryffindor cleanly from its scabbard, grabbed his wand, and strode bare-chested back into the witches-in-waiting's bedchambers.

Hannah's bed had gotten crowded in his absence, and his drawn sword and bared chest drew a chorus of non-verbal utterances that were tinged with surprise, shock, and no small amount of lust.

"Erm...Good Morning?" he stammered.

"Good Morning, Harry," four witches cooed in unison.

Harry tried to focus on Hermione face. It helped that she had thrown a white t-shirt on over her thong. It didn't help that Padma, Parvati and Susan were wearing no more than they had the night previous.

Erm...sorry," he said softly. "Didn't mean to scare you...or to wake you up."

"No worries, Harry...it was entirely intentional," Parvati quipped.

"How..."

"I cast a detection charm on your bed curtains last night," explained Padma. "It set off an alarm when you got out of bed."

"But I didn't hear any alarm?"

"It was a silent type," Padma stated.

"Yeah, it was set to vibrate," added Parvati cheekily. "Three guesses where it was set to go off."

"Hush," Padma admonished.

"So why..."

"We wanted the chance to do some girl talk with Hermione," offered Parvati.

"And the chance to see my boyfriend less than fully dressed was just incidental, right girls?" asked Hermione.

"Well that part worked," said Susan, as she gazed appreciatively at the defined muscles on Harry's bared chest.

"In a rush to get somewhere, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Erm, no...I mean yes," he replied. "Wanted to get in a quick workout with my sword."

Hermione cocked her head to one angle in thought.

"Bit too early to wake Sir Evan and badge-jump to Windsor, or to find a sparring partner, don't you think?"

"Yeah...I was just going to find a tree to hack at around here," Harry replied.

"What...and show the world your secret weapon?" Hermione asked.

"That I've got a sword isn't that secret, is it?"

"No, but which sword you've got and the way you've begun to wield it is, though."

"Do you have a better idea in mind, then?"

"Yes, actually," Hermione replied with a smile. She then drew her wand and transfigured a desk chair into a two-foot diameter wooden post that stretched from floor to ceiling.

Harry arched an eyebrow.

"Okay, so it's out of view, but there's not a lot of room to move around, is there?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, and cast spells that shrank down every piece of furniture in the room down to miniature size, save for the bed that she and the other three witches were sitting on.

"Any other excuses, then?"

Harry snorted as some of the steam that was fueling his energy and emotions bled off. Two or three other possible counter-arguments came to mind, but the "Hermione voice" inside of his head parried them before the real Hermione got the chance. So he slid his rucksack to the side, and cast a spell towards the four witches.

"A shield, to keep errant splinters from attacking you," he explained with a smile.

"Better make it two-way, so that we don't attack him," Parvati muttered.

"Remember the rules, ladies," Hermione said. "Look, but don't touch."

"Aww...are you sure we can't form a harem?" Parvati teased.

"Do you want to watch or not?" Hermione asked pointedly.

"Alright, alright...just teasing you," Parvati replied. "Not that you have anything to worry about."

"How's that?"

Padma shook her head in disbelief as Harry began to break into a sweat as he hacked away at the post. She ran hand down the front of her thin tartan-patterned camisole and said, "Oh, please...despite how little we have on, the only Potter Plaid that his eyes were glued to was the bit that's

between your legs.”

Hermione sighed, masking the glee that this assessment had produced with a neutral nod towards Parvati.

“And the only Potter Plaid that your sister’s eyes are glued to is covering my boyfriend’s bum.”

“It’s doing too good of a job,” Parvati quipped. “Don’t you think he’d be more comfortable if that kilt’s hem were a little higher?”

“No...it’s no longer than what the Highland warriors wore back in the day,” Hermione replied.

“Just a few inches, Hermione?”

“How many is ‘a few?’”

“Fourteen or fifteen?”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“In your dreams, Parvati.”

“Well that’s going to be true enough,” the light brown-skinned witch admitted with a sigh. “Can you blame me for asking, though?”

Hermione shifted her attention from her dorm mate back out into the room, where Harry had begun to incorporate twirls and thrusts into his routine that revealed firm thighs and teased with the possibility of seeing more.

“No,” she replied brightly. “I guess I can’t.”

There was a brief lull in the conversation that Susan used to check the time.

“Oh darn, I need to get ready for my shift...Hannah’s getting off soon.”

Parvati laughed. “Well, she’s not the only one.”

“Parvati?” Hermione cautioned.

“Yes, Lady Gryffindor, I’ll be good, Lady Gryffindor,” her dorm mate replied in a sing-song voice.

“Hey...I don’t have that title yet,” Hermione protested.

“Not yet?” Padma asked with an arched eyebrow. She reached out for the Gryffindor’s hand and inspected the ring finger. “So exactly *when* will it become applicable?”

“Come on,” Hermione protested. “We’ve only been together for a few weeks!”

“Oh please,” snarked Parvati. “You two have only been sleeping together for a few weeks, but you’ve been *together* for six years...just didn’t want to admit it.”

“But...we’re not sleeping together...we’re just sharing a bed.”

“A difference only in degree, and only if that’s true,” Padma stated. “And you did say ‘not yet,’ so don’t tell me you aren’t thinking about it.”

Hermione smiled slyly. “Ok,” she replied. “I won’t tell you.”

“Really? So start talking!”

“Sorry, but I’ve really got to get going,” Hermione replied. Waving out towards her boyfriend, she added, “Besides, I have more important things to worry about than the color of my bridesmaid’s gowns...like what else I can do to help Harry work out this excess energy.”

The other three witches snorted.

“Do you really need suggestions?” Padma asked.

“Or do you just need some help draining Harry of his ‘energy?’” added Parvati.

“Thank you for the kind offer, ladies,” Hermione replied. “But I don’t think I’ll need any helping hands.”

“How about a helping mouth, then?”

“Parvati!”

“Yes, Lady Gryffindor. Sorry, Lady Gryffindor. I’ll be good, Lady Gryffindor.”

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6:45am, Mayfair Hotel, London

Special Assistant to the Minister Percy Weasley woke up far too late, and in far too comfortable a bed for his own good. Reaching for the wand that sat on the ornate side table, he pulled himself up and padded off to the loo in search of a headache potion.

Not that he was able to find one in the most expensive suite of one of the most expensive Muggle hotels in London.

Percy groaned as the events of the previous twenty-four hours filtered back into his memory. He feared the worst as he threw his robes over his head and ran out into the sitting room of the suite...and almost found it.

The worst thing would have been a missing Dutch Charms Master.

The next worst thing was a Dutch Charms Master watching pay-per-view Muggle porn as he washed down a room service breakfast with £300 per bottle champagne.

"Hey Percy, buddy...you're alive," the Dutch wizard said with a smile. "Good thing, that...wouldn't fancy me being the one to pay for all this."

"What in Merlin's name do you think you're doing?"

"Waiting on you to take me to your leader, of course," Peter replied brightly. "But so long as you're here...pour yourself a flute and pull up a chair."

"No, I don't think..."

"What, don't fancy that sort of thing?" Peter asked, as he waved towards the telly. "No matter...think I saw a gay porno offered in the listings...I can set you up in the other room."

"No it's not that...I'm not that way...it's just...what I meant was...what...."

The young Dutchman grinned as Percy was taken in by the scene playing on the television.

"Yeah, it is amazing what some Muggles can do...you'd think that there'd have to be an *Engorgio* involved somehow...or maybe a magical throat expansion."

Percy responded with a weak nod.

"So what time are we meeting your boss, Percy?"

"No...scheduled time..." the red-headed wizard replied, as he sat down next to the Dutchman.

"Excellent...there's more movies once this is done."

The Special Assistant to the Minister snorted, but didn't refuse the glass of champagne that was thrust into his hand as he stared at the screen.

If this was the sort of thing was going to cause him to lose his job, then at least he was going to enjoy it.

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7:15am, Balmoral Castle

Susan Bones's need to get ready for her day shift, the return of Hannah from her night shift, and the influx of calls and reports at the start of another busy day all conspired to keep Hermione's hands from getting too naughty once Harry completed his hacking. The two settled for a sweaty hug before he headed off for a second shower, and she decided to rearrange her early morning schedule.

Thinking that Harry found almost as much solace in the air than in her arms, Hermione figured out how to rationalize an early morning flight. By the time that Harry had washed up and dressed (this time more fully), Hermione was kitted out in her combat blacks, and in the company of her parents, who were dressed in full combat gear.

"Attention!" barked Roger, as his wife and he clicked their heels together and snapped off a crisp salute.

Harry rolled his eyes. "At ease, Mr. and Mrs. Granger...what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Harry," Hermione quickly replied. "I thought you might want to do some flying this morning."

"And we're the excuse," Emily said warmly, as she stepped forward and pulled the teen-ager into her arms.

"How are you doing, Sir?" she asked.

"Mrs. Granger, please...."

"Yeah, Mum, aren't there rules about hugging a senior officer?"

"Well if there are, and if your boyfriend can't call me Emily, then I might rather resign my commission!"

"No worries, Mrs. Grang...erm, Emily," Harry replied. "Especially when it's just us." He then rapped his knuckles against Emily's body armor and added, "Although it's hard not to think of that when this stuff gets in the way of your hugs."

Emily laughed. "Yes, well we're still trying to get used to it as well."

"As are her students at the Summer Institute," Roger said with a smile. "Amazing how well the kids behave when their Headmistress patrols the halls carrying an Uzi."

"Roger!"

"What...you don't?"

"No, I do, but it's to protect the children, not to threaten them."

"And do they know that, Dear?"

"Well..."

Harry laughed at the banter, and then asked, "Have you a way back, though?"

Roger nodded. "Sir Evan can anchor us to The Round Tower, and Cumberland Lodge is just down the road from there."

Harry then turned to Hermione. "Not that I don't enjoy the visit, but can you rationalize it given all four of our schedules?"

"Absolutely," she replied. "I needed to get Mum and Dad keyed into Glengairn's wards, and as long as they're right there...well, you ought to check on your squadron deployment, Daddy ought to take a look at your new real estate holdings, and so long as they've come kitted with their wizardvision goggles maybe we could give them a fly-by around Hogwarts?"

Harry arched an eyebrow. "We've really got time for a fly-by, Hermione?"

"Are you telling me that you're going to turn down a chance to fly?"

"Of course not," Harry replied. "So you're going to fly too?"

"Of course not," Hermione replied with a grin, as she nodded towards a long-handled broomstick that was propped up against the wall. "I had Fred hop back to the shop for one of the unmodified Bluebottles."

Harry gave the slow moving "minivan" of broomsticks a frown.

"Well, I guess it'd still be considered flying..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Would you rather spend the next couple of hours filling out after-action reports?"

"No, no...this is obviously a much more important mission," Harry said quickly, as he took hold of the broom. "Shall we open a window and head off?"

"Not just yet, Seeker," Hermione advised, as she opened the flap on his rucksack and stuffed in the broomstick. "You've got a bit of fence-mending to do with the Black Watch."

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Hermione's idea of "fence-mending" involved transporting chafing dishes and coolers from the castle's kitchens into the back of a five-passenger Landy. The Muggle driver assigned to provide transport for the Queen's Wizard arched an eyebrow when Harry and the three Grangers emerged from the castle...not so much for what the four were loading than how they were dressed.

Roger and Emily Granger sported four-color camouflage patterned jackets and trousers, matching body armor (chest plate and leg guards), sand-colored boots and gloves. Each had automatic rifles hanging from shoulder straps, and semi-automatic pistols holstered on their belts. It appeared to be standard military issue, but was anything but...the boots and gloves were dragonhide, the body armor magically thinned and reinforced with lightened sheets of Kevlar and steel plating, and the uniform charmed to maintain a comfortable temperature.

Harry was dressed similarly, save for the bright red "Potter Plaid" kilt and sporran that substituted for trousers and thigh packs, and the rucksack on his back. Hermione, whose battlefield "cred" came from her MI-5 commission, sported full-black commando gear and matching black body armor underneath a tight-fitting Potter Plaid shawl. In consideration of their eventual destination, her hand gun was hidden in one of her thigh packs and her wand was strapped onto a black arm holster.

"Good morning, Private," Harry said cheerfully as he climbed into the front passenger seat.

"Morning, Major," he replied, as Hermione and her parents piled into the rear bench.

"Know where you're going then?" Harry asked.

"Erm, yes Sir," the driver said cautiously, eyeing the tartan pattern woven into the Queen's Wizard's kilt. He had heard stories in the motor pool about the people who wore that weave, but didn't dare ask about it...especially once Hermione answered a satellite phone call from Number 10

and began to discuss with "Tony" the need to brief in the Opposition Leader and his shadow cabinet.

The call from the Prime Minister's office kept other conversations from starting up as the Landy made its way up towards the moorland valley guarded by the broom-buzzed Black Watch. As they approached the checkpoint, Hermione finished the call, and Harry rolled down his window to address the soldier who had waved them to a stop.

"Good Morning, Sergeant."

"Morning, Sir," the infantryman said warily, as he looked inside the vehicle. "No broomsticks today, Sir?"

Harry's eyes darted over towards the driver, then narrowed as they came back upon the Black Watch sentinel.

"What are you on about, Sergeant?" he demanded. "We've brought breakfast, not broomsticks."

"Erm, Yes, Sir...sorry, Sir, don't know what I was saying."

"Obviously," said Harry, as he rolled his eyes and pulled on the flap of his maroon beret. "So go on, then...get your men queued up behind us and we'll set up a buffet line."

"All the men, Sir?"

"Yes, Sergeant, all of them," Harry replied, as he got out of the vehicle. "The four of us can cover your watch for a few minutes."

"Thank you, Sir...much appreciated."

Harry nodded as he stretched his legs and stepped away from the Landy. He chuckled as he noted the defensive upgrades...the soldiers were climbing out of foxholes, their tank was hidden behind a wall of sandbags and earthwork, and the machine gun batteries had been augmented by an array of surface-to-air missiles.

"Looks like we made a favorable impression yesterday," he said, as Hermione and her parents joined him.

"If you mean that you scared the dickens out of them, then yes you did," Hermione gently chided.

"It was worth it if it makes them take their mission a little more seriously."

"So what is their mission, then?" asked Roger. "To keep wizards from getting out of the glen, or prevent Muggles from going into it?"

"Both," Harry replied. "Although they'd be hard-pressed to stop any wizarding force that was strong enough to get past our forward position at Glengairn."

"So is this part of your new lands, Milord?" Emily asked with some cheek.

"Hey now," complained Harry. "Hermione is the only one who gets to address me as her lord."

"Oh, really? And when does that happen, Dear?" Emily asked her daughter.

"Whenever Harry is dreaming," Hermione replied. She punctuated her response by punching her boyfriend in the shoulder.

"Hey!" he whined. "No beating up a superior officer!"

"Doesn't apply," Roger pointed out with a smile. "She's not in the Squadron, and you share the same rank in MI-5 ¾."

"Well...no cuffing the Clan Chief, then!"

"Are you saying that the Clan Chief outranks his Consort, dear?" Hermione asked sweetly.

"Oh, I'd think for a moment before I answer that one, son," Roger advised.

"Fair enough," Harry said with a snort. "To answer your question, Emily, my new lands start about three miles west of here...the Queen said that they could have been extended out this far, but she advised that I'd be hard pressed to generate income sufficient to cover the tax burden for these moorlands."

"But if you wanted a buffer zone, this would be hard to beat, wouldn't it?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I guess, but at the time I didn't know that there'd be anything on the lands that *required* a buffer."

"There'd be even more of an uproar about the transfer out of the Crown Estate if the parcel were any larger than it already is," offered Roger.

"Oh, that's not going to be an issue," said Hermione. "Balmoral has never been part of the Crown Estate."

"Really?"

Hermione shook her head. "Prince Albert bought it for Queen Victoria with his own money...it's been passed on as private property through different inheritances ever since."

"It's still going to be front page news, though," said her mum.

"We should be so lucky, given the attacks," said Harry. "That a simple real estate transaction would be the most newsworthy item of the day."

"Nothing is simple when it comes to you or the Queen, son," Roger said as he placed his arm around Harry's shoulders.

"Well I can't argue with that, can I?" the Queen's Wizard replied ruefully.

The Muggle Sergeant who had first chatted with them approached, and reported that everyone has passed through the line.

"Right, then, you can send the driver back with the dirty dishes," Harry advised.

"Yes, Sir," the soldier replied. "And sorry about the broomstick reference, Sir...I didn't mean to be telling your secrets."

Harry nodded. "They're not just my secrets to keep, Sergeant....they're yours now, too."

"Yes, Sir...I won't forget. Just never thought that I'd have to sign on to the Official Secrets Act."

"Neither did I, Sergeant...neither did I," Harry replied, as he casually reached into his eighteen-inch long satchel and pulled out a seven-and-a-half foot long broomstick.

The Muggle soldier gave the broomstick a close look as Harry placed it the ground.

"No forward guns on that one, Sir?" he asked.

Harry smiled. "Good spot, Sergeant...it's a stock model that's more minivan than military."

"If you say so, Sir."

Harry waited until the Land Rover had pulled around a bend and out of sight before yelling "Up!". The broom lifted up off the ground as the two rear "bench seats" shimmered with yellow-tinted magical energy.

"Hop on," said Harry, as he passed out flight helmets pulled from his bag, and climbed into the pilot's seat.

"We'll cover the rear," Roger announced, as he swapped out his beret for his helmet and swung his machine gun around to a ready position against his chest. Hermione's mum mirrored his actions as they climbed up onto either side of the rear bench. Facing away from each other, they hung their feet over the edges of the bench and fingered their triggers.

"Buckle us up, sweetheart?" Emily asked.

Hermione shook her head, still trying to wrap her mind around the idea of having parents who were armed with more than dental drills. She touched her wand tip to "seat belts" that wrapped around the waists of her two parents, before doing the same for herself in the middle bench. Seeing three "thumbs-up," Harry turned forward and called into the radio channel used by air traffic control.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Lord High Steward, Part 1 (part 2)

"Phoenix Lead requesting permission to take-off from Black Watch Station."

"Phoenix Lead you are cleared for flight," replied a voice through the radio. "Good Luck, Major."

Harry turned to offer the soldier a departing salute, only to take note of the soldier's intense interest. He looked at his watch and asked, "Think we have time to give the sergeant here a ride up the valley and back?"

Hermione snorted, then shook her head. "Mission first, Harry...pony rides later."

"Ma'am, Yes Ma'am!" Harry said crisply.

He was startled by the slap against the back of his helmet.

"You are a git sometimes, Harry," Hermione decided.

"Ah...but a lovable git, right?"

"I suppose."

The Muggle soldier had to settle for salutes and a handshake from Hermione before Harry sent the broom up the valley at a steep angle of ascent.

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The distance between the Black Watch's position and Glengairn's ward line was covered in very short order. A call out over the radio kept fingers off of triggers and hands from drawn wands once they came in sight of the ivy-covered manor house and the sentinels that were now posted on its rooftop. While Hermione keyed her parents into the wards, Harry pulled hooded robes and tartan lap blankets from his bag. The robes hid their Muggle military apparel, while the small blankets hid Roger and Emily's automatic weapons...this type of concealment would be necessary just as soon as they plunged into the valley on the other side.

Roger and Emily's reactions to Glengairn once they passed through the wards were no less dramatic than Harry's the day previous.

"It's beautiful," Emily gushed, as Harry ferried them to the top of the hill. "So lush...and green...and it's yours?"

The Queen's Wizard shrugged his shoulders. "That's what they tell me."

"But the flowers...and the shrubs...how can they thrive at this latitude...much less altitude?"

"Magic," Harry replied glibly. "Neville reckons that the same weather moderation charms that temper the winters and keeps Black Lake from freezing over work up here as well."

Roger and Emily got their first glimpse of Black Lake when Harry flew the Bluebottle up to the roof of Glengairn Lodge, where Katie Bell and New Six were standing watch. While Hermione played tour guide and began pointing out places that her parents had only known previously through her letters, Harry chatted with his troops

"How are things looking?"

"A quiet night, Major," New Six replied.

"But only because there were silencing charms on the Love Shack you loaned out to Ron and Luna," Katie snarked.

Harry snorted and looked down at the formal garden, where the Love Shack had been pitched. The tent flaps were still drawn shut.

Looking down at his watch, he asked, "No sign of those two this morning, then?"

"No, Sir."

Harry sighed, and tried to call Ron using his Art Club badge. It took almost a minute's time before he got a response.

"Oh, poo!"

"Luna?"

"Sorry, Harry."

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes, Ronnie's badge just stopped vibrating. I must have nudged it the wrong way...would you hang up and call again?"

"Erm...Luna, why are you wearing Ron's badge?"

“Oh, I’m not wearing it...Ronnie and I aren’t wearing anything at the moment.”

“But how did you know that it was vibrating....wait, wait, don’t tell me....is Ron there?”

“Yes.”

“Can I talk with him please?”

“Erm, sorry, but Ronnie is busy checking me for overnight messages.”

“Checking you for overnight...how is he doing...wait, wait, don’t tell me.”

“Okay, Harry.”

“Will you have him call me when he’s done...checking?”

“Sure Harry...it won’t be much longer...even quicker if you called back.”

“Erm...right. Thanks, Luna.” Harry said hastily.

Katie Bell gave Harry a devilish look as he touched “off” his badge.

“You know, Harry...George knows a charm that turns his voice into a dead-on imitation of his Mum’s.”

The Queen’s Wizard paused for a moment to consider this statement, then matched Katie’s grin. He called Ron’s brother, then listened in on a “three-way” call that was made to the Love Shack.

It took almost as much time as the previous call for Luna to accidentally “lift” the vibrating receiver with an errant touch.

“Oh, poo...it stopped again.”

“RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY!” George shouted using a a dead-on impersonation of his mum. “GET OFF OF YOUR GIRLFRIEND, AND GET YOURSELF OUT OF THAT DEN OF FORNICATION THIS MOMENT! NO SON OF MINE IS GOING TO.....”

The volume of this faux tirade was sufficient to catch Hermione’s notice.

“Harry...what is that?”

“Ron’s alarm clock,” he replied with a grin, as the Love Shack’s tent flaps were thrown open and the Clan Champion exited whist trying to run and put on his boots at the same time.

The laughter that rang down from the Lodge’s rooftop had to bounce around in Ron’s head for a few moments before he realized that he’d been pranked.

“That was mean, Harry,” Hermione said with a shake of her head.

“It was Katie’s idea,” Harry said defensively. “And it did get him out of the tent.”

“So now we’ll have to expect Ron to plot his revenge next time we’re in that situation?”

“And what situation is that, Dear?” her Mum teased. “Don’t tell me that Harry checks you for overnight messages as well?”

Hermione and Harry both blushed, as he stammered, “Erm, I’m sure she meant the next time that we slept in the tent.”

“Oh, really?” asked Roger. “And when will this next time be?”

Hermione’s blush grew before she realized that her parents were only teasing her. But as she had no interest in continuing this sort of banter with them, she ended the discussion with a huff and a “Never mind.”

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Given their proximity to Hogsmeade Village, it was decided that the easiest way for Ron and Luna to get to the Ministry for their internships was for them to floo from The Three Broomsticks. Hermione had suggested this, not fancying the idea more of Luna’s hugs as she side-along apparated her back to London.

There was only incidental physical contact as Luna squeezed in next to Hermione on the middle bench of the Bluebottle. But Hermione soon decided that the Ravenclaw’s hugs would have been preferable, once she began to effusively (and explicitly) describe how she and Ron had made use of all of the Love Shack’s amenities.

It was only the shortness of the trip that kept Luna from getting too far down the road towards “Too Much Information!” A Notice-Me-Not charm applied to the broomstick kept them from being “noticed” once Harry flew out beyond the Notice-Me-Not wards that surrounded Glengairn. Once Ron and Luna were dropped off, Harry piloted the broom back up into the air and down the path towards Hogwarts.

Hogsmeade and Hogwarts sat on either end of an "L"-shaped valley whose limbs pointed east and north. The magical village anchored the east end of the closed valley, and was surrounded by high hills and mountains on three sides. Glengairn Lodge sat south of Hogsmeade, at the top on the only walkable pass out of the valley.

Hogsmeade Station sat just west of the village, with tracks that led north, and then along the northern shoreline of the lake. The TPOMS squadron had followed these tracks the day before, looking for where they led out of the valley and connected into the Muggle railway system. They had found a second pass on the north end of the valley, and were surprised to discover that the tracks that had been used by the Express not six weeks disappeared under a thick blanket of heather and heath.

It had taken Neville's inspection of the foliage and a side trip to the train's engine house just past the Station to suss out what was a work. The heath that covered the tracks was an "instant-growth" magical hybrid variety that could cover a bared area in seconds. The Express's locomotive had localized banishing charms attached to its front. This magical equivalent of a Muggle locomotive's cow catcher cleared the heath and other obstacles as the train passed over the tracks. Once the train passed, the thick brush immediately reestablished itself, and quite literally covered the magical train's tracks.

This thick mass of vegetation would make it difficult for anyone, Muggle or magical, to walk along the tracks and out of the valley using the northern pass. But as it was a "known" route between the magical and Muggle worlds, TPOMS had established a manned lookout station at the top of the pass.

Keeping live eyes watching the magical valley from both Glengairn and the northern pass had become the TPOMS squadron's latest assignment. The Phoenix Teams were taking rotating eight-hour shifts, and Harry took the opportunity to fly by the northern pass to check on the lookout station.

Lee and Stout were disappointed when the Grangers played "I spy" and sussed out their concealed location using Muggle thermal imagery equipment. Solace was taken by the fact that Harry and Hermione hadn't been able to spot them with their bare eyes, as that was how a "normal" witch or wizard would scan the hills.

Once visual contact had been made with the northern lookout station, Harry doubled back to the station. Dropping down to low altitude and striking out over the lake, he followed the route Hagrid took with every class of First Years, four to a boat, so that Hermione's parents to see Hogwarts Castle for the first time just as he had ...well, almost. Harry and Hermione hadn't needed to use electronic "wizard glasses" to see through the illusion of a ruined hovel that disguised Hogwarts's location from unaware Muggles. But Roger and Emily's first sight of the castle was no less breathtaking because of it.

Had Hagrid gotten any better at keeping secrets, Harry would have stopped by and introduced him to Hermione's parents. But as the half-giant wasn't, Harry bypassed the wooden hut and (after a single lap about the castle that allowed Hermione to play tour guide for her mum and dad), headed back to Glengairn Lodge. Once there, the house tour focused on a three-dimensional table-top model of Hogsmeade Valley that the magical members of the squadron had constructed in the dining room.

Roger looked at the model not only as a freshly-minted military man, but as the Steward of Clan Potter and the manager of Harry's finances.

"So all of this valley is now yours, then?"

Harry nodded. "Yes and no...the Queen has given me clear title to the land, the Forbidden Forest, and the lake, but the Hogwarts and all of the buildings in Hogsmeade Village are privately owned."

"So the inhabitants lease the land?"

"Most of them do," Harry said with a smile. "Nobody has ever dared ask the Centaurs to pay rent."

"Did the Queen say how much she receives in lease payments?"

"Yeah," Harry said with a snort. "She doesn't receive a knut."

"How could that be?" asked Emily.

"A bit of coercive magic during negotiations, no doubt," Harry replied. "All of the payments go to the Ministry...not just here, but in Diagon Alley as well."

"The Queen owns Diagon Alley, too?"

"Sort of," Hermione replied. "The Alley is actually part of the Duchy of Cornwall...remember our discussion about Edward the Black Prince and how all of the magical lands in England were protected by incorporation into the Duchy?"

"But Scotland was a separate nation at the time, so this valley wasn't part of that?" Roger asked.

"Exactly," Hermione replied. "Hogsmeade Valley was owned by the Hogwarts Board of Governors and individual magical families up to the Treaty of Carlisle and the final separation. At some point the land was ceded to the Muggle Earl of Huntley, and then changed hands several times...the details are still a muddle, according to the Royal Historian. The important point is that when Balmoral was purchased by Prince Albert and Queen Victoria in the mid 1800's, the Valley got the same sort of royal protections that Diagon and all of the other magical lands already had."

"But how does that relate to the lease payments going to the Ministry of Magic?"

"Discriminatory tax rates," Harry said with a rueful grin. "Witches and wizards don't appreciate why their tax burdens are so low."

How is that?"

"It all goes back to the Treaty of Carlisle," Hermione replied, dropping into lecture mode. "The Minister of Magic is the Queen's magical Justice of the Peace, and the Ministry of Magic is nominally part of her government. The Treaty allows the Minister of Magic to collect taxes from witches and wizards on the Queen's behalf, and to use these funds to run the "her" magical ministry. But then the Ministry building was destroyed in the 1700's during one of the Goblin Rebellions, and there wasn't enough tax money to rebuild it. So, the Minister of Magic convinced King George to "redirect" the annual lease payments paid by witches and wizards who lived on Royal lands to the Ministry, rather than to the Crown. And the rest, as they say, is history. Nobody let the Crown know when the Ministry had been rebuilt, so the rent money on Royal lands has been added to the Ministry's coffers ever since."

"Hmmm," thought Roger. "So when Prince Albert bought Balmoral, that 'redirection' of lease payments began to apply here?"

"Exactly," Hermione replied. "Brought in so many galleons that the Minister of Magic was able to drop income tax rates by two-thirds. And by amazing coincidence, that particular Minister still holds the record for longest term of office."

"But now that this land is back in Harry's private hands?"

"The Goblins figure that by giving these lands to Harry, the Queen's cut the Ministry's current annual revenues in half."

"Wow," remarked Emily. "So even if things don't change on Saturday, the Queen's hobbled the Ministry?"

"That's right," Harry said brightly. "Wasn't until I was told that point out that I started to like the deal."

Emily looked at her watch and frowned.

"I should be getting back to Cumberland," she announced. "Dean's doing a fine job as its Head Boy, but with the ICW folks staying there, and the seminars that they've volunteered to teach..."

"How's that all going?" Harry asked.

"Wonderfully," Emily replied. "The King's Wizard is doing a short course on magical world history this morning. The Emperor's Wizard is giving a talk on magic and Muggle mysticism this afternoon, the Swedish witch is Muggleborn, and is going to work with the new Muggleborn parents, and then there's Rongo..."

"What's he up to?" Harry asked with a smile.

"He's taking over part of the physical education curriculum," Roger said with a grin. "So if you see an invoice for a hundred and fifty black rugby jerseys, that's why."

"Oh, it's going to be more than that, Daddy," Hermione admonished. "The Maori mages are world famous for their wandless magical rituals."

"Right," Roger said dismissively. "Next thing you'll tell me is that the haka is really a magic dance."

"Why yes, actually...it is," Hermione said with an arched eyebrow. "How did you know?"

Roger snorted, but was too smart to be shocked...during his tenure as the father of a witch he had become accustomed to such implausibility.

9:45am, Minister of Magic's Office

Despite the grim discussion topic, Rufus Scrimgeour found himself enjoying his morning meeting with the Head of the Department of Mysteries. He'd leave it to others to link this positive attitude to the fact that the meeting didn't involve Dolores Umbridge (who was busy finalizing a rationalization for her staff's performance in Edinburgh) or Percy Weasley (who was still absent).

"We need a back up plan in case this Project Arcanum doesn't pan out," he stated. "Anything come to mind?"

The Head Unspeakable gave his boss the kind of blank, noncommittal stare that one would expect from a man of his position.

"And just how...defiant...of the ICW should any such back-up plan be?"

"Best not to be openly defiant at all," Rufus decided. "And if you're right about how bad this meeting with the Muggle Queen could go, it wouldn't have to cover that much time."

"So you expect that if the Queen strips you of your power that the ICW will take your side?"

"Why wouldn't it?" asked the Minister. "It'd be Muggles against magicals...the ICW would have to take our side."

"I wouldn't be so certain," the Unspeakable cautioned. "Still, there is merit in distractions on a grand scale."

"Shipping them off to Azkaban would be a big distraction, wouldn't it?" Rufus mused.

"I was thinking about the Muggles," replied the Unspeakable. "They are taking advantages of differences between factions in the wizarding world... yet they are no strangers to factional strife on their side of the fence."

"Sounds like you have something in mind, then?" the Minister asked hopefully.

"Perhaps."

An airborne magical memo interrupted the conversation. Scrimgeour frowned as he snatched the "highest priority" message from the basket and read it.

"Damn."

"What's wrong?"

"Percy's shown up with a Dutch charms master."

"But that's what we wanted, isn't it?"

"I'd rather hear your ideas without being distracted by his presence, and if I let him in without Dolores here she'll throw a fit."

"If that's how you feel, why do you keep them around?"

"He knows too many Ministry secrets, and she's too good at blackmail."

"Ah, I see," replied the Unspeakable. "So you found a way to keep him out of your hair for a day...find a way to keep him busy for an hour more."

"Excellent idea," Rufus said with a grin. He inked a quill, jotted down a quick reply on the parchment memo, and sent it flying out the door.

"Tell me about Muggle distractions," he said.

The Head Unspeakable nodded.

"So how much do you know about Muggle Ireland?"

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The Minister of Magic smiled as the Head of the Department of Mysteries fleshed out his idea. Meanwhile, the Minister's Secretary smiled as she read his reply memo. Percy Weasley had always treated her poorly, so she was going to enjoy this.

"I'm sorry, Special Assistant Weasley," she said to Percy. "The Minister has asked that he not be disturbed for the next hour."

"But...but...this is important!" Percy whined. "I've been on an important mission, and brought back an important person that the Minister would want to meet right away."

"Minister Scrimgeour is aware of the situation," the secretary replied. "He's instructed me to have you complete a vital aspect of your important mission while you wait."

"And what could that be?" Percy asked dismissively.

The secretary narrowed her eyes, but decided to let her magical command speak on her behalf. She drew her wand and pointed towards a file cabinet.

"Accio blank expense report form!"

Percy winced as the magical document was levitated into his hands.

The Dutch wizard who was traveling with the Special Assistant looked over his shoulder and whistled.

"Merlin, there's some powerful magic laid down on that parchment."

"Compulsion and truth charms," the secretary said with a grin. "Percy came up with that idea himself...said that the 'junior staff' couldn't be trusted."

"Ah, I see," Peter replied. "Well, no worries."

"How can you say that?" Percy asked weakly.

"Look at all of the lines under 'Miscellaneous Expenses,'" the Dutchman replied. "There's plenty of room there for all of the drugs, and the booze, and the porn."

The Minister's secretary smiled evilly.

"Do you need a copy of the scroll that you wrote on 'Allowable Expenses,' Mr. Special Assistant?"

Percy moaned, and tried to muster all of the haughty contempt that he possessed as he dismissed the secretary's offer.

He failed miserably.

Chapter 41: Taking Offense

Author's Note: This chapter introduces "Sir John," a cricket-loving former Conservative Party PM into the mix, and alludes to two princesses high up in the line of succession. I should therefore reiterate that all characters in this story are fictional, although they may resemble real life counterparts. Some real life persons who "should" have fictional counterparts in this story don't necessarily have them (don't expect to see somebody named Camille, or references to somebody named Diana, for example). Also worth repeating is that the story takes place in the summer of 2006, rather than 1997, with a timeline pushed up nine years from canon. So, Prime Minister "Tony" has been living at Number 10 for a while now, after chasing "Sir John" and the Tories out of power in 1997. Oh, and The Princesses York...they are 18 and 16 years old, respectively.

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of fenriswolf, who reviewed it only a few months before his untimely passing.

Thursday, July 12, 10:15 am, The Round Tower, Windsor Castle

The Queen's Wizard carried a bag of deluxe owl treats with him as he badge jumped to Windsor Castle. It had been a few days since he had been "home" to the Round Tower, and he felt rather guilty for it. His familiar was quick to remind Harry of that fact, and didn't let the treats stand in the way of nipping his ear. She also showed no inclination to let Harry out of her taloned grip, which is why the Queen's Wizard entered the State Apartments and was announced to The Prince with an owl perched on his shoulder.

"Ah, Good morning, Sir Harry...come in, come in. Oh, and I see that Hedwig is joining us....welcome to you both."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Harry replied. His familiar responded with a bob of her head that was almost as easy to interpret.

"How are spirits holding up at Balmoral?"

"Pretty well, Sir...they flew the Queen's corgis up from Edinburgh last night, and that's helping keep things lively down in the Bunker."

"And what of the morale of my magical squadron and its commander?"

Harry snorted. "They've settled into the new mission. As for me, well...no shortage of surprises to hold my attention."

"Yes, I imagine that to be the case," The Prince replied, as he waved Harry towards a pair of high-backed chairs. "Shall I have someone bring in a perch for your friend?"

Harry winced as Hedwig tightened her grip on his shoulder.

"Erm, no thank you Sir, Hedwig seems to be happy right where she is."

"I see," The Prince said with a smile. "So...what is your opinion of the Balmoral defenses?"

"They seem impressive, Sir," Harry replied. "I can't imagine that it's all that comfortable for Her Majesty to be holed up in The Bunker, even with her pets...but I also can't imagine a safer place right now, unless we could put her under a *Fidelius* ...makes me think that you should be there as well, frankly."

"Yes, well there's still a rather robust defense here at Windsor," The Prince replied. "And the Lines of Succession must be preserved."

"Sir?"

"Need to keep the Queen and those of us nearest in line to the throne apart," The Prince explained. "It wouldn't do to have all of us in one place these days, in case the next attack were more successful."

"Which is why you weren't in attendance at the Garden Party?"

"Exactly."

"So Prince Harry, then?"

"He's stationed at Buckingham, while my oldest son is out at Sandhurst. Meanwhile, my younger brother has been dispatched to Sydney for a Commonwealth financial conference, and my two nieces are presently on hols visiting their mum in New York...that covers the next six in line."

Harry snorted. "Five different places on three different continents? Nothing half-done about that level of detail, except..."

"Yes?"

"Well, Sir, we've only got TPOMS at Balmoral...Sir Evan being posted here gives us an anchor to your location, but we don't have any magical protection for the others."

The Prince nodded. "You've got enough on your plate, Sir Harry."

"But I'm to protect the Queen and her family, Sir."

"And you've done a smashing job so far," replied The Prince. "As for Andy and his Princesses...I had opportunity to meet with some of your foreign witches and wizards when they returned to London yesterday, and they offered to pass along word to their overseas counterparts."

Harry nodded as he swallowed his response.

"You don't look pleased."

"No Sir...I mean, it's not that I'm not pleased, but I feel responsible for...."

"Harry, you aren't the Prince's Wizard, are you?"

"Erm...no Sir."

"How about the Princess's Wizard? I understand that one of my nieces might wish it were so, but it's not the case, is it?"

Harry frowned, and tried not to wonder which of the Royal teen-agers The Prince might be talking about.

"No Sir, I'm the Queen's Wizard."

"So let others worry about the rest of us, then...it isn't as if you aren't having even more dropped into your lap."

"Sir?"

"I was referring to our meeting this morning," replied The Prince. "Have you been briefed in?"

"Just from the bit that Her Majesty mentioned this morning, Sir...Hermione has been sent to Carlisle to scout out the location for Saturday's meeting, and I'm to take her place and help you inform the Shadow Government about magic and recent events, in case the Prime Minister gets sacked."

The Prince nodded. "That covers it, save for the fact that Her Majesty has called in reinforcements for us."

"Sir?"

"Exactly," The Prince replied with a wink. "Sir John should be here shortly. The drive into town should give us enough time to bring him back up to speed."

"Back up to speed, Sir?"

A low-pitched chuckle escaped from The Prince's lips. "Sir John was in a position to know about the wizarding world before he retired to the cricket fields of Surrey. With any luck he'll bring a few bats along to keep his party's Young Turks in line for us."

Harry arched an eyebrow, then smiled as he solved The Prince's riddle. He had heard the former Tory Prime Minister's name disparaged dozens of times on Privet Drive...Vernon had never forgiven the man for losing Number 10 to Hermione's "Socialist" boss.

The Prince stood, and the Queen's Wizard followed suit.

"Harry, you have had perfectly good reasons to be cautious when dealing with politicians, but I do hope that you give Sir John a chance...he's a decent chap."

"Yes, Sir," the young wizard replied. "My Uncle Vernon cursed the former Prime Minister almost as often as he cursed his replacement...so that's got to be a good sign, right?"

The Prince laughed as he led Harry out of the room and into the courtyard. Nodding towards Harry's familiar, he added, "Well, then, it appears that all that is left is to apologize to Miss Hedwig."

"Apologize, Sir?"

"We're meeting the Shadow Cabinet in the Opposition Leader's offices within Parliament," The Prince explained. "And I am afraid that there is a tradition that animals are not allowed on the grounds, other than seeing eye dogs."

Harry turned his head to say a few words to Hedwig, only to watch his familiar launch herself off of his shoulder and towards the top of the Round Tower.

"Guess she likes these sorts of meetings almost as much as I do," Harry said with a chuckle.

The Prince smiled and nodded his head. "Proving yet again how amazingly intelligent certain magical creatures can be."

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11:00 am, The Minister of Magic's Office

The meeting between Rufus Scrimgeour, his Special Assistants, and the Dutch Charms Master had gone south rather quickly (or north, if you have an antipodean perspective).

"Refusing to provide a cost estimate up front? There is no way that we should work with this *boy* under these conditions," spat Umbridge.

"Fine, suit yourself," replied the Dutch Wizard. "As soon as you make the transfer into my Gringott's vault I'll be on my way."

"What transfer?"

"The one that Percy here agreed to make when he signed my consulting contract," the Charms Master said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I don't remember signing any such contract!" Percy objected.

"I'm not surprised, given that it was after you ordered that third plate of brownies."

"What are you....where is this contract?"

The young Charms Master smiled as he pulled a thick parchment scroll from his coat pocket.

"Give me that..."

"Ah, ah, ah!" chided Peter, as he snapped the document away from Weasley's grasp. Drawing his wand from a sleeve, he used a duplication charm thrice over, and handed out copies.

The Dutch wizard enjoyed watching the faces of the three Ministry officials fall as they got further and further down the scroll.

"What? This is outrageous!" Umbridge hissed.

"This must be a forgery," whined Percy. "I would have never signed this kind of contract."

"That is your signature down at the bottom, isn't it?"

"Well...."

"And you did say over and over again that as Special Assistant to the Minister, you had the authority to sign on the Minister's behalf..."

"He did, did he?" asked Rufus. "If that's the case, it won't be the case much longer...."

"Of course I wouldn't have said that I had that kind of authority, Sir," said Percy.

"Section 4, subpart 6 suggests otherwise," noted the Former High Inquisitor, as she worked her way through the document.

"Must not have been in my right mind," Percy muttered (he was more right than he knew). He then turned towards the young Charms Master and said, "You tricked me, or magically coerced me...either you or Katja...."

"Who's Katja?" Rufus demanded.

"She's....." began Percy, who suddenly decided that he didn't want to finish. Peter decided to do it for him.

"She listed under 'Miscellaneous Expenses' on Percy's report."

"Why would a witch be itemized....," muttered Scrimgeour, as he glanced over at Percy's financial reckoning. "The name Katja isn't written here."

"Oh, really?" asked Peter. "Maybe it's under her nickname."

"What's her nickname?"

"A good time."

"Two hundred galleons 'for a good time'...what in Merlin's.....Percy?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Might you explain why you spent 200 galleons for 'a good time'?"

"Erm, not really, Sir...all a bit hazy."

"Just like your employment status is a little hazy, right?"

"Now Minister, don't be too hard on the boy," replied the Dutch 'consultant.' "If he hadn't been willing to get naked in Oslo or Holland, I wouldn't be here now."

"What's this about getting naked...there's nothing about that in your report!"

"Erm...well...it's not something I was comfortable reporting, Sir...not that there's room on the expense report for it. But between the hobgoblins, and turning my shorts into a portkey...."

The Minister of Magic reached for his wand. But rather than hex Percy, he cast a silencing spell on Umbridge...it was the only way that was going to be able to think this situation through.

Rubbing his temples in a futile attempt to ease his burgeoning headache, he finally stated, "There will be a full investigation...*after* our business with Mr. Vanderwood has been completed."

Rufus then turned to address Madame Umbridge, who was turning blue in the face with frustration. "Yes, yes, I know...we'll discuss a revised organization chart in the near future. But for now...as one-sided as this contract appears, it does stipulate at the risk of Mr. Vanderwood's magic that he is capable of casting a *Fidelius* Charm."

"Ah, well said, Sir...no wonder you're in charge here," Peter said with a smile.

The Minister of Magic winced, wondering how much longer that statement might hold. "Yes, well...perhaps Mr.Vanderwood, you might explain why we needed to pay more for your consulting services than for your charms work."

"Oh, don't be too sure that the actual magic won't cost you more...depends on what secret you decide to protect."

"But...more than this 15,000 galleon consulting fee? You mean that the charm is priced separately?"

Peter shrugged. "It's all spelled out in that contract."

"But why...."

"Because there have been too many situations where either my father or I have been blamed for failed charms that were really the client's fault."

"How could we be held at fault if you can't cast a proper charm?" demanded Percy.

"I thought that you went through this already with my dad?" the Dutch wizard asked. "Some secrets can't be protected by the *Fidelius* Charm, no matter how powerful the Charms Master is."

"And why is that?"

"Because magic is a bitch that demands balance," quipped the young wizard.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Sir...there is no single, all-powerful spell, or all-powerful spell caster out there. Every use of magic has its limitations...by design."

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"Right...we're talking about the *Fidelius* Charm, so we'll use it for an example. Do you have any idea just how powerful I would be if there were no checks on my ability to cast that specific charm?"

Scrimgeour rolled his eyes. "No...just how powerful would you be?"

The Dutch wizard responding by nicking a quill and piece of parchment from the Minister's desk. He wrote a quick line of text, folded the parchment in half, and passed it across the desk.

"So let's pretend...Abracadabra-hocus-pocus-*Fidelius*I've just pulled the secret that I've written down on that bit of parchment out from the world and placed it inside you, Minister. You are now the only person in the world that knows the secret."

Rufus opened the note and read, "*Lord Voldemort is a Wizard.*"

"So if I am the only one that knows that fact," he mused, "then he doesn't, right?"

Peter nodded. "Do you know what they call a wizard that doesn't know he's a wizard?"

"No, what?" asked Percy.

"A squib," stated Scrimgeour.

"Hey, that's pretty good," admitted the Dutch wizard. "No wonder you're the one sitting behind that desk."

"We've not time for flattery...though at your billing rates it should be expected."

"Fair enough...so what if I cast a new charm about the statement '*There are British-born witches and wizards*'?" How much do you think the French Ministry would pay for me to cast that spell?"

"Yes, yes...so you aren't omnipotent...why should we have to pay for you to reveal your limitations?"

"Because I know them, first off," Peter replied. "Secondly, I can usually do a good enough job of suggesting the right secret...so long, of course, as the client is forthcoming."

"What do you mean 'right secret' or if 'the client is forthcoming'?"

"What I mean is what I said," the young wizard replied. "I know what level of magical opposition I can overcome when I cast the charm, but I can't guarantee success if I'm not told what kind of opposition exists."

"That's rather a cloudy answer."

"Fine, let me be specific...no extra charge for that, by the way," the Dutch wizard said with a grin. "You want to hide the Ministry of Magic's location from others, right?"

"How did you...I never told you that!" Percy exclaimed.

"You didn't need to," Peter quipped. "So why do you need to hide?"

"What business is that of yours?" asked Percy.

"Have you been listening at all to what I've been saying? Never mind...the answer to that question is 'no' and the answer to my previous question is because you want to keep an ICW delegation from gaining access to Ministry files."

"How did you..."

"Time is money...am I wrong?"

Scrimgeour cast his eyes back down onto the parchment in front of him.

"You are contractually bound to client confidentiality?"

"Magically bound, too," Peter said with a nod.

"Let us assume that you are partially correct, then," replied Rufus. "How does that impact your work?"

"Percy here has agreed to allow this ICW delegation to visit the Ministry tomorrow morning and gain access to your files, correct? Don't bother asking how I know, am I wrong?"

"No."

"And did he do this willingly?"

"No, I had to acknowledge the Writ of Inquiry," Percy explained. "But it's really not my fault, when you think about it..."

A spell caught Percy mid-sentence, and struck him as silent as Umbridge.

The Dutch Wizard glanced at the Minister's extended wand and smiled.

"Thanks, he was beginning to get on my nerves as well...and I've only been with him for a day. How do you manage to put up with him for longer than that?"

Practice,” Rufus said with a sigh. “Practice...and judicious use of the *Obliviate* spell.”

He then cast two separate memory charms that sent his “Special Assistants” scurrying out of the office in the belief that their meeting had ended and that the Minister asked for briefs outlining their proposed changes to the Ministry’s org chart.

The Dutch wizard let out a low-pitched whistle. “Wow, I like how you operate.”

“I don’t, but I seldom have any choice in the matter,” the Minister replied gruffly. “Now where were we?”

“The Writ of Inquiry,” Peter replied. “Do you have it?”

Scrimgeour nodded, and pulled open a desk drawer.

“Oh, and while you’re at it, you might as well show me the Orb.”

Rufus arched an eyebrow, but did as he was asked. There would be opportunity to learn how the Dutch wizard learned about the Orb later on.

The young Charms Master dropped the necklace almost as soon as he touched it.

“Yeow!...burns my hands just at the thought of it!”

“At the thought of what?”

“Trying to cast a *Fidelius* that would overpower the magic that went into the making of this artifact, and the treaty that stands behind it,” Peter replied. “I’d die trying to protect *‘The Ministry of Magic has lost its home rule authority over Magical Britain and Ireland’* ...not that you’d be saved from paying my fees were that to happen, mind you.”

“So...are you saying that it’s impossible to hide the secret...or just that it’s impossible for you?”

“The former,” the young wizard said seriously. “You could bring in another Charms Master and ask his opinion, but given all of the time and effort that it took to get me here...”

“Right...what about the ICW’s Writ of Inquiry?”

The frown that formed on the Dutchman’s face was almost as intense as the one produced by his handling of the orb. It wasn’t until he finished reading through the document that Scrimgeour saw a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“Well?”

“This is a tricky one,” Peter replied. “The way that this writ is worded...I doubt that I could match its power right now, but maybe once you’ve provided them initial access?”

“What?” asked the Minister of Magic. “I don’t understand.”

The young wizard sighed. “Most of the magic bound within this document is likely linked to allowing the ICW delegation access to the Ministry and its records. If you asked me to protect the secret that *‘The Ministry of Magic has documents that the ICW would want to review’* then I’d be butting head-on with this writ.”

“But...”

“But once you meet the initial obligations, most of the power attached to this writ should dissipate.”

“Most?”

“While it isn’t spelled out on this parchment, there is a tacit assumption that the ICW delegation would be allowed access to the Ministry not just tomorrow morning, but any time afterwards, so long as access was needed for their work, right?”

“Yes, I would think so.”

“So, it would be easier for me to cast a successful *Fidelius* Charm if I was only overpowering an implicit promise, rather than an explicit one.”

“So...,” drawled the Minister, as the gears ground in his head. “We wait until tomorrow morning, let the ICW in the door, and then kick them out just as soon as you cast the charm?”

“Charms.”

“What?”

“Charms, plural,” the Dutch wizard replied. “You are going to need two of them.”

"Why would we need that...just so you get paid twice over?"

"No...well, okay, yes...that would mean I'd get paid twice, but the fact is that you'll need two charms because you've got two separate problems."

"Yes, but can't you solve both problems with the protection of one secret?"

"Like what?"

"Like...I don't know, something like, *'The Ministry of Magic is located beneath Central London'*."

"That's something that I could do, once you let the ICW in, but it wouldn't completely solve your problem."

"Why wouldn't it?"

The young wizard rolled his eyes. "I went through this with your flunky last night...how does your floo network work?"

"What do you mean...they don't have floo's in Holland?"

"Of course they do...look, for all that I know, we are presently underneath High Street in Bolton, right now, rather than Central London."

"Why would you think that?"

"Percy and I stayed in a Muggle hotel last night. This morning, he took me to his flat, so that we could floo here."

"And...?"

"And what address do you think he told me to use?"

"The Ministry of Magic?"

"Right...not *'Sixty Feet Beneath a Telephone Box in Central London'*."

"Why would...oh, now I see your point," the Minister admitted. He shook his head and let out a deep breath.

"So what bright ideas do you have, then?"

The Dutch Charms Master replied by writing two statements down on separate pieces of parchment. He folded each slip once, and then pushed them across the desk. Scrimgeour opened each slip and held them open for a few minutes.

When a smile crept onto his lips, the Dutch wizard asked, "So what are you thinking?"

Rufus vanished the two slips of paper with a spell, and then leaned back in his chair.

"I'm not thinking, so much as wondering," he finally replied.

"What are you wondering, then?"

"Whether, when the time comes, these secrets have to be shared with my two Special Assistants."

oo000000oo

12:30 pm, The Palace at Westminster, London

"Right, well that was lovely, wasn't it?" asked The Prince as they left the meeting room.

Not waiting for an answer, the man with almost as many titles as Harry turned to an attendant stationed just outside of the door.

"Be a good chap and inform Sir John when he is finished that Lord Gryffindor and I shall be in the Peers' Dining Room, would you?"

"Of course, Your Highness," the man said with a bow.

"This way, Harry," The Prince then said, leading his young colleague by the arm. "There's a round-about route that will avoid most of the crowds."

"Sounds good to me, Sir," the young wizard replied.

A five-minute traverse of one of the many long corridors of the Parliament complex brought them into a restricted area open only to the members of

the House of Lords and their guests. Though it was called "The Peers' Dining Room," most of the space was taken up with a long mahogany bar with brass railings and several shelves of liquor bottles behind it.

"Good afternoon, Basil," The Prince called out to well-dressed man who was standing behind the bar. He then added, "It is afternoon, isn't it?"

"Yes, Your Highness," the man said with a curt nod, as his arm automatically arched out towards a bottle of The Prince's favorite single malt whisky.

"Doubles, if you will?"

The bar man didn't flinch at the request for two glasses full of neat whisky, but The Prince knew what the yeoman was thinking well enough.

"No worries, Basil...I daresay Gryffindor needs a drink more than I do right now."

"Of course, Your Highness."

The Prince's assessment was true enough in Harry's mind as the burn of alcohol hit the back of his throat. A deep sigh escaped his lips as he placed the empty tumbler back down onto the bar.

"Need I concern myself with the ease with which you downed that drink, Gryffindor?" The Prince asked.

"Erm...I don't think so, Sir," Harry replied with a smile. "Wizards hold their liquor better than Muggles for some reason."

"Because of the magic?"

Harry shrugged. "Hermione thinks so, but I reckon it might have more to do with the fact that we're served in wizard pubs beginning in Third Year... not that this drink didn't hit the spot, Sir."

"It's Cornwall."

"Sir?"

"Things are slightly less formal inside this room...members refer to each other by simple title...Cumberland, or Argyle...or Gryffindor."

"There's some choice in your case then, Sir?"

"It's Cornwall, Gryffindor."

"Erm, yes, Sir...I mean, Cornwall...why not Wales, then?"

The Prince shrugged. "Switched a few years back, when it began to remind me of my expanding waistline."

Harry chuckled at the first thing he'd found funny over the past few hours. Dying to talk about the meeting they had just held with the Shadow Cabinet, he looked over his shoulder and around the room.

"Safe to talk, here... Cornwall?"

The Prince nodded. "In general terms, yes...peers come here when they want a bit of space."

A shout came from across the room.

"I say! Cornwall!"

The Prince winced a bit, and then muttered, "Although there are notable exceptions to the rule."

Putting on a brave face, he turned to greet a white haired man who was hobbling towards them with aid of a cane.

"How are you, Melbury?"

"Excellent, Cornwall, excellent," the man replied. Finally noticing Harry, he asked, "Who's your friend, then?"

The Prince smiled thinly.

"Lord Melbury," he replied, "May I introduce to you Her Royal Majesty's Wizard, The Right Honorable Earl Gryffindor, Major Sir Harry Potter."

There was a pause as the old man looked over Harry's mixture of military and tartan attire and whispered the title to himself.

"Royal...no...Wizard...no, not that either...Oh! Gryffindor! Yes, yes...I remember it now," he loudly proclaimed, holding out his hand. "That's quite a stylization for someone your age, isn't it?"

"Yes, well..." Harry replied, as he shook the man's hand. "Had I the choice, 'Just Harry' would be perfectly fine with me."

"Figures," the old man muttered. "The young ones not appreciating....I've heard about you, you know!"

"You have, Sir...erm, Melbury?" Harry asked.

"Of course I have!" the man shot back. "Your Letters Patent caused quite the stir...hasn't been a peer created that was under the age of twenty-one in centuries!"

"Wasn't exactly by my choice, Sir," Harry protested.

"So, how did you manage it, Gryffindor?" the old man asked. "Get cozy-rosy with one of the Princesses?"

Harry choked in response.

"Gryffindor was reestablished when Harry here became Queen's Wizard," The Prince explained. "He has neither been cozy nor rosy with any member of the Royal Family."

"So far as you know, eh Cornwall?" the man replied. He laughed at his own wit, and then added, "So...Her Majesty has finally gotten around to sending out the Writ of Summons? Giving Gryffindor a tour of his new offices?"

The Prince smiled. "No writ yet, Melbury...Gryffindor and I needed a bit of respite after a meeting with 'The Chameleon' and his lot."

"Ah, that explains the doubles, then," the old man said with a nod. "Damn Commoners, thinking they can push their betters around..."

"Yes, well, Melbury...it was a pleasure seeing you again," The Prince stated, lying through his teeth.

"Oh, I'm sure that it was," the old man replied. He then turned his head sharply, frowned, and began to wander off in a rather aimless direction.

"So, Melbury is a Member of the House of Lords?" Harry hissed, once some distance was gained between the table and the old man.

"As far as he can recall," The Prince replied with a smile. "Best justification I've ever seen for booting twits like him and all of the remaining hereditary peers from the Upper House."

"But...you said that I've got a hereditary peerage as well?"

"That's right," The Prince noted. "So when The Lady Gryffindor and you have a child, they'll inherit your title."

"Oh, Hermione isn't The Lady Gryffindor yet," Harry stated.

The Prince smiled. "I'm afraid that I was speaking in general terms, Gryffindor...or is there reason for me to expect that Dame Hermione will soon gain that title?"

Harry blushed. "How did we get on the topic of my love life?"

"I was trying to steer clear of talk on the Shadow Cabinet."

"Oh...well it worked, then," Harry had to admit.

"So how were your accommodations last night, Gryffindor?" The Prince asked with a slight eyebrow waggle. "Wasn't too much of an imposition to share a room?"

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "That story has made its way down here already?"

The Prince snorted. "I'm afraid that I know first hand just how efficient the gossip network is within the Royal Household."

"Erm, right...sorry, didn't mean to offend."

"You aren't Gryffindor, you aren't....I was the one trying to lighten the mood with allusions to witches-in-waiting and potential harems."

The self-admission that The Prince had indeed lightened the mood didn't mean that Harry didn't want to change the topic.

"So what's this Writ of Summons that Melbury was talking about?" he asked.

"A letter from the Queen, inviting someone to become a Member of the House of Lords."

"She can do that?"

"Absolutely," The Prince replied. "All but ninety-three hereditary peers are appointed by the Queen, on the advice of the Prime Minister."

“Okay, then....she *would* do that to me?”

The Prince let out a laugh. “Relax, Gryffindor...the Queen has other plans for you.”

“Other plans?” asked Harry nervously. He decided that this was a good time to finish off his drink.

“Buck up, Harry,” The Prince chided. “It’s nothing more than the contingency plans for reconvening the *Magnum Concilium* .

“Oh...the ones where the Queen’s Wizard plays a *very small part* in advising The Queen on the rule of her magical subjects?”

“Yes, those plans,” The Prince replied. “And on a related note...what’s your impression of Sir John?”

Harry arched an eyebrow. “I like him...seems far more even-tempered and reasonable than the others at that meeting...but why is the question a related note?”

“Because the Queen has plans for him as well,” The Prince said enigmatically. “Unless you’d like to make a pitch to become the first Lord High Steward in five hundred years?”

“Erm, thanks, but no thanks,” Harry replied quickly. Noticing some activity at the door, he added, “Speaking of which?”

The Prince followed Harry’s glance to where someone was blocking the entrance to the room.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” he muttered, before calling out in a much louder voice, “He’s with us, Melbury!”

“Oh, right then...carry on,” the old man said pompously, as he stepped back and allowed the former Prime Minister of Britain to enter the room.

Sir John gave the peer a thin-lipped smile as he adjusted the placement of his glasses on the bridge of his nose, and walked past him.

“Sorry about that,” The Prince said. “You know Melbury...”

“Far too well, I’m afraid,” Sir John replied.

Basil didn’t have to be asked whether a third glass was needed, or whether the first two should be refilled.

Harry waited until Sir John put down a long draw on his single malt.

“So did things end any better then were they stood when we left?” he asked.

The former Tory Prime Minister nodded. “They’ve agreed not to push for a no confidence vote, and to openly support the current Prime Minister’s efforts against the terrorists.”

“They came to reason, then?”

“No,” the retired politician admitted. “They finally came to realize just what kind of mess they’d be getting into if they were to gain power right now.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “It was as if Percy had a twin Muggle brother.”

“Percy?” asked Sir John.

“Oh, just somebody within the Ministry of Magic that has far too much power for our own good,” Harry explained.

“Yes, well...that may change, from what I understand?” asked Sir John.

“It may indeed,” replied The Prince. “Which reminds me...might we impose on you for a few more hours, Sir John?”

“Well...of course. What do you have in mind?”

“A stop on the drive home to Surrey...there’s some people at the Cumberland Lodge that we’d like you to meet as part of our contingency planning.”

“Planning for what, if I might ask?”

The Prince glanced around, and then lowered his voice.

“Planning that might bring you out of retirement, Sir John.”

The former Prime Minister stared at The Prince for a moment, then let out a very small (but audible) sigh as he finished off his drink.

As Her Majesty commands," he finally replied.

Harry couldn't help but smile, and reached out to offer a consoling pat on the back.

"If it helps any, Sir John," he offered, "I know exactly how you feel."

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2:30 pm, The Summer Institute, Cumberland Lodge, Great Windsor Park

There was nothing lovely about The Queen's Wizard's attitude when he bolted from his next meeting. Hermione, who had shared a spot at the table after completing her tour of Carlisle Castle, was right behind him, and near enough to hear as he activated his Art Club badge.

"Emily?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Is there a bar within Cumberland Lodge?"

"Erm...not that I know of...this is a school, after all..."

"Right, sorry to have bothered you."

"Wait...Harry...is something wrong?"

"No, nothing that a stiff drink or a flash of sword might fix."

"Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard turned on his heel.

"They've got to be kidding, Hermione!"

"Harry...I know it seems like a lot, but what the Emperor's Wizard said did make sense..."

"But why me?" he asked. "Okay fine...the ICW thinks it best if the new Lord High Steward were magical...why can't it be you or Tonks...or Ron? He's short a few titles, I'm sure that he could use an extra one."

"Harry?"

A rather distraught young wizard let out a deep breath.

"I'm sure that Sir Evan has some gin at the Tower," he muttered. "Although...why waste time with the weak stuff? Dobby?"

His aide-de-camp was immediately by his side.

"Yes Sir, Major Harry Potter, Sir?"

"Can you bring me a bottle of firewhiskey? Don't bother with a glass."

"Don't listen to him, Dobby," said Hermione. "Firewhiskey is the last thing he needs right now."

Harry gave Hermione a sharp look that was cut short only when he heard Dobby's nervous whimpering.

"Oh, what to do...Private Dobby knows he must be following the Great Major Harry Potter Sir's orders, but...but...the Great Harry Potter Sir should be listening to Harry Potter Sir's Hermione's orders, too!"

"Thank you, Dobby...I always knew that you know what's best for Harry," Hermione said with a smile.

A look halfway between a frown and snarl grew on the Queen's Wizard's lips.

"Well, if that's the last thing I need, then what's the first thing?" he asked.

Hermione bit her lower lip in thought, then pushed Harry into an unused classroom and locked the door.

"Get undressed," she ordered, as she as took off her jacket and began to unbutton her blouse.

Her boyfriend lost his eyebrows to his hairline.

"Honestly, Harry," Hermione said dismissively, as she pulled her shirt out from her long Potter Plaid skirt and slipped it off her shoulders. "Who taught you that a stiff drink was the best way to deal with stress?"

The Queen's Wizard caught his breath at the sight of his girlfriend's black dragonhide vest that was doing double duty as a skintight undergarment.

"Erm...The Prince?" he replied.

"Well, I'll just have to have words with him, then," Hermione muttered, as her skirt slipped to the floor.

The thong, black stockings and hold-ups that Hermione wore underneath the skirt weren't as protective as the vest, but Harry found it difficult to find fault with how they looked.

"Words with The Prince?" he asked. "Might want to cut him some slack...it's not like he could hold my attention like you are right now."

"Hold your attention?" Hermione asked with a smirk, as she slipped off her shoes and rolled down her stockings. "Is that why you think I'm taking off my clothes?"

"Erm, finding it hard to think coherently about much of anything right now."

Hermione shook her head and smiled.

"This isn't going to work if I'm the only one doing this, you know."

"Why not?" Harry said with a roguish grin. He then grabbed hold of the hem of his kilt, lifted it several inches towards his belt and added, "Kilt-wearing commandos are always ready for action."

"Fine, keep your kilt on...I'm sure that some of the other boys will as well."

"Whaa...other boys?"

Hermione waggled her eyebrows. "Why not? Potter Plaid kilts are now part of their Summer Institute uniform, after all."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Are we talking about the same thing?"

"Probably not," Hermione replied with a giggle. She then called out, "Dobby?"

The house elf popped back in.

"Hermione...but you're barely dressed!"

"So? It was your idea to...tell me, Dobby, how many naked human bodies did you see yesterday at the Garden Party?"

"Seven thousand, eight hundred and fifty two, Miss Harry Potter's Hermione Ma'am."

"There you go," she stated with a declaratory hand wave.

"So what is that, then...Dobby is going to stand here and watch us?"

"That's up to him," Hermione decided with a grin. "Dobby...would you bring us our physical education kits?"

The house elf bobbed his head emphatically.

"Dobby can do that!" he exclaimed, before popping away.

A moment later he returned with two separate boxes. Hermione thanked him, and opened the one on top.

"This one's yours," she announced, passing Harry the box. "Another early birthday present."

Harry arched an eyebrow, then shrugged his shoulders and pushed the tissue paper away from a short-sleeved black rugby jersey. The number 8 was sewn on the back, below a nameplate that read "*Just Harry.*"

"Hurry up," Hermione ordered. "Rongo's got a class of upper years starting in a few minutes." She then pulled her own All Blacks jersey from the other box. It read "*Potter 7.*"

"Potter?" Harry asked.

"Always wanted to wear your Quidditch jersey," she said with a smile, as the shirt slipped over her head.

Harry snorted as he stripped off his shirt and tie and slipped on his own jersey.

Harry snorted much louder when Hermione pulled out a pair of Potter Plaid spandex shorts, looked down at her thong, and banished it to her purse.

“Erm...mmmm....Hermione?”

“What?” she asked, as she wiggled her bare bum into the skin-tight pants. “I don’t care for panty lines when I wear spandex...do you?”

Harry let out a low-pitched belly laugh and stepped up so that he could pull her into a tight hug from behind.

“I think that Luna’s rubbing off on you,” he whispered huskily into her ear.

“Is that a complaint?” Hermione purred.

“Certainly not,” Harry replied, as he dragged his hand up her thigh. When his fingers passed over a thin rectangular bump underneath the fabric, he asked, “What’s this?”

“My GPS beacon, hidden under a patch of dragonhide.”

“Why do you have it pasted on down there?”

“Thought I’d see if the electronics would last any longer if I kept it farther away from my wand.”

“Hmmm,” Harry growled. “Shall we check to see if my wand causes interference if it gets too close?”

“I think we already know just how well your wand is working, Mister,” Hermione replied, as she rubbed her bum against his front. She then grabbed his hands and stepped out of his embrace. “And if you don’t get it holstered, then everyone else in class will know as well.”

Harry took a step forward and waggled his eyebrows. “Well, I think that my wand would fit quite nicely in your holster, Hermione.”

“Come on, Harry,” Hermione said with a smile. “Rongo might have something useful to teach us, if what I learned about Carlisle pans out.”

“Okay fine,” he replied. “Are you sure that Dean and the other guys are going to be wearing kilts in the scrum?”

“Yeah, they’re calling it the *Highlander* Look,” Hermione said brightly. “The other girls like it, and the kilts aren’t that much different than what Rongo’s wears with his jersey.”

“So what look do you prefer, then?” Harry asked.

Hermione waggled her eyebrows as she walked up to Harry, grabbed the spandex shorts that were still in his uniform’s box, and tossed them aside.

“I can’t wait to watch you play the eight man in your kilt.”

“Eight man?” Harry asked. “Where did you learn about rugby positions?”

“A book.”

“Of course....so that explains my number. But why put me at the back of the scrum?”

“Bent over in the last row while I play the back line...where else would I want you?”

“Back in Hannah’s bed?”

“You mean Parvati’s,” Hermione replied with a smile

“What?”

“It’s Parvati’s turn for third shift tonight.”

“Wouldn’t put it past her to skive off and join us,” Harry said with a grin.

“In your dreams, Potter.”

Harry nodded. He thought to inform Hermione that it was actually their kids that joined them in his dreams, but that just brought him back around to his nightmares.

“What’s wrong, Harry?”

“What? Erm...nothing.”

“It didn’t look like nothing.”

“Oh, well...you mentioned dreams, and that got me thinking about the nightmares...and that family in Edinburgh...and why we can’t chase after the Death Eaters that abused them.”

“Now Harry...we’ve been through this, right? Am I going to need to gather up those captured portkeys and hide them from you?”

“No, I suppose not,” Harry replied. A glance back towards Hermione’s sexy uniform gave him reason to smile.

“Nice patch line, sweetheart.”

“What?”

“No panty lines...but I can see the outline of your dragonhide patch,” Harry replied, pointing towards the front of Hermione’s shorts.

She looked down and shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, can’t be helped, unless I was going to swallow it.”

“Not a bad idea, actually.”

“What...to swallow my GPS locator?” Hermione asked with surprise. “And are you going to be the one fishing for it in a day or two when it pops out?”

“No...I was thinking about something less messy,” Harry replied. “Like Malfoy’s portkey tooth.”

“Don’t fancy the thought of giving up one of my molars, for.....Harry? Why do you think that’s a funny thought?”

The Queen’s Wizard shook his head. “A different idea, Hermione...I was thinking of...these GPS tracking devices...they still work after a portkey is used, right?”

“Yes, we tested that the other day...why do you ask?”

“Because...Tonks is on-duty for a few more hours, still, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“Need to talk with her about our prisoners,” Harry replied. “One of them just might be lucky enough to earn a pardon tonight.”

“Earn a pardon?” Hermione asked. “And exactly what will they need to do to earn their release?”

“Put us on the offensive again.”

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10:30 pm, The Palace at Holyrood House, Edinburgh, Scotland

The low-level Death Eater woke up face down on a cold stone floor, with a high-level headache, a sore arm, and a foggy memory.

“What the...where are....”

The reach for his wand came up empty.

“Looking for something, wizard?”

The Death Eater rolled over and pushed himself up into a sitting position facing the questioner, who stood on the opposite side of jail cell bars. The man dressed in a Muggle police uniform had a smile on his face as he twirled a wand in his hands.

“Who are you?”

“I’m your worst nightmare, wizard....somebody who knows the truth about you lot.”

The Death Eater frowned...he had no memory of where he was, or how he had gotten there. The last thing he could remember is apparating with Rodolphus LeStrange into the attack, but appearing not in the middle of the Muggle crowd, but in mid-air.

Stalling for time, he asked, "And what truth is that?"

The policeman snorted.

"That wizards are weak and pathetic creatures who hide in the shadows, waving their wands about. And that you wizard...you tried to kill my Queen."

"I...I did nothing of the sort."

"Oh, so you just showed up with your friends and crashed the party because you fancy the cucumber sandwiches?" the jailor snarked. He then looked over his shoulders, and smiled.

"But no matter...I'm so glad that you finally decided to wake up."

"Why is that?"

"Because I dislike killing scum like you without there being a bit of sport to it," the policeman replied casually. To emphasize this comment, the man stopped twirling the Death Eater's wand and pulled his handgun from its holster.

The Death Eater's eyes went wide. Thinking the situation desperate enough to risk a bit of magic, he closed his eyes and focused on the "three D's."

He went nowhere.

"Something wrong, wizard?" the policeman asked with a smile.

"Erm...please don't kill me...I haven't done anything wrong..."

"Right, right...I believe you," the Muggle replied. "So we'll just call this an experiment."

"Experiment?"

"Yes...a test to see what is more powerful...a wizard with a wand, or a real man with a gun."

The Death Eater raised an eyebrow as his own hopes for escape rose just a bit. If this Muggle was that stupid or that arrogant...

A list of painful hexes began to form in his head.

The wizard's spirits rose even higher when he slipped a hand into his robes and took hold of the candy wrapper portkey that his captors must have missed when his wand was taken from him. He now had a clear way out, once he had that wand in hand...and made this Muggle pay for his hubris.

Masking his emotions as best he could, he asked, "So some sort of duel?"

"Yeah, you against me...what do you say?"

"I'd say that you have me at a disadvantage, Sir," the Death Eater replied, as he nodded towards the wand in the policeman's hand.

"Oh, right...you want your wand back, huh?" the Muggle said with a grin. He then held the wand out perpendicular to the floor and pressed it against two of the jail cell bars.

"Oh, darn...it doesn't fit through!"

"What?" asked the Death Eater, wondering whether this Muggle was really that stupid. "Just slip it through the other way."

"Oh, right," the jailor replied. He then rotated the wand a half turn and pressed it back up against the bars. "No, it doesn't work when it's pointed in that direction either."

"Merlin," the Death Eater muttered. "Here, I'll take it..."

The wizard only got a step towards the front of the cell before the Muggle pushed hard enough on the wand for it to snap in half against the bars.

"Ah...there it goes," he said with an evil grin, tossing the two pieces through the bars. "All yours."

"You..."

"On the count of three, then?"

"What?"

"We'll open fire on the count of three," stated the Muggle. "One...."

The Death Eater swore as he scrambled to pick up the two pieces of his wand. It had broken closer to the handle, so that there might be just enough....yes. There was faint warmth when he grabbed the larger piece by its thicker end.

"Two..."

Thinking quickly, the Death Eater decided that he couldn't risk a misfired hex...or risk that he could even cast a hex. But there might be just enough magical power within the wand to make his escape. He shoved his broken wand tip into his pocket, touched the candy wrapper portkey, and cried out the activation word just as his opponent yelled out "Three!"

He disappeared before learning whether the Muggle had fired his weapon.

He reappeared in a place where the odds of being shot were only slightly lower.

"Stay where you are!" yelled a wizard whose wand was pointed directly at the Death Eater's heart.

"Wait, don't fire...it's me...Jacobs! I'm one of you!" he called out.

"Then why are you wearing Auror Robes, then!"

Rodolphus LeStrange entered the room that the Death Eater had portkeyed into, quickly assessed the situation, and then cuffed the wand-holding sentry on the back of the head.

"Because we were dressed that way when we launched the attack, you dolt!"

"Oh, thank Merlin, Rodolphus...at least you believe me..."

"Don't take a step from there, Jacobs...or whomever you are," Lestrangle shouted, as he drew his own wand out and plopped down on a chair.

"But Rodolphus...it's me...I escaped from the Muggles..."

"Or you are Potter on Polyjuice," Lestrangle replied. "Strip down naked...let's be sure that you aren't hiding anything under those robes."

The Death Eater bit his lip, but complied with the order.

"See...Dark Mark and everything," he said, showing the other two in the room his left forearm.

"No different than what somebody's arm would look like if they nicked a strand of your hair," the senior Death Eater replied. "Now...we're just going to sit tight over the next hour, and have a little chat. You tell us what happened, and we'll decide whether or not we should wait for the full hour before we AK your sorry arse."

"But...you can't...the Master forbade us from using magic within a safe house!"

Rodolphus arched an eyebrow. "True enough...and a bit of trivia that speaks in your favor." He then turned to the other Death Eater and said, "Go check downstairs and see if we've still got the beater bats...just in case."

"Yes, Sir."

Rodolphus return his steely gaze to the naked Death Eater in the center of the room.

"It won't be as quick as an AK," he said with a thin smile. "But that's okay...I could use the exercise....now start talking."

The Death Eater nodded grimly, and began to tell his tale.

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A far less tense atmosphere could be found back in the faux jail cell underneath the Palace at Holyrood House.

"Outstanding acting job," Harry said, as he slapped Roger Granger on the back. "I was hoping that you'd slip into the Dirty Harry routine, or some Python, but..."

"I was too nervous to think of it," Roger admitted, as he stripped off the uniform that he'd worn as the Death Eater's pretend jailer.

"But I was in the corner the whole time, underneath my cloak, right?"

Yes, well...still..."

A flash of Harry's Art Club badge interrupted the banter.

"What's the good news, Wally?" Harry asked, after "picking up" the call.

"It's working," the MI-5 ¾ agent replied brightly. "Got a location lock on the bastard in Salisbury."

"Right where Lucius wanted to go before we nicked him," Harry said with a nod. The excitement over the fact that his plan had apparently worked was tempered by a sudden realization.

"So this might be headquarters," he stated softly. "Maybe even Voldemort in residence...."

"We'll know more when surveillance sets up, Harry," Wally replied.

"Won't take that long, since we'd already been looking in Wiltshire, right?"

"Yes, had that team on standby...should be at the address within ten minutes."

"Great," Harry said, fingering his wand. "And all they are going to do is watch, right?"

"Yes, Harry."

"Not going to be any SAS teams barging in and mucking things up again?"

"No, Harry...not unless you want them too."

A smile crept onto the Queen's Wizard face. He'd sat around enough meetings that day, and was looking forward to the possibility of some exercise of his own.

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Friday, July 13 2:30 am, 25 MeadowRoad, Salisbury, England

Harry couldn't decide which hat he was wearing as he surveyed the target through his field glasses. There were elements of both the Order of Arthur and TPOMS at the scene, but as everyone was comfortable with the idea of Harry's leadership it didn't really matter...at least inside the perimeter established by a ring of heavily-armed Muggle sentinels.

From a literal standpoint, the answer was obvious. Harry, along with the rest of his team, was wearing a black balaclava that coordinated with the rest of his black commando "night operations" kit.

The Queen's Wizard handed his binoculars to Roger Granger, and shifted his gaze from the run-down row house to the display of a high-tech electronic device that Hermione was monitoring.

"Looks like this one's settled down after the trip to the loo," she whispered, as he pointed towards the bright false image display of a detailed thermal profile of the structure's entire interior.

Harry nodded. The secret agent surveillance device clearly showed four people inside the house...three sleeping upstairs in two separate bedrooms, while the fourth watched late-night telly in the ground floor sitting room.

"What do you think?"

"Neighbors have been evac'd," Hermione noted. "Maybe we should send the robot in??"

"Make it so, Number One," Harry intoned, in his best Picard voice.

Hermione rolled her eyes as she called for their Muggle MI-5 ¾ colleagues who had established a perimeter line to send in the robot. They both watched as a small, remote controlled electronic device normally used for bomb disposal slowly made its way to the front steps of the house and then back again. That it made this trip without having its very sensitive insides shut down by the interference of magical wards suggested that there weren't any.

"Right then," Harry said, mainly to himself. He then turned to Roger and said, "Give us a shout out on your badge if you see anything on the display that we should know about."

"Yes, Sir," Roger said with a combination salute/smirk.

“Right behind you, Captain,” Hermione replied.

“Thought I was a Major?”

“Thought you were stealing bits of Trek dialogue?”

Harry shook his head, and then stabbed his face forward so that he could steal a kiss from his heavily armed girlfriend. Hermione had just begun to whisper a protest when a flash of white swooped down and landed on Harry’s shoulder.

“Ouch!” Harry hissed, as Hedwig’s talons dug in. “What’s that about?”

Roger smiled. “Maybe she doesn’t like the idea of my daughter being your Number One.”

“No, but what...Hedwig, why....do you have a message for me?”

His familiar looked down at her unladen legs; then back up again at Harry, and shook her head.

“Okay, okay...stupid question,” Harry hissed. “Look, Hedwig...if it’s about me not spending enough time with you...now isn’t the best time to be asking....”

The white owl shook her head, and then glanced over at Hermione.

“Yeah, sometimes I wonder, too,” she whispered conspiratorially to the bird.

The owl nodded once, and then launched herself up towards a perch on the highest chimney top along the street.

“Think that’s an omen, or something?” Harry asked.

“Yes...it’s a sign that you shouldn’t take the women in your life for granted,” Hermione said with a smile.

Roger leaned over to give his daughter a hug, then did the same to Harry.

“Stay safe, you two,” he ordered.

“Yes, Sir,” Harry replied smartly, with a crisp salute and smile. He then gave the thermal imager one last glance, and activated the “party line” feature of the Art Club badge.

“Okay, folks, let’s show Sport and Social how it’s done properly.”

“Sir, Yes, Sir!” Fred and George Weasley whispered back.

Harry ignored the faux respect as he double-checked his goody bags and scabbard, then slipped his invisibility cloak over his head. Hermione did the same, only with a high quality concealment cloak. She then followed Harry as they made their way to the front of the building on silenced-charmed boots.

The Queen’s Wizard pulled out the Portable Hole that had served him so well on Privet Drive and pressed it against the exterior wall of the house. He flinched as the television’s sound escaped out through the hole, but didn’t flinch enough to catch the notice of the Death Eater who was sitting with his back to them.

It was a challenge to slip through the hole on one’s hands and knees whilst underneath an invisibility cloak, but Harry had actually practiced this maneuver, and was able to execute it flawlessly. Once clear of the magical entrance, he crawled over to the front corner of the room and waited for Hermione.

Meanwhile, portable holes had been slapped against the walls of the two upstairs bedrooms, where the assigned tasks for Fred and George on one broom, and Remus and Tonks on the other, were a bit simpler. Placing these holes high up on the walls gave the assault teams clear shots towards the three sleeping Death Eaters, without need of entering the building.

The operation had been necessarily stripped down to simple elements that had already been proven in battle, in order to gain authorization from the highest of “higher-ups” (i.e. The Queen, The Prime Minister and the COBRA team). But even the simplest of military plans rarely survives first contact with the enemy, whether due to the quality of the plan, the cunning of the enemy, or sheer bad luck.

It was bad luck that turned this plan pear-shaped. The telly-watching Death Eater, wondering whether he could bully the next watch into taking his shift early, looked up at a wall clock just as Hermione entered the hole. The clock didn’t betray her presence, but the mirror next to it clearly showed a round hole in the wall where it shouldn’t be.

Had Harry been in position to see the wizard’s eyes narrow, or his hand reach for his wand, he would have jumped and fired first. But the Queen’s Wizard was still hidden behind the Death Eater, so his first indication that they’d been caught out came only once the wizard flipped around in his chair and fired a blind spell towards the hole in the wall.

“Reducto!”

“Hermione!”

“Bollocks!” swore Remus across the badge line. “Open fire!”

While stunning spells flew upstairs, Harry Potter flew into action downstairs.

The invisibility cape sailed off of his shoulders as his left hand drew the Sword of Gryffindor from his shoulder scabbard, matching the wand already held in the right.

“You bastard!” he shouted, closing the distance between himself and the Death Eater in a flash.

The target turned and swept his wand arm out for the start a second blasting curse. It was met by a slash of silver metal that caught the Death Eater’s arm in mid-air. The blade struck so sharp fast and true that the wizard finished the wand motion and yelled out *“Reducto!”* before realizing that the spell wouldn’t work without his wand.

Or the severed hand that had been holding his wand.

The momentum behind Harry’s sword attack, and the ease with which the blade cut through the arm caught him off balance...literally. Thrown forward with the swing, his instinct was to follow it in a shoulder roll that carried him past the Death Eater. But having practiced this move as well, he came out of the roll on his feet, and immediately turned on his heels in a motion that facilitated the start of his own spell casting.

“Diffindo!”

The Death Eater, who had been staring at the stump of his arm in disbelief, didn’t see it coming. He therefore didn’t see anything ever again, as the spell struck his neck and he slumped to the ground dead.

Harry stared at the Death Eater’s corpse until his brain could catch up with what just happened. He then turned back towards the front wall of the house, and caught sight of a much larger and more ragged hole than what he had used to enter.

“Hermione!” he yelled out in anguish.

“I’m here, Harry,” said a soft voice to his side.

He jerked around, in a motion that swung his sword in a dangerous arc.

“Harry!” Hermione yelled more loudly, as she ducked under the sword blade. “It’s me...it’s me!”

The Queen’s Wizard stared at her for a moment in disbelief...there wasn’t a scratch on her.

Too relieved to wonder how that was so, he dropped his bloody sword and pulled her into a bone-crushing hug.

“The mission,” Hermione murmured into his shoulder. “Need to secure the scene.”

“Upstairs is clear!” Remus called out on his badge.

Harry glanced down at the body near their feet.

“Downstairs clear,” he said with a shake of his head. Whatever else might have been said was lost as he pulled Hermione’s balaclava from her head and buried his face in her bushy brown hair.

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It was the smell of too many humans out too late at night that first alerted Peter Pettigrew that something was off as he scampered back towards the safe house in his animagus form. He had gone out for a late night meal...something tastier and more filling than the scant rations that had been left behind when his Master had abandoned the location a few days past.

Keeping to the shadows, he crept forward for a closer look. There were Muggles surrounding the house...Muggles and their firesticks! But they weren’t doing anything more than standing guard, and there were other smells and other voices coming from the house itself.

He caught the whiff of blood just before he smelled werewolf. A specific werewolf, to be exact.

A rat-sized whimper escaped from Peter’s rat-sized lips and he shuddered in fright. They had been found out....found out in the safe house that the Master had ordered him to keep under watch! This was not good....not good at all.

He had to see what happened, on the off chance that this information would save his life when he reported to the Dark Lord. It was risky, but the risk paid off as he safely made it past the Muggle sentries peered inside the large ragged hole in the house's wall.

"I knew that these badges would come in handy," said a red haired boy that Peter knew all too well.

"Yes, well, it worked for Sir Evan...badge-jumping was all that I could think to do when I was on my hands and knees and heard the spell cast," said Hermione Granger.

The other boy...Potter!...was holding the witch tightly with one arm.

"I'm just glad you were smart enough and far enough away to duck when I turned," he said.

"It is supposed to transport us to a safe location by the anchor point, right?" asked the witch. She shook her head and smiled. "Not that it wasn't scary enough."

"Yeah for us both," Harry replied.

Hermione pulled Harry into a kiss. "Speaking of which...think you can let me go long enough for me to find a loo? I should check if my knickers to see if they need a *Scourgify* spell."

"Thought that you weren't wearing any today?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Too much information...la-la-la-la..." said Ron, as he covered his ears.

Peter watched as the witch separated from the two wizards and left the room. There were others there, but they were Muggles. Well, except for LeStrange, who was clearly dead on the floor. A nearly-headless LeStrange. He could smell Lupin, and the witch that wore Lupin's scent, but it was faint...perhaps they were either upstairs, or down in the basement.

What to do?

Tired of worrying about the life-debt he owed to Potter or Potter's witch (he couldn't remember which), and terrified of what would happen to him should he be the bearer of this bad news, Wormtail decided to risk acting. He scurried behind the sitting room sofa that Harry was standing in front of, transformed back into human form, and rose up to cast a non-verbal spell that he would only dare use in Snape's absence.

"*Sectumsempra!*" Wormtail thought, with a slash of his wand.

Ron was the first to make sense of what was happening, and reacted with far more instinct than premeditation.

"Harry!" he yelled, as he dove towards the Queen's Wizard.

The momentum carried Harry out of harm's way, and dropped him to the ground.

Most of Ron went with him.

"Aaaaarrgh!" the Clan Champion yelled, as blood sprayed in an arc from his head up towards the spell-severed ear that had been left behind.

TPOMS squadron members New Six and Coley were almost as quick to respond, and fired off a spray of bullets towards Pettigrew's head even before the ear hit the ground. They would have hit their mark, had Peter's head not already been shrinking down to rat-size.

"Where'd he go?" yelled New Six, as he pulled his combat knife and dove behind the couch. He froze for just a fraction of a second at the sight of a silver-pawed rat running away from him. That delay was all it took for Peter to escape out the large hole in the wall before the thrown knife could catch up to him.

The Muggle warrior was immediately on the radio relaying the news and calling for everyone to be on the look-out for either a wizard or a rat.

Wormtail had beaten the odds of being found out when he scurried into the safe house. He hadn't noticed the owl who had been keeping watch over the area, so he didn't know just how incredibly lucky he been on the first run.

He wasn't so lucky the second time. The baffled feathers of a white owl's wings allowed for a silent approach as a very hacked-off familiar swooped down from the rooftop.

Hedwig and the other owls that had patrolled the skies of Little Wizing and Windsor had been given specific instructions concerning the capture of the silver-pawed rat...he was to be taken alive, if possible. Harry's familiar had followed those orders once, and where had that led? The rat was captured, released, and allowed to attack her human again. So this time....

Had she ever been asked, Hedwig might have been forced to admit that she had swept down on Wormtail just a little too fast, and dug her talons into her prey just a little too hard. And banging the vermin's head against the ground until its neck broke?

The owl shook her head, and would have smiled if she could. Her human companion was so silly, to think that he didn't need her around to keep him

safe!

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By the time that Hedwig decided to proudly show off her catch, her human was gone. Harry had gathered a barely-conscious Ron and Ron's ear and the two badge-jumped to the Hogwarts Infirmary using Emily Granger as an anchor point (she had been pre-positioned there for just this kind of medical emergency).

"Poppy!" Harry called out. "We need help now!"

"What is it...oh my," the Hogwarts Matron said, as she ran towards the two blood-covered boys. "What happened?"

"*Sectumsempra*, I think," Harry announced, as he lifted Ron up to a bed and rolled him onto his side.

"Oh my! My Ron! My Ron! Not My Ron!" shouted Molly Weasley, from a bed across the way.

She fainted before a magical sedative could be administered. The results were the same...Madame Pomfrey was able to work without interruption.

"Fetch the blood replenishing potion, Mr. Potter...over there on the shelf."

"I've got it," announced Arthur, who was in the room and closer to the medicine. "How many?"

"As many as we have," Poppy announced, as she began to cast intricate coagulation spells towards Ron's head.

The situation was touch and go for a few minutes...Ron lost consciousness, and required the administration of *Draught of the Living Death* to keep from bleeding out. Finally, Madame Pomfrey was able to lower her wand, exhale deeply, and announce that she'd managed to stop the flow.

Harry smiled, and let out his own sigh of relief. He then turned to Arthur and announced, "He saved my life tonight, Mr. Weasley...definitely need some subtraction from that list that you insist on carrying about."

Arthur nodded. "What happened, Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard was about to describe the raid before a separate thought came to him.

"Madame Pomfrey...I brought the ear along for you," he announced, grabbing the bloody bit of body from where he'd set it next to the bed.

Poppy shook her head. "I'm afraid there's nothing that can be done with it. That horrid spell is so Dark...there's no way that I'd be able to reattach it."

"Are you sure?" asked Arthur.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," the Matron said with a sigh.

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. "Madame Pomfrey...how exactly does the curse get in the way of your healing?"

"It actively fights my healing magic," Poppy responds. "That's what makes the spell so much more dangerous than a simple *Diffindo*."

"So if we were to..." Harry mused. He then activated his badge phone.

"Hermione?"

"Go, Harry."

"Poppy stopped Ron's blood loss, but says the curse's magic will fight hers if she tried to reattach the ear...think that the MI-5 trauma team could give it a look?"

"That's what we had them on call for," Hermione replied. "Give me a few seconds to get there."

"Roger that," he said. He then looked over towards Arthur. "Mr. Weasley...if the curse is effective because it fights against magical healing...there's a chance that Muggle healing might not be affected."

Arthur's eyes went wide, then immediately went towards his wife's bed. Thankfully, she was still unconscious, and couldn't voice her opinions.

"So...they could reattach the ear?"

Harry shrugged. "I know that they're capable of reattaching fingers, and arms...even legs sometimes, depending on circumstances."

"So they'd get out their sewing kits, like when I was bit by that snake?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Harry replied truthfully. "But if the sewing doesn't take hold, he'll be no worse off than he is now, right?"

Arthur pursed his lips. "Poppy?"

"I don't even want to imagine what they might try to do," she said with a shake of her head. "The worse that could happen would be for them to buggger up the magical blood clotting...not that I'd know how they could manage it."

"But if you were there, Poppy...if that were possible...then you could step in?"

The Matron turned to Harry and raised an eyebrow.

"Well?"

"I think I have enough sway to make that happen," he said with a thin smile.

When Hermione called back with word that she was ready to receive the patient, Arthur helped Harry pull Ron up to his feet and into his grasp.

"With Ron unconscious, I'll have to side-along him to hospital," Harry told Arthur. "We'll get you down there as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Harry," the Weasley patriarch said.

The Queen's Wizard didn't take time to argue over who should be thanking whom, and apparated to London.

They arrived in a mostly empty room that was close to MI-5's emergency medical facility and the designated arrival point for injured magical secret agents. Hermione was there waiting for the two, kitted out in medical scrubs, a mask, and a cloth cap that did a poor job of constraining a mass of bushy-brown hair. She helped Harry lay Ron out on a wheeled gurney and aimed it towards the exit.

"Hermione? Why are you dressed like a doctor?" asked Harry.

"Just push...I'll steer," she replied sharply, as they wheeled Ron down the hallway.

Ten seconds later, they were met by a pair of surgical nurses who were dressed similar to Hermione.

"We've got him," one said. "You're to follow, then, Agent Granger?"

Hermione nodded, and then turned to Harry.

"Somebody needs to be there in case the magic interferes," she explained. "What's he been given?"

"Four units of blood replenishing potion, and some *Draught of the Living Death*," Harry replied.

"So that solves the question of anesthesia," Hermione announced. "How long ago?"

"Ten minutes, maybe?" Harry asked. "Poppy could tell you for sure...she and Arthur wanted to come down to help."

"Good idea," Hermione replied, as she headed towards the operating room. "Have Tonks and Remus side-along apparate them to the front gate and meet them there to clear the wards and security checkpoints."

"Erm...right...I'll do that," Harry said...mostly to himself, as Hermione had already disappeared into the operating room.

There would be a time later on when Harry would replay events, and decide that his girlfriend was not only the brightest witch in her generation, but at times the most assertive. But for present purposes, Harry had some magical transport to arrange. He activated his Art Club badge, and called out, "Tonks?...Remus?"

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The Muggle aide assigned to lead Harry, Remus, Tonks and Arthur to a waiting area didn't have high enough clearance to know about magic, or the nature of MI-5's work. Still, she had experience with the odd injuries and odd situations whenever "normal" secret agents were brought in for emergency repair, and therefore paid no mind to the group's strange attire, and even stranger conversations.

She paid a little mind to the blonde haired girl who was waiting for the group at their destination...but who wouldn't notice someone who was reading an upside-down newspaper while her MI-5 credentials hung from a necklace made from fizzy drink caps?

"Luna!" Harry exclaimed, as he pulled her into a hug. "I'm so glad that you're here...but...how did you know? How did you get here?"

The thestral knew where I was needed," she replied simply.

The Muggle aid ignored the comment, and announced, "There's coffee over there, and water for tea, if anyone needs it."

"Thank you," Harry replied, as he glanced over towards a small kitchenette. "You'll be back when there's word, then?"

"Yes, Sir," the aide announced, as she eyed something strange over his shoulder. But she said nothing of it, and left the room.

Harry turned to find Arthur Weasley opening and closing a refrigerator's door.

"They have a light... a light that turns on and off whenever the door opens!" he said with amazement. But once he noted that they were alone, he focused his interest where it was most needed.

"So, Harry... can you tell me what happened tonight?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry... I would like to hear, too," added Luna.

The Queen's Wizard nodded, and gave a brief recount of their actions, up to the point where Ron stepped in front of a curse meant for him. The story was then interrupted by a badge call from Hermione's dad, announcing that he had something to share with Harry, and that TPOMS was demobilizing from the scene at Salisbury.

"Good... I was just getting to that point in the story," Harry replied. "Can you jump in to provide an update?"

"Is it safe?" Roger asked.

Harry looked around. "Yeah, the kitchen appliances don't look all that high-tech."

Roger laughed, and appeared in the surgery's waiting area a few moments later.

"So what happened after I left?" Harry asked.

"Not much... after-action mop up," Roger replied with a thin smile. "Although magic worked far better than a mop against that blood on the floor. Looks like Ron was the only causality on our side."

"How about the DE's?"

"Two dead, three captured," said Roger.

"And Rookwood wasn't one of the ones sleeping upstairs?"

"No, he wasn't there," said Roger. "But Pettigrew was... he's the one that fired the curse that Ron caught."

"Too bad that he got away," said Harry. "Hold on... you said two killed?"

Remus stepped up and grabbed Harry by the shoulder.

"The rat bastard is finally dead," he announced. "Can't decide whether I wish him to hell, or worse."

"Worse than hell?" asked Arthur.

"I think it would be, for him at least... if Peter ended up where Sirius could prank his sorry arse for all eternity," Remus said with a grim smile.

"How did we get him?" Harry asked.

"Close air support," Roger said with a smile.

"Air support... what kind?"

"A very *familiar* kind, Harry," Tonks quipped. "Hedwig must have been keeping watch over you tonight... she spotted him and swooped down before he got away."

"Yeah, she was there... and you're sure that it's not a regular old rat?"

"A were-enhanced sense of smell," Lupin said sagely, tapping the side of his nose.

"Not that a regular old witch's sight couldn't have determined the same," chimed in Tonks. "Unless there are other rats out there with a silver paw?"

"Wow," Harry said, as he slumped into a chair. "Guess I owe Hedwig a deluxe bag of owl treats."

"That you do."

They sat quietly for a moment, before the stress of a very long and difficult day got to him.

"So, Roger...you sure it was Peter Pettigrew, and not just some parrot resting after a prolonged squawk?"

Hermione's dad arched an eyebrow, and then broke out into a brilliant smile.

"This was a dead Peter, Harry...not a dead parrot."

"So it wasn't just pining for the fjords?"

Roger shook his head. "Pining for the fjords? Only Norwegian Blues do that, Harry...beautiful plumage, the Norwegian Blue."

"So it was really a dead Peter?"

Roger winked. "If he wasn't nailed to the perch he'd be pushing up the daisies."

Harry and Roger broke out into loud laughter, leaving everyone else in the room very confused.

Well...almost everyone.

Which became evident when Luna Lovegood began to sing softly to herself as she continued to read her upside-down Quibbler.

"Spam, spam, spam, spam...Spam, spam, spam, spam..."

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall

Lord High Steward, Part 2 (part 1)

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

Chapter 42: Project Arcanum

Friday, July 13, 6:00 am, MI-5 Headquarters, Thames Bank, London

As Ron's surgery passed the three-hour mark of what would ultimately be a ten-hour long procedure, Hermione Granger let a yawn escape from underneath her surgical mask.

The vibration of her Art Club badge did much to reestablish her clarity of mind.

She moved quickly to a corner of the operating theater, touch-activated the badge which was hidden underneath her surgical scrubs, and engaged in a brief, whispered conversation.

"Hermione?"

"Go ahead, Harry,"

"The Queen requires our presence."

"When?"

"Right now."

The young witch looked down at her attire.

"Do we have time to change?"

"Steve said as soon as practicable, and given the meeting location, I doubt that formal attire is necessary."

"Is everything okay up in Balmoral, Harry?"

"As far as I know," he replied. "I thumbed out a quick after-action report on my BlackBerry that she was cc'ed on...perhaps she has questions."

"She was awake at this hour?"

"Apparently so...Steve's the anchor point...do you want me to wait?"

"No, go ahead...I need to secure Ron's kit before any of the magical devices walk off, or inadvertently affect the electronics."

"Good idea," Harry replied. "I'll let the Queen know."

Once the Queen's Wizard signed off, Hermione gave her father a badge call. She then approached the Hogwarts Matron and pulled her away from the table.

"I've got to go out for a while," Hermione whispered.

"Is it something that would warrant my return to the Infirmary?" Poppy asked.

The younger witch shook her head. "Harry and I have been summoned to Balmoral. My dad is going to scrub in and take my place here."

Poppy looked back towards the operating table, and then shook her head. "No need for that...things appear to be going well here."

Hermione bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Madame Pomfrey, but I'm afraid that there is a need. He'll be able to contact us using his badge, and then there's the fact that all visitors to Thames Bank need an escort while they're here."

The Hogwarts Matron frowned. "This is more than just a medical facility, then...isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And you are far more than just a visitor here, aren't you?"

Hermione nodded.

Madame Pomfrey snorted. She has suspected as much from the deference that the Muggle medical team and gun-carrying guards had shown the young witch.

"As if the wizarding world's problems are enough...now you have responsibilities in the Muggle world as well?"

A gloved and scrubbed Hermione entered the operating room before the operating room could launch into a lengthy response. So instead she shrugged her shoulders, smiled, and said her good-byes.

Nurse-provided directions led Hermione into a post-op ward, where Ron's bloody clothing and combat gear had been placed on a side table. As she sorted out what needed to be secured and what could be safely left behind, she came across an Art Club badge that was still pinned to a blood-stained black wool jumper.

An idle thought crossed her mind...that if there had been more than twelve badges, then Poppy could have been given one, and wouldn't have needed her father to convey messages from within the operating room. This thought was immediately linked to a concern that had been nagging Hermione since her visit to Carlisle Castle the day before. The thought and concern were then tied together by a guess...a guess that Ron wouldn't be in a position to use his Art Club badge for at least the next day or two.

The young witch nodded to herself, and offered a silent apology to Ron as she unpinned the badge from his jumper and brought it with her to Balmoral.

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Hermione's arrival was greeted by more than a few howls.

"Oh, hush," admonished the Queen, as she gathered one of her precious corgis into her arms.

The young witch's eyes followed the Queen's other canine companions as they scurried underneath a bed.

The Queen's bed.

In the Queen's bedchambers.

"Sorry for the welcome, Ambassador Granger," the Queen said with a smile. "They are still getting used to all of this popping in and out."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the teenager replied, as she reflexively grabbed the ends of her hospital scrub shirt and curtsied in front of the monarch.

The fact that the Queen had called her "Ambassador Granger" did not register in her mind. Not much of anything could have registered in a mind that had now zoned in on the fact that the Queen was presently sitting on an unmade bed wearing an RAF officer's jacket over top a dressing gown and slippers.

"Sorry for my delay, Your Majesty," she added, trying to keep her facial expressions neutral even as she spied Harry's rosy cheeks from the corner of her eye.

"No worries, Ambassador," the Queen replied. "Lord Gryffindor was just recounting the mission for us."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hermione nodded. She then noted that the "us" wasn't a plural form of the "Royal We"; Steve, Parvati Patil, and one of the Queen's Muggle handmaidens were also in the room.

"How is Sir Ronald?" the Queen asked, noticing the spare Art Club badge in Hermione's hand.

"Still in surgery, Ma'am," the young witch replied. "It will likely be six or seven more hours before they're done."

"Then there is some other reason for you to have his Order of Arthur badge?"

Hermione was caught off guard by the question, and quickly looked down at the emblem.

"Erm, no, Ma'am, I mean...yes, this is Ron's badge, but he isn't using it right now, and I had an idea..."

Parvati couldn't keep her snark in check.

"Hermione having an idea," she said with a snort. "What a surprise."

The bushy-haired witch gave the witch-in-waiting a dirty look, then turned back to the Queen.

"Begging you pardon, Ma'am, but...we haven't yet figured out how to ensure your safety at Carlisle, and...well, isn't the sovereign always a member of their royal orders?"

The Queen, having at least twice as much sleep as anyone else in the room, was the first to catch on. A smile formed on her face as she considered the possibilities.

"We would we pleased to test your hypothesis, Ambassador Granger."

"Hermione?" Harry asked in a low voice, as his Consort offered up Ron's badge to the Queen.

"We know that Muggles can use these badges, Harry," she replied. "If Her Majesty is a member of the Order of Arthur by default, then..."

Harry's eyes lit up as he finally understood her logic. He then turned and watched as the Queen set her corgi onto the ground, then pinned the spare Art Club badge onto the lapel of her unbuttoned wool jacket.

It's 'Clarence', is it not?" The Queen asked.

The fact that the badge lit up in response to the monarch's use of the activation phrase was all the confirmation that was needed.

"How delightful!" stated the Queen. She pressed against one of the badge's rays and called Harry. His Art Club badge vibrated and lit up in response.

"So if she can call, then maybe she could jump away from danger?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps we should find out, and give Sir Evan an early morning visit?"

Harry couldn't help but snort at the thought of the Queen jumping into Sir Evan's Round Tower magical tent wearing her dressing gown and slippers.

The Queen smiled. "Yes, we suppose you are correct, Gryffindor... wouldn't want to stop Sir Evan's heart from the shock." She then walked to the corner of the room, 'called' Steve, and successfully badge-jumped to the other side of the room.

The monarch looked quite pleased with herself, and badge-jumped again, this time to Hermione's side.

Her corgis were not amused, though, and howled after each trip.

"Excellent," the Queen declared. "Now Agent Wall can get some much needed rest."

"Ma'am?" Steve asked.

"There is less of a need for a rallying point to be always by our side if we are able to instantly rally ourselves to a different location, correct?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Steve replied (a bit reluctantly).

"Excellent, then you are dismissed, Agent Wall... go to sleep."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The Queen then turned back to Hermione.

"We presume that Sir Ronald will not have need of this badge for at least a few hours?"

"No, Ma'am," Hermione replied.

The monarch raised an eyebrow as she turned her focus towards the young witch's attire. "Were you assisting in the surgery, Ambassador?"

"Erm, no Ma'am... Madame Pomfrey, our school nurse, is there."

"Ah, yes," replied the Queen. "We understand that you brought more than one visitor to Thames Bank this morning."

Harry jumped into the conversation. "Yes, Ma'am, we brought Ron's father in... not just to be there for the surgery, but... we thought he was owed an explanation as to how his son was injured and what he's been doing for us."

"Sir Ronald's father... he works in the Magical Ministry, correct?"

"Yes, Ma'am, but he took a Wizard's Oath not to reveal what I said or what he saw there, so no worries on that point."

"And what is your opinion of his loyalties?"

"Couldn't be any prouder of his son, Ma'am," Harry replied. "His son Ron, that is."

"We understand your point... there is an estranged son, yes?"

Harry didn't catch the Queen's meaning, but Hermione did.

"Yes, Ma'am... Ron's brother Percy is, well... a Ministry *functionaire*."

The Queen nodded. "Would you recommend, then, that Sir Ronald's father be vetted for a position on the *Magnum Concilium*?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and held a silent conversation. It was Harry that then turned back and said, "Yes, Ma'am, Head Auror Robards and he are about the only ones in the Ministry's upper management that we know well enough to truly trust."

"Excellent," the Queen replied. "We will have the process begun, then."

"Would you like us to ask Mr. Weasley, Ma'am?" Harry asked.

The Queen looked at Harry and Hermione's tired faces and shook her head.

"There are others to whom that task can be delegated," the Queen replied. "Which brings us to other issues... Gryffindor, for how many hours have you gone without sleep?"

Harry caught his breath, and replied cautiously. "Not that many, Ma'am."

"We would be pleased with more specificity."

The bleary-eyed wizard looked at his watch. "A little over twenty-four, Ma'am."

"And it the same for you Ambassador Granger?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

The Queen sighed. "We wish that these conditions be remedied forthwith."

"Ma'am?"

"You both need some sleep," the Queen replied candidly. "We need both of you at your best tomorrow at Carlisle."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

"Still a bit early for using Sir Evan at the Round Tower," he thought out loud.

"And the Love...I mean, our tent is presently occupied," Hermione added. She then looked towards the attending witch-in-waiting, and added, "Thanks, but no thanks, Parvati."

The Queen chuckled to herself.

"We are concerned that you both are pushing yourselves too hard," she said. "It is rather tight here at Balmoral...we just dismissed Agent Wall to a cot in our dressing room. Were there a way to ensure....ah-ha!" The almost smug-looking monarch then called out, "Private Dobby?"

A kilt-wearing house elf popped into the room and bowed so low that his nose touched the carpeting.

"Yes, Major Harry Potter Sir's Queenie, Ma'am?"

Harry choked on some spittle. Hermione drew pale. The Queen just smiled to herself and chuckled as she patted the top of her bed.

"Private Dobby, we would be pleased were you to change the linens and dress this bed for Major Potter's and Ambassador Granger's use."

Harry choked on some more spittle and Hermione drew paler, causing the Queen's grin to grow.

"Private Dobby be doing that right away!" the house elf said brightly.

After a few seconds time and a blur of activity, the large four-poster bed was made up with Potter-Plaid linens and a crimson duvet that bore the Clan Potter crest.

"Your Majesty," Hermione objected, "We are honored but..."

"And we, Ambassador Granger, would be pleased to have our wishes met," The Queen replied. She then turned to Dobby.

"Would you please ensure that these two actually use this opportunity to rest?"

"Dobby can do that!" he said with a vigorous headshake. He then turned to Harry and Hermione and used some house elf magic to confiscate their BlackBerrys.

"But..."

"We have been frustrated with our ability to be useful down here," The Queen said with a smile. "Now that we have new means of shared communication we will be pleased to determine personally if there is a situation serious enough to warrant your awakening."

"Yes, Ma'am," Harry said reluctantly.

Parvati Patil was grinning from ear to ear as she followed the Queen and her Muggle hand maiden out the door into the adjacent dressing room.

"Remember you two...the royal command was to sleep!"

"Yes, Parvati," Hermione chimed in reply. She then turned to Harry and gave him a tired, but still distinctive, "Can you believe this?" look.

Harry shrugged his shoulders and yawned as he pulled down the duvet.

"I think that the ICW delegation can find its way back to the Ministry on its own, don't you?"

"Yes, but...eek!" Hermione chirped, as she was lifted up into the air and levitated over the bed.

"Private Dobby does be promising Major Potter's Queenie," the house-elf said seriously. "Major Potter, Sir and Mistress Consort does be needing to sleep."

Yes, Dobby," Hermione sighed, as she was gently dropped onto the mattress. She reached for the edge of the duvet, only to be taken by surprise once more as all of her outer clothing disappeared.

"Dobby!" she hissed, now dressed only in a Potter-plaid thong. "What are you doing?"

"Dobby be helping," the house-elf replied. Nodding towards their matching Potter-plaid thongs, he asked, "This not be how the Great Harry Potter Sir and Harry Potter's Sir's Mistress Consort be dressing for bed?"

Hermione looked down the length of her body, then over towards Harry's. "Erm...Dobby, you can keep the BlackBerrys for now, but badge and weaponry?"

The house-elf nodded, and a moment later Hermione found her MI-5 badge hanging from a necklace, her Art Club badge fixed to bare skin above her right breast, and her "flat-panel" charmed handgun holster fixed above her left. A knife was strapped against the outside of her right leg, while her wand and wrist holster were now tied onto her left forearm.

Noticing that Harry had been similarly equipped (with the addition of his charmed sword hilt pasted onto the back of his neck), she shook her head, smiled, and said, "Thank you Dobby, we'll take it from here...okay?"

Dobby gave a deep bow, then popped away.

The snarky comment forming on the tip of her tongue was lost when Hermione turned towards her near-naked boyfriend and was captured by the intense focus of his green eyes.

"Harry?"

"I was so afraid, Hermione," he whispered. "I thought I had lost you."

"Oh, Harry," she said sympathetically, as she fell into his arms. "I love you."

"I love you to," he replied, as his lips searched for hers.

A few minutes after Hermione's lips were found, Harry's hands found the soft curve of her thigh. Her eyes lit up with surprise, and she rolled off of his body with a giggle.

"Oh, Harry, we...we can't!"

"We can't what, Hermione?" he asked, wagging his eyebrows.

"But...but this is the Queen's bed!"

Her boyfriend shrugged as his fingers drifted up Hermione's thigh. "I always thought that our first 'first time' would be memorable...talk about memorable locations!"

"You...Harry Potter, you are incorrigible!"

The Queen's Wizard was about to say something when he rubbed his fingers together and caught his breath. He smiled devilishly, and declared, "And you, Hermione Granger, are very..."

"Don't you dare finish that sentence!" Hermione warned.

"Even if it's true?"

"Especially if it is true!"

The banter was interrupted by a frowning house-elf that popped in between them.

"Does Major Potter and Mistress Consort be needing separate beds to be following Major Potter's Queenie's orders?" he asked.

Harry was very close to hexing his house-elf friend before he thought better of it.

"No, Dobby...we were just about to close our eyes."

"Does Dobby need to be staying in bed between Harry Potter Sir and Mistress Consort?"

"No, we'll be good," Hermione said with a laugh. She kissed Harry on the tip of his nose, then rolled onto her side facing away from him. "Good night you two."

Dobby turned towards Harry.

"You win, Dobby," the Queen's Wizard said with a resigned grin on his face. Once he rolled onto his side facing away from Hermione, Dobby the house-elf nodded his head with approval, and popped away.

8:28 am, The Ministry of Magic

The five-person ICW Delegation began to pop out of the Ministry of Magic's inbound floos exactly forty-eight hours, two minutes and thirty seconds after Percy Weasley had invoked the two-day waiting period for their investigation (it would have been closer to forty-eight hours on the dot, had the floo network not been intentionally slowed down to more closely monitor traffic). Percy was again there to "greet" the Internationals, looking far less harried and surprised than during their first encounter.

"Good morning, good morning to you all," he said with false cheer, as he handed each member of the delegation an oversized identification badge attached to a lanyard necklace. When the Emperor's Wizard questioned the need for nametags that read "**ICW**" in six-inch tall letters, Percy insisted that it was only done to ensure that every Ministry worker would know to provide them with any requested assistance.

Telling the five-member delegation that a room had been prepared for their use during their investigation, Percy led the group past the wand check and into a waiting elevator that whisked them directly up to the first level. Thorson, the Norwegian King's Wizard, didn't much care for the fact that this space was adjacent to the Minister of Magic's office, but Percy explained that this was only so that they'd be that much closer to his office, and that he would be at their disposal during their review.

Silencing and eavesdrop detection charms were cast just as soon as Percy left the room. This effort was focused enough to miss the fact that the Special Assistant to the Minister was casting charms of his own other side of the doorway.

The sound barrier charm that Percy cast was strong enough (by design) for the international delegation to miss the alarm that blared out ten minutes later, announcing that the Ministry of Magic was under attack.

8:45 am, Azkaban Island

The overworked, underpaid and always inebriated warden of Azkaban was sleeping off his latest hangover on the office couch when the magical painting that hung behind his desk roared to life.

"Open the gates!" shouted the portrait of a splendidly dressed nobleman. "Open the gates! 'Tis Gloucester that calls!"

When this announcement went unanswered, the portrait muttered, "Where be these wardens that they not wait here?"

After a few more calls, the portrait finally got a growling response from a just-wakened wizard.

"What are you on about?"

"Mark me!" bellowed the painting, after spotting the horizontal source of this response. "And haste ye to hear it, that ye, with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love, may sweep to thy Ministry's defense!"

The noisome wizard scowled. "Whazz'at...meditation...love?" With a shake of his head he rolled over to face the wall and added, "Bugger off!"

"Shall I be flouted thus by dunghill grooms?" lamented the portrait. "Good God! These wizards should such stomachs bear!"

Seeing no other recourse, the elegantly dressed nobleman unrolled a scroll and read from script the crass words that were strange to his oil paint ears.

"Initiate Prison Lockdown. Ministry Defense Plan Alpha-One-Bravo."

The clearly spoken orders from the Minister's office caused the warden to immediately sober up. He jumped to his feet, winced at the pain this motion caused within his head, and asked the portrait to repeat what was said. When the magical portrait complied, the warden swore loudly, then immediately drew his wand and turned towards the five glowing crystals that were set along the side of his desktop.

A unique sequence of five wand tip touches to these crystals, when combined with an authorization incantation, set klaxons ringing throughout the prison. The warden then touched the crystals in a different order, and said a second incantation that caused the framed portrait of the Duke of Gloucester to swing away from the wall.

The warden ducked under the swinging frame and removed emergency portkeys from a hidden cache. The wizard then ran out to the mist-shrouded prison yard, where he was soon met by the prison's full complement of guards and other personnel. The portkeys were distributed, authorization codes were called out, and the island was left to prisoners who were all locked within their cells.

Thirty seconds later, automated "lock-down" wards burst up from the prison's walls and arched into a shimmering, menacing hemispherical dome.

Barely a minute after Azkaban was abandoned by its guardians, stunned and bound bodies began to appear onto its bare-dirt grounds.

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The portkeys hidden within the Ministry-provided nametags caught the ICW delegation by surprise.

Four of the five Internationals stepped out of the cascade of flashing lights and onto the grounds of Azkaban with wands drawn. Those wands were quickly dropped when painful discharges of electrical energy shot down from the thick fog and struck their wand-bearing hands.

"Damn that stung!" shouted the King's Wizard, as he crouched low to the ground and tried to shake out the pain. He looked out into the thick mist that enveloped the group and asked, "Where did that spell fire come from?"

"Given the poor sightlines, and that the lightning struck not the tallest of us, but those who were holding wands, I'd say it was a passive ward boundary," opined his Japanese colleague.

"So where are we, then?" asked the Swedish witch.

"A convenient distance away from the Ministry of Magic, no doubt," replied the Emperor's Wizard. He then turned towards his Maori friend, who was already working on the visibility problem using wandless magic.

As the dense fog began to lift, a half-dozen prone bodies came into view, scattered within the walled grounds. Taking in the sight of guard towers and the smell of fresh sea air, the King's Wizard announced, "They've sent us to their Azkaban Prison!"

"It appears so," replied the Japanese wizard, as he strode towards the nearest immobilized body. Reaching down and feeling a pulse of the man dressed in blue Auror robes, he added, "Though I suspect that these people would know with more certainty."

Noting that an electrical penalty had not been applied to the Maori sorcerer's wandless cloud communing, the Emperor's wizard crouched down next to the nearest body and cast a wandless variation of *Finite Incantatum*.

"What's going...where am...who are...oh, Merlin, they didn't?" the revived wizard mumbled.

"It appears that somebody most certainly did," replied Matsuhisa. Grabbing the hand that was reaching for a wand, the Shinto priest added, "That would be unadvisable, Sir, given the apparent warding of our location."

The downed wizard stared at the Japanese spell caster for a moment, then patted the portion of his sleeve that covered his holster.

"The wand has gone missing, anyway," he observed. Glancing furtively at his surroundings, the wizard then reached for what used to be pinned to his chest.

"Damn," he swore.

"Missing something other than your wand?" Matsuhisa asked.

Head Auror Robards nodded and sighed.

"My badge."

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9:15 am, Ministry of Magic

As the smoke cleared from a diversionary false alarm that was set up to get most of the MoM staff out of the Ministry, the mercenary Dutch Charms Master slumped down onto a chair in front of the Minister of Magic's desk.

"One down, one to go," he murmured, as he pulled a stamina potion from his robe pocket.

"Well, time is wasting away, Vanderwood," Scrimgeour snarled. "We didn't pay you to sit on the job."

The young Dutch wizard rolled his eyes.

"Just need to catch my breath," he replied. "That was by far the easier of the two."

"So it worked, then?"

The dreadlocked wizard looked around Scrimgeour's office. Not seeing anyone else about, he said, "Guess you'll have to ask me to be sure."

"Right, then...where is the British Ministry of Magic located?"

The Dutchman furrowed his eyebrows.

"I have no idea."

"Sure you're not just saying that to cover your arse?"

The young wizard rolled his eyes and held his wand tip towards his heart.

"I swear on my magic that I have no idea where the British Ministry of Magic is located," he stated, quickly adding, "Aside from a guess that it is most likely someplace within Britain."

The Charms Master paused for a few moments, then cast a *Lumos* spell as confirmatory proof.

"Right then," he declared. "As soon as you're done shipping folks out of the Ministry and have closed down the floo network, I can move on."

The Minister of Magic nodded, and activated communication mirrors that linked him with Umbridge and Percy Weasley. Once they gave an "all clear," Peter Vanderwood cracked his fingers, rolled his neck muscles, and stared intently at Rufus.

After thirty seconds of incredibly focused thought, the young wizard raised his wand towards the Minister of Magic's chest and whispered, "*Fidelius*."

Rufus braced himself for the same kind of chest-pounding that the last spell had delivered, and watched nervously as long wisps of magical memory were drawn out from the air and into the Dutchman's wand. The flow of inbound magic quickly grew...from two or three per second, then ten or twelve, then to a continuous attack of energy from all directions. The young wizard's eyes bulged out and his wand arm began to tremble, but he kept his aim true...even as his wand began to overheat and burn his hand.

As this rush of magic grew buffeted him with a loud roar, Scrimgeour tried to cover his ears...only to find his body immobilized by both the spell's connection and the onslaught of gathered knowledge that was racing by his sides. He winced at the pain, and imagined that his ears were now bleeding just like the Dutchman's.

But still the Charms Master's focus stayed true, and his wand held firm.

The wave of magic drawn into the office began to channel itself into a whirling vortex of energy, as if a tub of bath water was draining into Vanderwood's grip. Scrimgeour was now shouting an open-mouth cry that couldn't be heard above the roar, until the tornado of magic collapsed down on itself, and disappeared into the butt end of the Charms Master's wand. And with a snap, all of that magical energy...all of the knowledge that the *Fidelius* spell had stolen from the world...was discharged out the front end of spell caster's wand and square onto the Minister of Magic's chest.

The impact sent both wizards spiraling backwards, and they fell to the ground unconscious.

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When the Minister of Magic was later revived by Percy Weasley, his ears rang so loudly with pain that he couldn't hear the Special Assistant's words. Scrimgeour batted away Percy's wand, realizing that the younger wizard was going to attempt to heal his burst eardrums, and struggled to his feet. Stepping over the still unconscious body of the Dutch wizard, the Minister of Magic lurched towards a locked cabinet of healing potions that had been gathered just for this potential outcome.

"Minister, can you hear me now?" asked Percy, after two different potions had been downed.

Rufus snorted as he looked around his bruised and battered office, and nodded.

"Weasley...how...how did you get to the Ministry this morning?" he asked with a painful wheeze.

"Well I...I...I can't recall!" Percy said with wonder.

Scrimgeour's lips formed a thin smile. "That is something worth hearing, then."

It was only fifteen minutes later, and with no small amount of reluctance, that the newly-formed secret keeper passed two slips of paper to his two Special Assistants.

The first read, "*The Ministry of Magic is located beneath Central London.*"

The second stated, "*The Ministry of Magic can be reached by magical methods of transportation .*"

9:30 am, Azkaban Island, North Sea

Introductions made after all six stunned high-level Ministry personnel had been wandlessly revived by the ICW delegation established that Azkaban Island was presently a "stooge-free" zone. Amongst the handful of now-wandless wizards who had been ambushed, stunned and rendered from the Ministry to Azkaban were Gawain Robard's two most loyal lieutenants, his buddy from the Portkey Office, and Hit Wizards Numbers 1 and 2. Robards and the other two Aurors had been meeting with MLE Director Oswald, while the two Hit Wizards and Portkey Office head had been called into a separate meeting by Matilda Hopkirk to review Hit Wizard team deployment procedures.

A more complete picture of who was considered loyal to the Minister's Office (and who was not) came when a third wave of witches and wizards arrived via three separate portkeys. Within this group of twenty were several non-Slytherin student interns, including Peanut Butter Brigade members Lisa Turpin, Lavender Brown, and Ernie Macmillan. The balance were either parents of non-Slytherin students (like Hannah Abbott's mum), or Ministry workers who had been critical of the Minister's office.

These witches and wizards had responded to a general alarm and gathered in the Atrium, where they were informed that the Ministry of Magic had come under attack by Muggle nerve gas. As the space began to fill with foul-smelling smoke, they were instructed to form into pre-assigned groups and take hold of distributed emergency portkeys.

The group assignments had struck some of these witches and wizards as suspicious, as they were disproportionately Potter-friendly. But fears that this was some type of ruse, or that they'd be sent into harm's way had been dampened, by the fact that their groups also included Slytherin students and older pure-blooded bigots. These Ministry loyalists, however, had all taken their hands off of the portkeys just before they sent the others to

Azkaban (instead of to Hogsmeade, as they'd been told).

It didn't take long for the entire group of witches and wizards to find commonality, once the members of the ICW delegation introduced themselves, and explained why they had been visiting the Ministry. The Minister's Office had been involved, for reasons that became clear once they began to brainstorm on not just how they'd get off of the Island, but how they might return to the Ministry.

A quick check of the prison complex confirmed what had already been suspected...the guards had abandoned the island to its inmates, thinking that they were needed to thwart and imaginary attack on the Ministry. The lockdown wards that kept prisoners within their jail cells also prevented the new arrivals from using their wands.

That Azkaban would incarcerate witches and wizards who could use wandless magic (beyond apparition spells) was something that had not been anticipated during ward construction. Exploiting this gap, however, still required a good deal of collective thought. The Maori and Japanese wizards employed a very different style of magic...there was, for example, no wandless version of the *Portus* spell in their repertoires. They did have a type of messenger spell on hand, but these were caught up by passive outer wards that intercepted all types of magical communication.

All types of *direct* magical communication *that was known* to the Ministry, that is...as was demonstrated when Lisa Turpin proposed a clever use for Rongo's cloud whispering skills.

9:45 am, Orkney and Shetland Desk, Met Office, FitzRoy Road, Exeter

The young Muggle meteorologist whose Met Office duties covered weather advisories for the Orkney and Shetland Islands had just returned to his desk with a fresh cup of tea when he saw something rather odd.

He stood up onto his tiptoes so that he could peer into the office cube next to his.

"Oi, Jerry...come take a look at this!"

"What's that...another naughty web site that slipped under the Department's filters?"

"No, nothing like that...just take a look."

The weatherman's cube-buddy shook his head, and reluctantly crab-walked his office chair out into the aisle and into the next work station. He frowned when all he spied on his mate's computer screen was a satellite image.

"What's caught your fancy this time?" he asked. "More clouds shaped like Posh Spice?"

The weatherman waved dismissively. "No this is for real...you know that island past Fair Isle that's always covered in clouds?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

The weatherman pointed to a spot on his huge display.

"What do you think this means?"

The Muggle Weatherman leaned closer to the display, then frowned.

"So they've changed into something resembling the letter W...is that all?"

"No...I mean yes...when have you ever seen clouds form up that way?"

"Okay, so it's not something you see every day...what's with all of the excitement?"

"Know how the boss is moaning over the budget cuts all the time?"

"Yeah."

"Know how he says the public has gotten complacent, and taken weather reports for granted?"

"Where you going with this?"

"Publicity, my boy...publicity. We send pictures of this out to the press, and given them some ideas on what it might mean. They put it on the news, attribute it to us and our department, and we're famous."

"More likely infamous," his mate replied. "What possible meaning could a W-shaped cloud have?"

"Hmmm...let's see," the weatherman said. "It's Friday the 13th, which is always an unlucky day....the W could stand for 'warning,' or maybe....win. Hey, that's it!"

"What?"

Not 'what,' you oaf...the W stands for 'win.' All we need know is to check the sports pages and figure out who is playing, and suggest that it's a sign that one team or the other is going to win today."

"Sure that this isn't an excuse to web surf on company time?"

"No, no...this is all business-related. You take football and cricket, while I peruse the *Racing Post*."

The weatherman snorted at the suggestion, but the clear skies currently over the Highlands would give him enough time to follow this lark for a bit.

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10:15 am, The Bunker, Balmoral Castle

When a lumbering, dead-to-the-world Steve failed to respond to either mobile or badge-call, Wally gave the Queen her first opportunity to anchor a badge jump.

"Begging your pardon, Your Majesty," he said, after gathering his bearings (they were in a small sitting room with the Queen's Muggle handmaiden and Padma Patil, who had taken over for her sister). "We've got some problems in the wizarding world."

The Queen was not amused by Wally's elaboration...not by the method of delivery, mind you...it was the information itself that was so disturbing. She glanced at a wall clock and sighed.

"It is a sad state of the Realm when we can go no longer than four hour's time without need of Gryffindor and Ambassador Granger's services."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Wally replied. "Shall I wake them, then?"

"No, no, we shall do that necessary task," the Queen replied, as she activated her borrowed Art Club badge.

Harry Potter was sleeping far more lightly than Steve was, and woke instantly when his Art Club badge began to vibrate. He panicked when he realized that it wasn't Ron who was trying to call him, and made a snap decision to immediately badge-jump to the Queen's side.

"What's the emerg..." Harry called out, with both drawn wand and drawn sword.

"Oh, my," said the Queen.

"Oh, baby!" hissed Padma Patil, who was the on-duty witch-in-waiting.

"Nice response time," noted the Queen's Muggle handmaiden.

"Nicer bum," snarked Wally.

Finally realizing that the Queen was not under attack, Harry followed Wally's and Padma's line of sight down to his tartan thong and blushed a deep red that travelled halfway down his chest. Sheathing his sword, he turned towards the Queen and asked, "You called, Your Majesty?"

The monarch tried not to smile, but failed.

"We need your attendance, and that of Ambassador Granger's," she replied. "Would five minutes' time be sufficient for your needs, Gryffindor?"

Harry scowled at Padma and Wally, who were trying to ogle and stifle their giggles at the same time. He then returned his attention to the Queen, called for Hermione on his badge, and summoned up the shreds of his dignity.

"Thank you, Ma'am, that will be fine...and, erm...sorry about..."

Hermione's response allowed Harry to badge-jump back to the bedroom before figuring out the least embarrassing way to complete his sentence.

Dobby's help with his clothing then allowed Harry to spend most of those five minutes explaining to Hermione why he had just jumped bare-arsed to the Queen's side.

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The news that Wally had brought to The Bunker kept the snickering to a minimum once Harry and Hermione returned to the Queen's location dressed in fresh combat blacks.

The Weasley Twins had provided on-the-ground confirmation of what Muggle sentinels had observed from a distance...hundreds of Ministry of Magic employees had suddenly appeared in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade with word that they had just escaped a Muggle poison gas attack. There was a lot of ongoing confusion about who got out in time and to where. The ICW delegation was nowhere to be found, as were more than a

few members of the Peanut Butter Brigade. Efforts to determine whether they had been trapped inside the Ministry were thwarted by the inability of anyone to remember where the Ministry of Magic was located, how Ministry personnel had escaped, and how they might be able to return.

Anticipating Harry and Hermione's immediate concerns, Wally provided a roster of known locations for members of the Art Club, Clan Friends and the Peanut Butter Brigade. Arthur Weasley and Luna were still at Thames Bank, waiting for Ron to come out of surgery. Remus was now minding Poppy, having relieved Roger Granger so that he could return to Cumberland Lodge and his wife for some much needed rest. Sir Evan was anchoring the Prime Minister's undisclosed location, the Twins were making repairs to their shop, and Tonks was taking a kip at Hogwarts.

Returning to the false attack problem, Harry called for Dobby, who informed Harry that the Ministry's house-elf staff had been evacuated, and that they had no idea of how they might return. This additional clue was all that Hermione and Harry needed to turn to each other with the same conclusion.

"*Fidelius Charm.*"

The Queen and Wally were not unfamiliar with this type of magic, as this type of protection had been discussed (and eventually discarded) when wards were designed for Windsor, Number 10, and the like. Questions on why the Ministry had taken this step, and what might be done to counteract it, were placed on the back burner in favor of locating the ICW delegation, or any of the other Peanut Butter Brigade members who might have gone missing.

This decision prompted Wally to bring up a second piece of potentially relevant information. MI-5 ¾ analysts who had been tasked with continually scanning the newswires and Internet for any bit of odd news that may have been magically related had seen the Met Office's press release, and forwarded to Wally a weather satellite photograph centered over an island in the North Sea. Hermione took one look at that same image and gasped.

"Padma, take a look!" she ordered.

When the witch-in-waiting looked across the conference table at the picture, she asked, "*Ehwaz*?"

Hermione shook her head, and turned the photograph around so that it faced Padma.

"*Ehwaz* reversed," the bushy-haired witch declared.

"How can you tell if it's reversed or not?"

"Got to think that north was assumed to be the imaginary top of page," Hermione replied.

"Could either of you stop and translate for the rest of us?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked up at Harry, then to the Queen.

"The magical rune *Ehwaz* is shaped similarly to the letter W," she stated. "Except that the outer lines are relatively longer...just like it's shown in this image."

"And this matters, exactly...how?" asked Wally.

"This island is almost always shrouded in clouds, right?"

"That's what the Met Office says."

"And now, all of a sudden, the cloud cover breaks up and forms this message?"

"What kind of message could this be, Ambassador?" asked the Queen.

Hermione placed the satellite photograph in front of the monarch, then rotated it 180 degrees.

"The rune *Ehwaz*, oriented this way, most commonly stands for transportation, Ma'am."

"It's a big part of the rune set equations used to make broomsticks fly, Your Majesty," Padma offered.

Hermione nodded, then rotated the picture back around.

"But, Your Highness, when you write a rune upside down...we call it reversed...the opposite meaning is indicated."

The Queen nodded. "So in this case, the opposite of transportation is..."

"Confinement, Your Majesty."

The Queen pursed her lips in thought. "And you propose that these clouds may have been manipulated by magical means?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Is this a traditional form of magical communication, then?"

"No, Your Majesty," Hermione replied with a smile. "In fact, I've only come across one witch or wizard who is capable of this kind of weather magic."

“Rongo!” Harry exclaimed.

Hermione nodded. “We may have just found the location of the ICW delegation.”

“They’ve been banished to some remote island in the North Sea?” asked Wally.

Nodding in agreement, Hermione replied, “Not just any old island, Wally...they’ve been sent to Azkaban.”

“Right then, time to organize a rescue effort,” Harry declared, as he looked down upon the photograph. “Doesn’t look that far away from the Scottish Coast and Fort George...we can run a squadron of brooms out from there.”

“Don’t you think the prison’s been protected against that type of assault?” asked Hermione.

Harry frowned. “Probably warded against inbound messengers spells or owls as well.”

“Need to think outside the box,” Padma declared. “Maybe use Muggle means of transportation?”

Steve followed on this suggestion with his own survey of the satellite photograph. “Could fly Sea Kings out there...treat it as a marine rescue operation?”

Harry shook his head. “Wards might play havoc with any attempt to land on the prison grounds...unless...”

Hermione grew instantly nervous at the gleam that developed in her boyfriend’s eye.

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Wally’s eyes narrowed when, ten minutes later, Harry presented him with his very own charmed flight helmet.

“*Rambo* ?”

Harry smiled. “I thought about nicknaming you *Dolce & Gabanna*, but it wouldn’t all fit on one line.”

Wally rolled his eyes. “But...*Rambo* ?”

“Steve’s idea, actually,” Harry quipped.

“Really?” asked Wally. “And he is the final arbiter on these types of decisions?”

“Well, I could have asked Mad-Eye Moody, couldn’t have I?”

The secret agent closed his eyes and sighed.

“So how do I go about changing my moniker?”

“Only by doing something incredibly brave, or incredibly embarrassing,” Harry replied with a smile.

“Well if that’s the case,” said Wally.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Wally waited until Harry’s back was turned before he badge-called Hermione and made a suggestion.

A delighted Hermione, in turn, had Dobby wait until Harry was wearing his helmet before he secretly altered the script that ran across the Queen’s Wizard’s forehead.

Harry couldn’t get Wally to explain why he was snickering during their motorbike ride from Balmoral to the village of Crathie, one-half mile east. The RAF had constructed a staging area there, and one of its heavy-lift helicopters had been made available for the Queen’s Wizard’s use.

The crew chief of that helicopter gave Harry a strange look as he backed his motorbike into its cargo bay.

“Why a Bonny?” he asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “I inherited it.”

The serviceman squinted, and then asked, “Why *Conan* ?”

“What do you mean?” asked Harry.

The crew chief pointed towards Harry’s flight helmet.

“How’d you earn the nickname *Conan* ?” he asked again.

Harry frowned, and whipped the flight helmet off of his head. He stared at the place where “*Seeker*” had once been written, then stared sternly at Wally.

The Muggle secret agent winked, drew an imaginary sword from a back-mounted scabbard, held it in a heroic pose.

“You did say that accommodations could be made for doing something embarrassing, right?”

Harry shook his head. “This is what I get for jumping to the Queen’s defense?”

Wally laughed. “No, Conan...this is what you get for flashing the Queen your manly loincloth.”

11:45 am, Over the North Sea

A very nice dream involving royal bedrooms and a skyclad girlfriend was interrupted by a gentle shake on the shoulder.

“Five minutes to Skull Island, Conan.”

Harry opened his eyes, stared at the helicopter’s crew chief, then nodded and sat up straight. He was only slightly surprised that he had fallen asleep during the brief flight...while it was very loud within the cargo hold of the CH-47 Chinook helicopter, he was also very tired.

“Thanks,” the teen-aged wizard yelled back, as a smirk came to his face. It wasn’t the new nickname that amused him, but rather the nickname given by Muggle sailors and aviators to mist-shrouded Azkaban Island. While there weren’t any 40-foot tall apes on the island, what a Muggle would encounter were they to visit would seem just as strange, and just as dangerous.

“Where’s Rambo?” he asked.

“Up front,” the crew chief said with a grin. “Tossed his biscuits three times already... now he’s looking out the cockpit’s front windows trying to avoid number four.”

Harry grinned. “Cheeky bastard deserves it,” he muttered to himself, as he unbuckled his safety restraints. He then stood and made his way towards his tail-facing motorcycle. As he double-checked his saddle bags, he caught the Muggle crew chief giving his ride a close look. He seemed no less interested now than when Harry had ridden the bike up the helicopter’s rear door ramp an hour previous.

“You really going to ride that out the back, Sir?” he called out.

Harry just smiled and nodded as swung a leg over its seat. Tapping into his charmed flight helmet’s comm system, he called out, “Hey Rambo, going to come back and send me off?”

There was a snort on the other end of the “line,” followed by, “Willing to risk me decorating your flight suit with dry heaves, Conan?”

“Nothing a bit of magic wouldn’t clear up, Rambo.”

“So long as you do it outside,” the secret agent replied, as he walked onto the deck and made his way to the motorbike. “Wouldn’t want any magical interference to make this ride any bumpier than it already is.”

“Two minutes!” yelled the crew chief, as he bent down and began to release the tie-downs that had held the motorcycle in place during the flight. As his two passengers engaged in conversation that he wasn’t privy to, the Muggle muttered to himself about the absurdity of it all. He’d hosted his share of special op types and their gear during “dark” flights over hostile territory...watched boats launch off the flight deck and into the water, and Land Rovers drive off the ramp and onto dry land. But this was just crazy...a motorcycle jump from 8,000 feet? Without a parachute strapped onto the rider’s back?

Once the ties were unfastened and stowed away, the crew chief gave Harry a “thumbs-up” to indicate that he was free and clear of any restraints. He then helped Wally clip into a safety harness, before latching himself onto a separate lanyard. At sixty seconds to drop, the crew chief stepped up to his control station and lowered the rear door until it was level with the flight deck.

“Something wrong?” the amused airman yelled towards Wally, who was clinging with white knuckles onto the back of a jump seat.

The MI-5 $\frac{3}{4}$ Agent shook his head tersely, not believing how nonchalantly the crew chief was walking around the bay with the back door opened to air and sea.

The crew chief walked to Harry’s side for the final count as the helicopter cruised at 160 knots over open water. When the young wizard kick-started the motorcycle’s engine, and kicked back the stand with the heel of his dragon-hide boots, the normally tight-lipped crew chief couldn’t help but ask a question.

“You some James Bond type, Sir?” he yelled, as Harry rewed the engine.

Harry turned towards the man, and smiled.

“Something like that, Sergeant,” he replied with a grin.

The crew chief snorted, then counted down with his fingers from five. As soon as the last finger dropped down to form a closed fist, Harry launched

Sirius's motorbike out the back and into the open sky.

The crew chief watched with disbelief as the Bonny's "normal" response to gravity halted a few seconds later, and the motorbike powered into a wide left turn.

"Better than Bond," the crew chief muttered, as he closed the door.

The sound of some uncharacteristically coarse language over the helicopter's internal radio system broke the crewman's musing. When he called up to the cockpit and asked what had prompted the cursing, he was instructed to look out the aft side bubble window.

What he saw caused the crew chief to launch into his own coarse comments, more out of admiration than of anger.

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Given the seriousness of his mission, Harry Potter probably shouldn't have taken the time to pull his motorcycle up next to the helicopter that had brought him to Azkaban and gestured to the pilot as if he wanted to race. But with the weight of both the Muggle and magical worlds seemingly on his shoulders, he thought it was the perfect time to, if only for a few minutes, act his age.

"Erm...Lord G?" Wally asked weakly.

"Go ahead, Rambo."

"The helicopter pilot is asking if you are challenging him to a drag race."

Harry responded with a hearty laugh, and an ersatz "wheelie." He then snapped off a roguish salute towards the helicopter, and shot forward as he pushed the bike's speedometer just past 200 mph.

As soon as it was well established that his motorbike could out fly the Chinook, Harry dropped into a dive and headed towards the island below. He pulled up a mile short and a thousand feet above the sea, and pulled out his trusty pair of omnioculars from a saddlebag. A group of witches and wizards were facing towards them and waving their arms from the center of the prison's "exercise yard" (poorly named, as Azkaban's prisoners were never let out for exercise). All except the tallest, who was focusing more on the peculiarly shaped clouds above the island than on Harry.

Spotting Head Auror Robards within the crowd, Harry tried to fire off a messenger *Patronus*, only to watch it strike up against an invisible ward and dissipate. Worried that his charmed motorbike might stall if it hit that same boundary, Harry used additional *Patronus* spells to scout out the hemispherical ward boundary.

A quick badge call to his wardmistress girlfriend prompted Harry to hover just above the ward boundary, some seven hundred feet above the waiting crowd (the thinking being that if Harry or his ride were incapacitated when he crossed the boundary that one of the wand-wielding wizards or witches could stop his fall with a spell). He then reached into his bag, and pulled out a small metal box that was tethered to a scale-sized parachute.

After flipping on a switch mounted on one side of the box, Harry called up towards the hovering helicopter.

"Seeker to Ralph...Seeker to Ralph."

"Thought my nickname was Rambo," Wally weakly protested.

"I'm thinking you've earned a new name after the dry heaves."

"Ha-ha...very funny, Conan...what can I do for you?"

"I've sketched out a ward boundary, and activated a canary."

"Hold on, then," Wally replied.

Harry dropped the "canary" a few moments later, once the slightly-green MI-5 ¾ agent announced that the helicopter had locked onto the electronic device's signal. The box's parachute fluffed full with air, slowing down the device's descent enough so that Wally could relay altimeter readings.

"Six hundred feet...five hundred...four hundred..."

"It's past the ward boundary," Harry noted. "Everything still working?"

"Affirmative," Wally replied. "Two hundred...one...hold on, Harry...the canary died at one-hundred and twenty feet."

"Damn," Harry muttered. "Must be another type of ward...I'm going in for a closer look."

At Hermione's instruction, he turned off the motorbike's magical controls, and dropped unpowered (and unharmed) down through the outer wards. Once on the other side, Harry quickly turned the motorbike back on, and let out a sigh of relief when he regained magical flight control. From that point it was a quick and simple descent down to the second ward boundary, which was defined by a second canary that Harry had let hang from the end of a fifty-foot length of rope.

The violent dismissal of a second messenger spell at this second ward boundary caught Harry's attention. The fiery incineration of a broomstick that he had pulled from his saddlebags and tried to drop to the group of witches and wizards beneath him was downright scary.

Head Auror Robards looked up at the hovering Queen's Wizard, then pointed towards the top of a guard tower. Harry cottoned on, and flew to a spot five feet to his side of the shimmering ward boundary that enveloped the tower's observation deck. Fortunately, the wards didn't intercept sound waves, allowing Harry to shout questions across to the Head Auror, once the older wizard climbed the tower's stairs.

The Queen's Wizard took off his helmet and hung it from his handlebars. "Well, well, well...what's all this, then?" he glibly asked, with a wave towards the shimmering wards.

"A whole lot of trouble for witches and wizards," Robards replied grimly. "It'll fry anything magical, along with anyone in contact with the magical objects."

Harry nodded. "I take it you're not able to bring down the wards from your end?"

Robards shook his head. "The Warden disappeared before any of us arrived, and activated a separate ward that makes wand use impossible on this side ...unless you're wearing the right kind of charmed pendant."

"Which you aren't?"

The Head Auror snorted. "They relieved me of my portkey badge and wand when they ambushed me at the Ministry."

"They being Rufus and friends?"

"That would be the most obvious answer."

Harry smiled grimly. "So they've decided to go nuclear."

"What's that?"

"Oh...Muggle saying," said Harry. "They hidden the Ministry of Magic and locked it down...nobody in or out. Not that we'd know how to get in even if it wasn't hidden."

Robards thought about this information for a few minutes, then frowned. "*Fidelius*?"

"That's our thinking."

"So how long before your brilliant girlfriend develops a work-around?"

Harry smiled. "She's working up some ideas even as we speak...could always use a hand, if you've got the time."

Robards shook his head as he glanced down at the spot where his badge used to be. "Well, it appears that I'm in the job market, so..."

"Excellent," Harry replied. "Just have to get you all off the island, then."

The older wizard nodded, then looked up at the helicopter that was hovering a few thousand feet above their heads.

"Got room in that beast for thirty witches and wizards?"

Harry looked up, then nodded. "I think so, although getting it down here in one piece may be an issue...what's set up on the outer ward boundary?"

"Normal stuff," Robards replied. "Anti-apparition, message interception, owl redirection, Muggle repellent..."

"Not sure that the pilot will fancy the idea of flying through that, even if the canary made it past."

"Canary?" asked the Emperor's Wizard.

"Muggle magic detector," Harry replied.

Robards nodded. "The edge of the boat dock is just beyond the wards."

"Really?" asked Harry. "Well would make things somewhat easier...let me get on the phone with them."

"Great," said the older wizard. "And while you're at it, can you ask if they've got extra clothing or blankets?"

"Erm...sure...what for?"

The defrocked Head Auror smiled thinly. "We'll need to leave wands and anything that's imbued with magic on this side of the barrier."

Harry puzzled over that comment. "So...any clothing that's got cooling charms or magical water repellents applied?"

Robards laughed at the situation and nodded. "Figures that this would be the day that I'd wear my magically animated boxer shorts."

The Queen's Wizard's eyes went wide at the implication, and he looked down to the prison grounds, where Lavender Brown, Lisa Turpin, and Mrs. Abbott were huddled with the other witches and wizards.

"Oh, Merlin... I know some of those witches!"

The former Head Auror snorted. "Then here's hoping that they are all wearing Muggle knickers."

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It took more than an hour to improvise a method to safely transfer the stranded witches and wizards from the guard tower, across the ward boundary, and then down to the Muggle helicopter that hovered with an opened hatch just off the end of Azkaban's supply dock. Harry appropriated the Chinook's rescue basket, and tied it onto his length of rope. He then had the trapped witches and wizard climb into the basket one at a time and tip it over the tower's edge. RAF-issue blankets allowed the rescued individuals some measure of modesty as they left their climate-controlled clothing behind. Of course some of the witches didn't mind disrobing in front of Harry...Lavender Brown's blanket slipped open "accidentally" a few times, and Hannah Abbot's mother displayed no qualms at all about showing off her matched set of black Muggle undergarments.

While none of witches and wizards were happy about escaping from the prison without their wands, charmed wedding bands, or any other magical personal items, they did take comfort when the Japanese wizard and Rongo volunteered to protectively bury the lot using their wandless magic before they crossed over.

Leaving the Azkaban prison population behind was an easy decision to make given how cramped the Chinook's cargo hold became once the stranded witches and wizards were coaxed (and occasionally coerced) into the Muggle flying machine. Harry freed up some room by shrinking down his motorbike and transfiguring the blankets that each rescued party wore into simple robes.

The plan to transport the rescued witches and wizards to the nearest inhabited island was rethought once the Norwegian King's Wizard provided some surprising information on the sovereignty of the Shetlands. While Muggle control of the islands had been pawned off to the Scottish king in 1468 by King Christian I of Norway, magical control of this crucial portion of the Norsca Network had been retained. The Norse Ministry of Magic therefore still held jurisdiction over the islands, and while the stranded British witches and wizards would be welcomed as refugees or guests, there wouldn't be an easy way for any of them to return to magical Britain using magical means.

While more than a couple of witches and wizards thought that staying away from the control of the British ministry would be a good thing (given how they'd just been treated) some had families back home, while others were anxious to openly side with Harry and the Queen against Scrimgeour and his lackeys. Harry tried to modestly shy away from these offers, but was smart enough to realize that this group could serve as an excellent nucleus to the magical Home Guard that the Scottish First Minister had seemed so eager to lead a few days back.

So the decision was made to head South, and carry the group a slightly longer distance to a remote portion of an active airfield on the Orkney Islands. Hermione badge jumped to the landing zone soon after they arrived, carrying a pack full of clothing, as well as portkeys to Hogwarts and a bag filled with confiscated Death Eater wands for the group to sort through for potential matches. After distributing these items, she asked the ICW delegation to join her for an impromptu conference on the tarmac.

"On behalf of the Her Majesty the Queen and her Muggle government, I wish to offer our humblest of apologies for your treatment this morning at the hands of the Ministry of Magic," she said formally.

The Japanese wizard waved off her concerns.

"We are well aware of the political realities you face, Ambassador," he replied. "What is the current state of communications between Muggle and Magical Ministries?"

"Nonexistent," Hermione replied. "They've issued a press release to the *Daily Prophet* and *WWN* with the bogus claim that Muggle nerve gas was used as a prelude to an attack on the Ministry. Didn't outright declare that it was an attack by Muggles, but the implication is there, and that's justified their actions."

"Of secreting the Ministry away from both Muggle and magical worlds?" asked the King's Wizard.

Hermione nodded. "They claim that they're only trying to preserve the wizarding world's secrets, by keeping the Muggles from gaining access to the Floo Network, or the surveillance system...even the Department of Mysteries, although they don't say what's inside that's worth protecting."

"What's public reaction been like?" asked the Swedish witch.

"Mixed," Hermione replied. "The Ministry personnel who were tricked into leaving the Ministry and haven't been allowed back have figured out what's going on. The ones we've been in contact with are wearing the snub as a badge of honor. As for the general public...well, they've always been easily influenced."

"Great," Harry replied. "So where do we go from here?"

"Oslo," replied the Japanese wizard. "We've gathered all the information that's needed to make a recommendation to the Supreme Mugwump."

Harry frowned. "And then what?"

Matsuhisa shrugged his shoulders. "That is for the diplomats and leaders to decide." He then turned towards Hermione and asked, "Do you speak on behalf of Her Majesty's Muggle government?"

Hermione grimaced, and turned to Wally. He shrugged.

"Prime Minister himself named you Special Ambassador to the Wizarding World," he replied. "So long as you keep in contact with him and the

Queen..."

"As if we don't have enough to worry about with Carlisle tomorrow," Harry stated. He looked over towards a line of small aircraft sitting outside of an airport hanger.

"Think we could charter one of those to fly to Norway, Wally?" he asked.

Wally asked, "How many passengers?"

"Actually, I think you can arrange transport, Major Potter," Thorson interjected.

"How so?"

"Take Matsuhisa-sensei and me to the Shetlands on your motorbike. We'll all use the Norsca Network station there to jump to Oslo, then you can... how do you call it... anchor?"

"Anchor a jump for Hermione?" Harry asked.

Thorson nodded. "Dyrrheim Station is as centrally located a place as any to convene a meeting."

Harry nodded, then turned towards the other Internationals. Anticipating his question, the Swedish witch said, "If it's just the same, I'd like to return to your Summer Institute, both to teach the Muggleborns and to help defend them and their families."

Rongo and the Indian wizard expressed similar views, with the Maori wizard particularly interested in doing something to make the Ministry pay for forcing him to leave his All Blacks rugby jersey at Azkaban.

Harry then asked, "So once I ferry you to Shetland Station, I could just shrink my bike and badge-jump back to Balmoral?"

The Japanese wizard snorted, and shook his head. "I did say that it would be left to both diplomats and leaders, did I not? I suspect that Supreme Mugwump will wish to confer with both Ambassador Granger and the Lord High Steward of Britain."

Shaking his head, Harry said, "That's one title that I've yet to have forced upon me."

Matsuhisa smiled, and acknowledged Harry's point. "Forgive me, Lord Gryffindor, but I think there will be no less interest in a meeting with the Lord High Steward-designate."

Chapter 43: And Now for Something Completely Different

Friday, July 13, 3:30pm Gringott's Bank

The true power and specificity of the *Fidelius* Charms cast by the Dutch Charms Master were on display when he activated a portkey that sent him from Percy Weasley's office to the steps of Gringott's in Diagon Alley...while he had no trouble realizing that he was using magical transportation to *leave* the Ministry, the magic now kept him from knowing that those same methods could be used to return.

Not that the young wizard had any desire to go back, or to spend any more time than necessary within Britain...which was why he was so intent on converting the Ministry's final payment from galleons to Euros, and catching the next Chunnel train to the Continent.

The Dutch charms master groaned at the sight of an extremely long line of account holders that had snaked outside of the bank's front doors. He queued up, and waited for a few minutes to see how fast the line was moving. Listening in on the wild rumors being passed was amusing but tedious (someone was actually claiming that the imaginary Muggle gas attack on the Ministry involved poisonous fart bombs). So once the young wizard determined that it would take hours to reach the front of the queue, he walked up to the front and paid a matronly witch fifty galleons cash to take her place in line. The goblin guards, thinking the transaction to be a shrewd bit of business, ignored the complaints of those behind him, and ushered the Dutchman to the first available teller.

"Key please," intoned the bored goblin.

"Don't have one, actually," the young wizard replied, as he handed over the Ministry's draft. "Just want to redeem that check and convert galleons to Euros."

The diminutive bank teller looked carefully at the document.

"One moment," he stated, before he hopped off of his high stool and scurried away with the signed check in hand.

A few minutes later, a much taller goblin appeared in front of the Dutchman, standing on the back of the original bank teller (who was now serving as a sentient stepstool). He passed the Ministry's draft back to the wizard and curtly stated, "There are insufficient funds available within the vault against which that draft is drawn."

"That's impossible!" declared the dreadlocked wizard.

“What makes you think that?”

“We had...we had a binding magical contract,” replied the Charms Master. “It would have been obvious if the Minister knew that he was passing a bad check.”

“Then perhaps the Minister was unaware of recent changes to the Ministry’s tax base?” the goblin replied with a toothy grin.

“So why can’t you just take the funds from a different Ministry account?”

“We would need Ministry authorization,” the goblin replied.

“In person?”

“Yes, although they could just as easily write a new draft against holdings within a different vault.”

“Don’t really want to take the time, but...oh, bugger!”

“Is something wrong?” asked the toothy Goblin.

The Dutch wizard sighed, desperately trying to determine how he’d get back to the Ministry. Once he decided that his charms work was too good for his own good, he shook his head and chuckled.

“What’s so funny, wizard?”

“If I can’t cash this check, and the Ministry is keeping me from returning for a new one, then they’ve just breached the binding contract.”

“And you find the loss of payment amusing?”

“Not really,” replied the young Charms Master. “But the consequences of that loss of payment are downright hilarious.”

“How so?”

“You’ll see for yourself, if they show up and make inquiries face-to-face,” the wizard replied, cryptically adding, “Won’t even need a stepstool.”

The goblin arched an eyebrow. “Do you wish to leave a forwarding address, in case the Ministry desires to make you whole with respect to the contract?”

The Dutchman shook his head.

“Percy will know where to find me,” he said, before taking back the rubber check and heading towards the front doors.

There was a part of him that wanted to hang around, just to see how the three buffoons who ran the British Ministry of Magic would react to their cursed transformations. But there were significant risks to staying, and he’d sufficiently front-loaded his overpriced fees in anticipation that something like this might occur. So as soon as he cleared the bank’s wards, he apparated to the Muggle hotel where he’d spent the previous two nights. From there he hailed a taxi for Waterloo Station, whilst softly singing the *Kabouterdans* ...

Make a turn in a circle.

Stamp with your feet on the ground.

Wave your hands in the air.

Sit with a sigh.

Stamp around like a goose.

That is how the gnome dance goes!

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In the Minister of Magic’s office, no one can hear you scream...at least not after all of the support staff had been tricked into leaving.

The commanding height, chiseled chin and leonine features that had served Rufus Scrimgeour so well when it came to browbeating suspected criminals and pompous Wizengamot members were gone...gone in a bright flash of light that had left him half as tall and far less intimidating.

“Minister Scrimgeour! Minister Scrimgeour!” two voices cried out in dismay.

No longer tall enough to see over the edge of his desk, Rufus slipped down from a now-oversized chair, drew his now-oversized wand, and scampered around the side, causing the bells that hung on his coxcomb hat to jingle.

“Well, at least I’m in good company,” the wizard mused, as he took in the appearance of his underlings.

Percy and Umbridge had each lost half their height, and made up a fair bit of the difference in grossly expanded waistlines. Percy was dressed in a brightly-colored shirt and red Muggle overalls, oversized clown shoes, and a green coxcomb hat with silver bells on the tips. Dolores sported a long purple skirt, canary-yellow blouse, and a frilly green apron. Her coxcomb hat was red, with a large flower in it.

The Director of Knowns had grown a red beard that mirrored Scrimgeour’s white beard in length and style (in that both lacked mustaches). While Umbridge had managed to avoid a facial hair curse, her hair had turned bright yellow, and now hung in thick braided pigtails. Her nose, like Percy’s

and Scrimgeour's, was proportionately grossly oversized, and sloped like a ski-jump.

"What in Merlin's name?"

"It's the kind of prank my twin brothers would pull," Percy stated.

"Let's hope that it's just a prank," Scrimgeour replied, as he tried to transfigure his current costume back into proper robes.

The spell didn't work, and a follow-up tickling hex successfully applied to Percy proved that it wasn't because Scrimgeour had lost his magic, or lost compatibility with his oversized wand.

Percy and Umbridge drew their own wands, and the three proceeded to cast every spell cancelling charm that they knew on themselves.

Nothing worked.

"We haven't eaten or drunk anything," Scrimgeour mused.

"The *Fidelius* charm contract, Minister!" Percy whimpered. "It's the only reasonable explanation...unless everyone else in the Ministry has been similarly pranked."

"Why don't you go and find out?" huffed Umbridge.

"Easier to check on that contract," Percy countered. "I still have it in my office."

The red-bearded midget waddled out of the Minister's office, and returned a few moments later holding a smoking piece of parchment by one corner. He rolled it out on the floor, revealing a message with flashing red letters that was superposed over the original black-inked script.

"CONTRACT BREACHED BY MINISTRY OF MAGIC!"

"Oh, bugger," Percy muttered.

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4:00pm Dyrreim Station, Oslo, Norway

The look of wonder on Harry's face belied the fatigue as he strolled down the main concourse of Dyrreim Station. He knew that he should have been using the precious down time to rest...that was, after all, why Hermione had insisted on them booking a room at the station's inn while she was back in London for consultations. But there was too much to see...too much to take in, on what was, after all, Harry's first trip away from Britain's shores.

The Queen's Wizard had met witches and wizards from different countries and traditions at the Quidditch World Cup, so it wasn't the many languages being spoken, or the difference in clothing that caught his attention. And while he'd been impressed by the station workings, and the magic behind it, Dyrreim wasn't any more awe-inspiring than his first trip to Diagon, or his first sight of Hogwarts.

It was the conflation of Muggle and magical that caught Harry so off-guard. While there was no doubt that Dyrreim was part of the wizarding world, the influence of non-magical society was everywhere. The station's newsstand (which stood next to a Starbucks) offered the Muggle *Afterposten* and *International Herald Tribune*, as well as *The Daily Prophet* and *Le Monde Magique*. Travelers passed Harry wearing black tie-ups or trainers as often as dragonhide boots. Within a small magical toy shop Harry discovered scale-model airplanes that had been charmed to fly just as well as the plushie dragons and hippogriffs that sat in the next bin.

The true scale of muddling between magical and mundane really struck home when Harry came upon Dyrreim Station's entertainment concourse. Along the margins of a small-scale magical amusement park filled with screaming children were themed restaurants/bars that had been lifted straight out of the Muggle world...

To his immediate left was "Ten Forward," with windows filled with stars and entrance doors that automatically slid open with a distinct pneumatic-sounding "ping."

On Harry's right was "Rick's Café American"...a facility that glamour-charmed its staff and patrons in grayscale tones to match its black and white décor.

And on the far end of the concourse...well, there was no doubt where he was heading once Harry read the advert for the adobe-walled structure, and spied its rather furry bouncer.

A wide grin grew on the Queen's Wizard's face while he made his way past the carnival rides and games, and began to hear the melody of an iconic ragtime jazz tune. Wondering just who (or what) might be playing the clarinet (or its Tatooine equivalent), Harry gave a nod towards the Wookiee that sat just outside the door, and walked with confidence into the "Mos Eisley Cantina."

The room was just as dark and dank as its cinematic analogue, which suited Harry just fine as his eyes adjusted...this made it easier for him to gawk anonymously at the other patrons. At least he assumed that they were patrons...that more than a few "people" resembled aliens, or were dressed in Jedi robes, led Harry to suspect that there were a few house actors in the mix.

The Queen's Wizard stepped up to the bar and ordered a butterbeer with a pepper-up chaser from a gruff bartender. While waiting for his drink, someone brushed against his left side. He turned, and locked eyes with a dark-haired beauty with three breasts.

"Erm..hello," he squawked, trying desperately not to allow his eyes to drift down towards the woman's diaphanous top.

"I like your robes," the woman said seductively, and with only a trace of Scandinavian accent to her English.

"Thanks...I...like yours too," he stammered, as the woman ran a finger down his sleeve.

The woman smiled as she pulled the sheer front to the side and exposed her tri-peaked chest to Harry.

"Want to play with them, Mr. Wizard?"

"Erm...aren't you in the wrong movie?" he asked.

"Is that a complaint?"

"No, not really."

The witch smiled, and leaned forward.

"You look like the kind of wizard who could use a good wand polishing."

Harry chuckled. "Thanks, but I've got that covered."

The witch smiled, and reached for Harry's crotch.

"Well, then we'll just have to uncover it, won't we?"

Harry grabbed the woman's hand and shook his head.

"Thanks, but I'm waiting for my girlfriend," he replied firmly.

The witch pouted.

"Earth slime," she muttered, as she drifted towards a pair of wide-eyed potential customers that had just entered the bar.

The vibration of Harry's Art Club badge kept him from tracking the success of her sales pitch too closely.

"Go ahead, Roger," he muttered into his chest.

"Have need to weigh anchors, Milord Admiral."

Harry rolled his eyes and said, "Give us a sec, then."

Wishing to keep their badge-jumping abilities quiet, Harry slipped into a loo that was far more sanitary than authenticity might have otherwise demanded and waited for a Han Solo-wannabe to wash up and leave.

"Welcome to magical Norway," he said, after anchoring Roger Granger's badge-jump.

Hermione's father snorted as he glanced at the tile and chrome trim.

"Looks rather like Muggle Norway to me," he stated.

"Tell me that once we're outside," Harry replied, as he cast a 'cone of silence' charm. He then asked, "So what's going on back home?"

"Hermione is still with COBRA...have you heard anything from her?" When Harry shook his head he continued on.

"Ron's out of surgery, but Remus says that it'll be a couple days until he comes around?"

Harry nodded. "Draught of the Living Death doesn't have a counter...in for a penny, knocked out for forty-eight hours."

Roger nodded with understanding. "So the three Internationals are back at the Institute...classes have been cancelled, and Rongo has all of the students out on the pitch dancing up a storm."

This garnered a raised eyebrow. "Literally dancing up a storm?" asked Harry.

Roger shrugged. "We sent all of the others that you rescued there as well...convinced them that it would be easier for their families to be gathered if the Ministry still thought they were on that island."

An Imperial Storm Trooper entered the loo just then, and disappeared into a stall. Roger asked a loud question with his arched eyebrows.

"Star Wars theme bar," Harry said with a grin.

"But how would witches or wizards know about..."

"Industrial Light *and Magic*," Harry replied.

"So the line between magical and mundane is a little less rigid outside of Britain?"

"So it would seem," said Harry. "But I should get going...there *was* a reason for you to swap places with me, right?"

Roger smiled grimly. "Powers that be want you to escort some live eyes into your Rookery flat."

"Live eyes?" asked Harry. "Live ammo as well?"

Hermione's dad shrugged. "Imagine that you'll find out soon enough. Wally is set to anchor you."

Harry sighed. "Right, then we'll need to get you up to my room, where you're out of the way."

"What?" asked Roger. "And miss my chance to use the Force?"

"It's their chance to use wands that worries me," Harry replied, gesturing towards the door. "Most of those surly blokes look to be playing parts, but if any of them aren't..."

"Then I've got a badge-full of back-up," Roger replied. "Not to mention a few tricks up my sleeve."

"I don't know..."

"Aw, come on, Harry...please?"

Against his better judgment, the Queen's Wizard acquiesced.

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MI-5 Headquarters, Thames Bank, London

It would have been easier for Harry to regain equilibrium after badge-jumping from Norway to London had he actually arrived at the anticipated destination.

"Wally?" he asked, looking around at an empty conference room. "Why are we at Headquarters, rather than the Rookery?"

The well-dressed secret agent waggled his eyebrows. "Because your guests are being picked up here, Lord G...why do you smell like a well-used ashtray?"

Harry glanced down at his attire.

"Erm...guess the cantina was a little smoky."

"What were you doing in a cantina?"

Harry chuckled as he pulled out his wand to cast a cleaning charm, and replied, "Turning down the advances of a working girl with three baps."

Wally arched an eyebrow as he grabbed Harry's arm. "Don't bother with those...you'll need to switch out to your dapper Muggle kit."

"What for?"

"Because you will look rather silly otherwise, when you step out of the stretch limo."

Harry silently stared at Wally for a beat, then shrugged his shoulders and began to unbutton his robes.

"So," Wally asked, "this woman with three breasts...don't imagine that her name was Eccentrica Gallumbits?"

The Queen's Wizard frowned.

"No, reckon she fancied that Schwarzenegger sci-fi movie...who is this Gallumbits?"

Wally rolled his eyes and let out a deep sigh. "*Hitchhiker's Guide*, Lord G...you know, I'm going to have to have a word with Roger about your Muggle cultural immersion classes."

"Hey, I rather like his syllabus," Harry said with a grin, as he pulled a Kevlar-reinforced suit jacket out from his bottomless rucksack. "What's wrong with his movie list?"

"It doesn't involve any reading," Wally replied with a frown, as he pressed down Harry's lapels. "How is it that this jacket isn't wrinkled beyond repair each time you ball it up and stuff it in your pack?"

"Magic," Harry replied with a snort.

"Just as well," said Wally. "Wouldn't do for you to be all frumpy and rumped after I played up your rugged good looks to the girls."

"What girls?"

The girls that you'll be putting up in your bachelor pad, Lord G."

"Thought that I was helping forward observers and a sniper team or two to set up in my Rookery flat?"

"You are."

"And they're all female?"

"Yes."

"And this is part of some plan from higher ups?"

"Indeed."

"So why am I putting an all-girl team up in my flat?"

"Plausibility, Lord G," he replied with a smile. "You did say that some of the Patriarchs use their flats to house their mistresses, right?"

"Yeah."

"And, though it breaks my heart to say so, you do fancy girls more than blokes?"

Harry snorted, and in a gesture of mock-comfort, placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Oh, Ralph...you know that you'd be on the top of my dance card if I didn't."

"By still, my beating heart," the secret agent replied, as he rapidly fluttered his eyelids. He then added, "Time to meet your harem, Conan."

The Queen's Wizard rolled his eyes, and followed Wally out the door.

The walk from conference room to lift allowed Harry to mull over the situation, and to have a question ready once they were alone in a descending car.

"So Wally...these are Muggle Jane Bonds, right?"

"Yes."

"But they're going to be setting up in a magical flat?"

Wally nodded. "That's why we've recruited two of your Brigadiddies to help them out."

"Two of my what?"

Two of your Peanut Butter Babes."

"Babes, huh?" Harry asked with a wink. "Thinking of batting from the other side of the wicket, now?"

Wally chuckled and shook his head. Lift doors opening to the ground level lobby gave him an excuse not to banter back.

"So...who is it?" Harry hissed.

Wally smiled. "You'll see."

Harry scowled. "So now you're a comedian as well?"

All he got in response was more chuckling, as Wally led him past the guard desk and out the front doors, where three sexily dressed women were waiting for them with their luggage. In short order, Harry was introduced to a blonde beauty with a big chest and bigger hair, a taller, intelligent-looking woman with shorter, straighter black hair, and a gorgeous brunette with high cheek bones and a brilliant white smile.

As Roger Granger's crash course in Muggle entertainment had inexplicably not yet covered an iconic 1970's American television show (or a much more recent big-screen cover), the names Kelly Garrett, Sabrina Duncan, and Jill Munroe meant nothing to Harry.

Wally, however, thought the aliases were hilarious, and entirely appropriate.

If the three women were surprised at their fellow secret agent's young age, they didn't show it...instead, he saw in their eyes cool professionalism, and a hint of danger. And since he was working diligently to keep his eyes from drifting down towards plunging necklines and thigh-baring hemlines, there was more than enough time for Harry to make that assessment.

The arrival of the longest motor vehicle that the Queen's Wizard had ever seen kept them from going much beyond introductions.

"Is this a company car, Wally?" he asked, gazing at the white stretch Hummer.

"All part of the role-play, stud," the secret agent replied, as the hired car stopped and his partner popped out dressed in a tuxedo.

Good afternoon, Guv'nor," the driver said with a salute.

"Oh, cut it out, Steve," Harry whined. "Queen let you out of bed, then?"

"Something like that," the agent quipped. He then turned towards the female agents and tipped his hat. "May I take your bags, ladies?"

As the three female secret agents rolled their bags towards the oversized boot, Harry pulled Wally aside.

"So where are the witches?"

The dapper Muggle winked, opened the limousine's rear door, and waved an arm towards the leather-trimmed, LCD-lit interior.

"Hey Harry!" a voice called from inside. The Queen's Wizard ducked his head, and caught his breath at the sight of a whole lot of Lavender Brown's and Lisa Turpin's legs. The two were sitting on a side-mounted bench, facing him, with glasses of champagne in their hands. Each was wearing a pink sequined micro-mini dress with a plunging neckline and knee-high white leather boots.

"Erm...Hi, Lavender...Lisa."

His blonde-haired house mate smiled and uncrossed her legs. A flash of red knickers hit Harry in the face as Lavender slowly straightened her leg out towards him.

"You know," she cooed seductively, "after that crowded flying trip in the Muggle helio-chopper, it's so nice to now have this much leg room...don't you think?"

"Ahhhh...yes, well...I'm glad that you're comfortable," Harry stammered.

Lisa smiled as she shifted down the bench to create some space between herself and the other witch.

"So come have a seat, Milord," she said, patting the bit of upholstery next to her hip. "And tell us about your lover's hideaway."

"Erm...no need to crowd, given all of the available seating, is there?"

"Just climb in, Stud," one of the female agents said from behind, as she gave the young wizard's bum a slap. Harry lost his balance, tumbled forward, and ending up with his face nearly in the Lavender lap.

"Oh, my," she hissed, as she ran her fingers through the Queen's Wizard's hair. "It's just like my dreams...except that you're still wearing clothes."

"With these tinted windows, don't let that stop you," quipped 'Kelly' as she ducked her head and slipped onto the rear-facing leather bench.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Lord High Steward, Part 2 (part 2)

"No thanks, I'm good," Harry said quickly, as he scrambled up onto the empty bench facing Kelly.

"Yes, that's what we've heard," Lavender said, as she wagged her eyebrows.

The other two "Angels" climbed into the seating area, and Wally poked his head inside the vehicle.

"I'd tell you not to do anything that I wouldn't do, Lord Gryffindor, but..."

"You wouldn't do *buts*, Wally?" Harry replied with a grin.

The secret agent's eyes lit up and he blew Harry a kiss.

"Of course not, Milord...you know that I'm saving myself for you."

"Scamp!"

"Scoundrel!"

"Would you want me any other way?"

"I want you in the worst way, luv!"

"In your dreams!"

"Don't think I can wait that long, Milord."

"Too Much Information!"

Wally smiled, and dramatically held the back of his hand to his forehead.

"And too little time for a tug."

"Not from what I've heard."

"Oh! You wound me, Sir!"

Harry chuckled. "And I suppose you want me to kiss it all better?"

"Yes, well...a bloke can dream, right?" Wally said with a laugh, as he finally closed the door and sent the car off.

As Harry's eyes readjusted to the interior lighting, he spied smiles on the faces of the three secret agents. Lisa and Lavender, however, had far more contemplative looks.

"So, Harry?"

"Yeah, Lavender?"

"Something going on between you and your male friend?"

Harry snorted. "No, no...just a bit of flirty banter."

"So...you were flirting with him?"

"Not for real, Lavender," Harry replied, adding, "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

His housemate frowned a bit. "So if you fancy witches, why can't we get a rise out of you when we're dressed this way?"

Harry took in a deep breath, then expelled it as he took Lavender's hand from his leg and scooted away from her.

"Because I've got good Occlumency skills, and a very hot girlfriend."

Lavender cocked her head to one side for a moment of thought. She then gave him a sly smile, dragged a finger down the length of her plunging neckline, and said, "So maybe your very hot girlfriend shares?"

Harry snorted softly. "You'll have to ask her yourself."

A vibrating ray on his Art Club badge kept Harry from hearing Lavender's retort. He held out his hand, brought a single finger to his lips asking for quiet, and activated his badge.

“Something wrong, Roger?” he asked.

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Roger Granger had been sitting at the Mos Eisley Cantina’s bar trying to decide whether he’d rather be a Jedi or Han Solo when someone pulled on the sleeve of his Clan Potter robes. He turned and reflexively jerked back from the onslaught of bad-breath coming from a dark-robed wizard who owned more fingers than teeth.

“Hey! I don’t like you!” the man declared with a slurred voice.

Roger frowned...the drunk was dressed in wizard’s robes, discounting the possibility that it was a hired actor doing a bit of role-play.

“Sorry to hear that,” he muttered, as he turned away from the wizard and looked down at his drink.

A few seconds later, Roger felt a more insistent tapping on his shoulder.

“I said that I don’t like you!”

Roger swore under his breath, and “called” Harry with an activation phrase whispered into a hunched shoulder.

Harry’s response was intentionally muffled with a robe sleeve.

“Look, mate,” Roger said clearly. “I’m just minding my own business...not looking for a wand fight.”

The foul-smelling wizard sneered, and casually pulled a twelve-inch long dagger from his sleeve.

“Who said anything about fightin’ with wands?” he asked, as he pretended to clean his grungy black fingernails.

Roger could feel the attention of the bar shift towards the confrontation. A hand that had reflexively slipped inside his robes and reached for a handgun stopped when he remembered where he was, and how much trouble he might get into by drawing a Muggle firearm within a room filled with wizards. So instead, he drew that hand back and snaked it up into his sleeves, where Weasley Wheezes were strapped to his forearm.

“Well, that’s an interesting knife,” Roger declared.

This observation was all that a certain wizard listening in from the back of a London limousine needed to decide that his potential father-in-law could use back-up. Harry immediately badge-jumped to Roger’s side in the quietest “apparition” that the cantina’s patrons had ever seen. Getting a quick visual confirmation of the scene that he’d pieced together over the open badge line, Harry smoothly pulled the Sword of Gryffindor from its back-mounted scabbard.

Shaking his head dismissively, the Queen’s Wizard unbuttoned his suit jacket, and swung the blade in a chest-high sweep that ended with its tip pointing towards the heckler’s hands.

Harry then smiled, and using his best Aussie accent drawled, “That’s not a knife... *This* is a knife.”

After a moment of near-silence, the nearly-toothless wizard correctly read the situation and scowled. A knife was sheathed, a few coins thrown down at the bar, and he was ushered out the front doors by jeers and derisive laughter.

As Harry sheathed his own “knife” the other bar patrons lost interest and went back to their own hushed conversations. Roger returned the “portable swamp” and “instant darkness” balls that he’d been gripping to their respective slots on his arm pack and shook his head.

“Thanks for the help, Harry,” he said. “Though I was expecting more Obi-Wan and less Crocodile Dundee.”

“Couldn’t be helped, Bruce,” Harry quipped, trying to hold the accent in place. “Left my light saber back in London.”

Roger snorted, and joined in with his own drawling accent. “Fancy a drink, then, Bruce?”

Harry chuckled. “Wish I could, Bruce, but I’ve got to get the Sheilas settled in.”

The banter was interrupted by a much thicker (and far more authentic) butchering of the Queen’s English.

“Beaut showing there, mate...that sword draw was flat out like a lizard drinking!”

The Queen’s Wizard turned towards the newcomer, who was dressed in khaki-colored robes similar to those worn by a half-dozen similarly dressed men who were crowded into a corner booth.

“Erm, thanks,” he replied.

“Mind you, the Aussie accents are all dunny dangles.”

Roger laughed at the negative assessment (even if he didn’t know its exact provenance).

“Yes, well...not everyone is fortunate enough to have been born on God’s own Earth.”

“Too right, there,” the wizard grinned. He stuck out his hand and said, “Name’s Bruce.”

Roger snorted, shook the wizard's hand, and replied, "Michael Baldwin."

The Australian squinted at Roger for a moment, then broke out into a roar.

"Right, then...that might get a bit confusing...mind if we call you New-Bruce?"

"Wouldn't want it any other way, Bruce," Roger replied.

The Aussie nodded and turned towards the Queen's Wizard, who stuck out his own hand and said, "I'm Harry."

The wizard in khakis caught sight of the lightning bolt-shaped scar and drew in a breath.

"Bloody hell...what do you think this is, bush week?"

The Queen's Wizard frowned. "Fine then...call me Bruce."

The khaki-robed wizard nodded. "Don't mean to be rude...it's just that I've had to deal with two other Boy-Who-Lived ring-ins, just in the last few months...and we aren't supposed to hook up to the real one 'til Pommyland."

Roger let out a snort as Harry's eyes went wide at the thought of possible impersonators Down Under.

"So what business do you have with the real Harry Potter?" he asked.

"Why would you need to know, mate?"

"Because he really is Harry Potter, Bruce," replied Roger.

"For real?"

Roger nodded. "Unless it's one of your Queen's Wizard-wannabes who is sleeping with my daughter."

"Hey!"

The Australian Auror's eyes went wide. He ignored Harry's protests and said, "Cris'sake...what the bloody hell you doing here?"

Harry cocked his head to one side.

"Having a drink?"

The Australian wizard looked down at Harry's butterbeer with a sniff.

"That's not a drink!" he declared. "Oy! Bartender! Throw two more tinnies on the tab!"

Harry used this distraction to activate his Art Club badge.

"Wally?"

"Go ahead, Lord G?"

"Am I supposed to be meeting with a group of Australian wizards?"

"No, you're supposed to be in a limo with Charlie's Angels...what's going on?"

"Nothing much...had to make a quick trip back to Oslo to back-up Roger."

"Everything okay, then?"

"Yeah, no worries...except for meeting the Aussies."

"Oh, well, yeah...that was supposed to happen later on tonight ...they're already in Oslo?"

"I guess so."

"How did they get there so fast?"

"Magic, I reckon," Harry said snidely. "So what's the story?"

The Australian turned back towards Harry levitating a platter of beer cans in front of him.

"Story on what, mate?"

"Oh, sorry," said Harry. "I was just checking in with my headquarters."

"Using that fancy bit of jewelry?" the wizard asked.

"Not that you know," Harry replied.

"Well come on, then, and meet the boys," replied the Australian, as he headed towards a booth filled with similarly-dressed wizards. Harry ended his call to Wally with a quick request for Steve to call back once he'd arrived at the Rookery, then followed along with Roger.

"Took you long enough, Bruce!" whined one of the men sitting within the booth.

"Sod off, Bruce." The wizard replied, as he slipped the tray filled with beer cans onto the table, pointed towards Roger, and added, "Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to a man from Pommeyland named New-Bruce."

"G'day New-Bruce," the wizards all replied.

The wizard then turned towards the Boy-Who-Lived and said, "And this here, mates, is none other than Harry Potter."

"Go on! Give us the good oil!"

"Yes, yes, it's true, or else he wouldn't be rooting New-Bruce's shiralee."

"Hey! Who said that I'm...rooting?"

"Harry Potter, Bruce. Harry Potter, Bruce. Harry Potter, Bruce...that fella's my best mate Bruce, and that daggy bastard over there...his name is Bruce."

"G'day."

"Is your name not Bruce, then?" one of them asked Harry.

The Queen's Wizard shook his head as Roger broke out into a wide grin.

"Yes, yes...I know, that's going to cause a little confusion."

"Good that you see it...mind if we call you Bruce to keep it clear?"

Harry smiled and nodded his head. "No worries."

"Right then," stated one of the boothed Bruces. "Have a seat and we'll start the faculty meeting."

Roger smiled. "Of the philosophy department at the University of Walamaloo?"

"How'd you guess, New-Bruce?" the Aussie asked. "But first I'd like to ask the padre for a prayer."

A different Bruce held a hand over the tray of beer cans and said, "Oh Lord, we beseech Thee, Amen!!"

"Amen!"

Somebody named Bruce called out, "Crack tubes!" and everyone opened a can.

Harry was in the middle of a long draw on his beer when his Art Club badge vibrated. He quickly pulled his lips away from the can when he glanced down...then relaxed a bit when he realized that it was Steve who was calling, rather than the Queen (whose "ray" was right next door).

"Alright, there, New-Bruce-too?" asked one of the Australians.

"No worries," Harry replied. "Just a bit of business to attend to. So are you lot really are heading towards Britain?"

"That's the plan, New-Bruce-too," replied Head-Bruce. "Her Majesty the Queen asked the Prime Minister for some assistance...we here are going to be 'Advisors,' while you sort out your squabbles."

"She asked your Muggle Prime Minister to send Magical Advisors?"

Bruce shrugged. "A bit more casual about secrecy issues Down Under."

All of the Bruces nodded, and intoned, "Australia, Australia, Australia, we love you, Amen!"

"Crack tubes!"

"But they're already cracked, Bruce."

"Oh, bugger, so they are. Drink up then, and Bruce...your shout, mate."

"Is not...I bought the round before you...it's Bruce's shout."

"I'll buy," Roger offered.

"Oh, no, New-Bruce, can't have that...not allowed in the Rules."

“What Rules?”

“Rule Six.”

“But Bruce, there is no rule six!”

Roger snorted. “Rule seven then?”

One of the Bruces automatically called back, “No Poofsters!...oh, blast!”

All of the other Aussie Aurors roared with laughter, and pulled the Bruce who had responded to his feet.

“Cultural sensitivity training,” Head-Bruce explained, as the respondent headed towards the bar. “Not allowed to call the natives and homosexuals what we used to.”

“So how is that training?” Roger asked.

“Well, it’s positive reinforcement, you see,” Head-Bruce replied. “Every time one of the boys calls a homosexual a ‘hoofster-with-a-p’, he has to buy the next round.”

Roger laughed. “Wouldn’t that be negative reinforcement?”

New-Bruce shook his head. “Nothing negative about getting a beer out of it, is there?”

Harry smiled and added, “Sounds like a good excuse to drink.”

“Now, New-Bruce-too...are you implying that we need a excuse to drink?”

Harry snorted. “No, never...especially since it’s...what time is it back in Australia right now?”

Head-Bruce shrugged and smiled. “It’s always tinny time, mate.” Something then caught his eye and he looked passed Roger’s shoulder.

“Aw, Cris’sake...there goes the bloody neighborhood.”

Harry turned his head, and spied six bare-chested warrior-sorcerers enter the bar.

“You got a problem with Maori, Bruce?”

“No, no...just a bit of friendly rivalry with our Kiwi colleagues.”

“Hey Bruce,” one of the others called out. “Isn’t it time for something completely different?”

“Why so it is,” Head-Bruce stated.

“So what’s something completely different?” Roger asked with a grin of anticipation.

“A man with a tape recorder up his nose,” replied Head-Bruce.

The Aussie proceeded to tilt his head to one side and stick an index finger up his left nostril. Whatever magic that was hidden within his nose started to broadcast a recording of a brass band playing what might as well be considered the Australian national anthem, and all of the Bruces began to sing along...with gusto and raised tins.

But as Harry didn’t know the words to “Waltzing Matilda”, he used this distraction to pop back to London.

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Steve was sitting in the back of the stretch Hummer when he anchored Harry’s return jump, and the same magic that had parked him outside Hermione’s bedcurtains (rather than inside) took hold once more.

Lavender’s eyes shifted skyward from the wizard who had just appeared on her lap and she cried out, “Thank you, Morgana!”

“Erm, sorry about that,” Harry said, as he pulled his house mate’s hugging arms away from his waist and shifted over onto a seat.

“Don’t be, I’m not sorry,” she replied.

Steve snickered and shook his head in disbelief.

“So, Harry, we’re double-parked in front of the Rookery, and I’ve just gone back over their briefing.”

The Queen’s Wizard nodded. “You all know about the memory erasing magic that will affect you once you leave the building?”

Secret Agent Jill nodded. “Everything that happens inside the building stays in the building.”

“And all of you are okay with that? I mean, it’s not something that we’ve been able to fix.”

"Oh, we'll muddle through somehow, Harry," Lavender purred. "Consider it our sacrifice for the war effort."

Harry stared at the blonde witch for a moment, then let out a deep breath.

"Right then, I'll have to escort you in two at a time, just to drag you through the magical wards...we'll split the witches in the first two shifts, just to keep the others from freaking out from the magic inside."

The Queen's Wizard ignored Lavender's comment that he could split her anytime he wanted, and addressed Agent Kelly's question.

"There might be a house-elf concierge inside," he explained. "You certainly won't be the first lovely Muggle ladies to visit, but partnering with a magical will help with any questions you might have."

With plans thus made, Steve stepped outside and began transferring luggage from boot to curb. Lisa Turpin and Agent Sabrina followed Harry out to the sidewalk and clutched his arms tightly as he pulled them into the ground floor lobby. A house elf was indeed there to greet them.

"Good afternoon, Patriarch Potter," the diminutive sentient said with a low bow.

"Good day to you, Gilbert," Harry replied with a smile. "I'd like to introduce you to Lisa and Sabrina. They're my...well, let's just say that I'll be hosting them in my flat for a period of time."

A nearly-imperceptible glimmer shined in the House Elf's eyes. He bowed once more and said, "Very Good, Sir...and ladies, welcome to the Rookery. If there is anything that the two of you need during your stay, please do not hesitate to call for me."

"Thank you, Gilbert," Lisa replied. Sabrina only nodded, but the fact that she hadn't blown her cover upon first sight of a non-human sentient was, in Harry's opinion, impressive.

"If that is all of your luggage, ladies, I'll bring it up to the flat presently."

"Well, actually, Gilbert," Harry replied. "I've got more luggage...and three more ladies waiting outside."

The House Elf's eyes went just a little wider with surprise, as he began to make favorable comparisons between this Patriarch and his grandfather, who had been secretly referred to by all of the Rookery staff as "Randy Andy" Potter.

He bowed a third time and replied, "I would be most pleased to attend to Miss Lisa and Miss Sabrina while you complete your party."

"Thank you, Gilbert," Harry said with a smile.

Before he could turn towards the entrance, Lisa Turpin took some initiative and pulled Harry into a tight embrace.

"Don't be too long, lover," she cooed.

Harry choked on some spittle and whispered his questioned response into her ear. Lisa kissed his cheek, gave his bum a squeeze, and whispered back that she was just staying "in character."

Wondering just how he was going to explain this to Hermione, the Queen's Wizard sighed, and headed back outside, where Lavender Brown insisted that only one more shuttle was needed. When Harry pointed out that he only had two arms, the witch smiled, and asked for a piggy-back ride.

She was most disappointed when Harry offered only his left arm, with Secret Agent Jill taking hold of his right. He quickly and efficiently returned for Secret Agent Kelly, and accepted Steve's wishes for good luck.

Of course, both understood that those wishes were offered more for his next visit with Hermione, rather than for anything associated with the group that was waiting for Harry inside the lobby.

Chapter 44: Lord High Steward

Friday, July 13, 5:00pm, Knockturn Alley

The teen-aged wizard who approached the entrance to his Knockturn Alley safe house had a spring in his step and a smile on his face. What he had just discovered was so massive...so magnificent...that he had almost forgotten that the information had been obtained while he'd been in the polyjuiced form of a two-sickle whore. The lewd suggestions and rough fondling of the guard who stood just inside the doorway served as quick reminder. But Draco Malfoy merely slapped at the Death Eater's groping hands as he brushed by and burst into their hideaway's ersatz potions laboratory.

"Godfather!"

There was a slight hitch in the counter-clockwise stirring of a foul-smelling potion, but no other indication that he'd been heard by the dark robed wizard whose back had been to the door.

"The Ministry has gone into hiding!" announced the boy with baps.

The vocalized count shifted from baritone to hiss, but did not lag behind the stirring.

"The Alley is ours to play with!"

The Potions Master finished his count, and with back still turned to Draco, carefully wiped off the cauldron's contents from the two-foot long willow-wood spoon that he'd been using to stir.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" demanded the presently curvaceous wizard. "The Ministry of Magic has disappeared! This is the perfect chance!"

Still silence...or relative silence, as one could still hear Draco's excitedly raspy breaths and the cauldron's soft boil. Then an explosion of sound, fury and movement...as Snape spun on his heels and smashed the side of his godson's head with the stirring spoon. The young wizard cried out in pain and crumpled to the ground.

"Perfect chance to do what?" the Potions Master demanded, as he hovered over Draco. "Openly defy our Master?"

"But...things have changed since then," Draco retorted, as he cautiously pulled himself off of the ground. "There are opportunities that didn't exist before..."

The Potions Master growled and grabbed the front of Draco's witch's robes with one hand while raising the wooden stir stick with the other. The younger wizard winced and covered his head in anticipation of a strike that never came...but only because Snape was worried about the blood spray contaminating his brews. The greasy-haired wizard settled for slamming his godson up against a wall.

"But nothing!" he raged. "Your persistent inability to do what you are told to do is going to be the end of you....and the end of me!" A face slap that dropped the younger wizard back to the floor served as Snape's sentence-ending punctuation.

"Insolent whelp! (*kick to Draco's feminine arse*)

"Stop!" the younger wizard begged.

Snape sneered. "If it weren't for promises made to your mother (*kick to the shin*) made necessary by your inability to finish off Dumbledore...(*kick to the gut*)..."

"Please, stop!"

"Simple cowardice (*rib kick*) ...quite understandable in your case...but this reckless impatience? (*two more kicks to the arse*)

"Why are you..."

Snape reached down and pulled Draco up by the front of his robes, until his face was just a few nose hairs away from the potions master's face.

"It's not 'why are you,' you ponce (*violent shake*) ...the correct question is, 'What are you...a Bloody (*spewed spittle*) Gryffindor?"

The former head of Slytherin again hurled the Malfoy scion against the wall, then turned away in disgust as Draco slumped to the floor and whimpered. Snape covered his face with his hands, and rubbed his forehead with the tips of his fingers as he fought to regain control of his temper. After several deep breaths, he turned back towards his godson and spoke in a tone of voice that, while lower in volume, was no less menacing.

"Barty Crouch Junior sucked down polyjuice potion and hobbled around on a peg leg for the better part of a year while he waited for the Master to determine the optimal time to return. Do you think that he ever second guessed our Lord?"

"N-N-N-No..."

"Your Auntie Bella spent fourteen years in Azkaban...when the Dark Lord opened the door to her cell and freed her, do you think that her first words to him were, '*What took you so long?*'"

"Erm..."

"The correct answer is, '*I don't think so,*' you idiot," hissed Snape. "And this past year, our forces had to bide their time and keep to the shadows while you dithered for months making repairs to that cabinet...didn't have anyone following you around whinging '*Can we attack Hogwarts now? Can we attack Hogwarts now?*', did you?"

Draco shook his head.

"If you have any hope of surviving the summer...much less of successfully serving our Lord, you will learn to be obedient...and patient. Your orders are to follow my orders...and my current orders are to lay low, and do nothing more than get our injured back to full health. Speaking of which...where is the knotgrass?"

"Erm...didn't make it to the Apothecary," Draco whispered. "When I heard about the Ministry, and saw the lack of Auror patrols...thought we could just raid the shop and cart their entire inventory back..."

A dangerous hiss escaped from Snape's lips. He glanced over at an hourglass and gauged how many sand grains had yet to drop.

"You have fifteen minutes before the polyjuice wears off...I suggest that you use them to complete your assigned task...unless you would rather put that whore's arse of yours to work providing some...physical comfort...to our patients?"

Draco's eyes went wide at the threat. He shook his head violently, rose off of the floor, and bolted towards the door.

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A few blocks away from the site of Draco's beat down, Harry Potter and his five new houseguests all crowded into the Rookery's lift. The three Muggle secret agent "Angels" took up positions behind and to the Queen's Wizard's sides. He snorted when he spied the pout on Lavender's face, and mouthed a silent thanks to the others as he used both palm print and wand tip to close the lift's doors and send it up towards his flat on the twenty-third floor.

When they passed by the fourteenth floor, Harry's thoughts drifted towards the Malfoy patriarch, who was still holed up in his Rookery apartment (based on continuous remote surveillance). The one-armed wizard hadn't left his flat since the day of his capture, but that didn't make Agent Potter any less concerned about his presence now that his own flat was to be occupied. When the lift came to a stop on the Queen Wizard's floor, "Jill," "Sabrina" and "Kelly" each pulled handguns out from Morgana knows where and adopted defensive stances.

"Stand down, and holster those weapons," Harry ordered. "The flat is secured with my own magic."

"Unless someone starts hurling cars towards it?" Jill asked.

The teen-aged wizard shrugged and pulled out his wand. "If it'll make you feel better, let me take point while I give you a tour."

Jill pursed her lips, and then nodded. "Fair enough. Kelly...you hang back with the bags and the bints."

"Hey, who are you calling a bint?" Lavender protested.

The Muggle woman replied only with a hard stare as the lift doors opened and Harry pushed out into the main sitting room.

"Oh, my!" hissed Sabrina, as she furtively glanced at the antique furnishings.

"Save the Roadshow for later, Sir Michael!" Jill barked.

"Yes, Mum."

"Shall we, then, Sir?" Jill asked.

Harry shrugged, nodded, and began his whirlwind tour of the flat. As the group of three made their way from room to room, he asked, "Can we drop the 'Sir' business?"

"You do outrank us, Sir," Sabrina tersely replied.

Harry snorted. "Not by my doing...so you're MI-5 ¾, then?"

"On loan to MI-5...clears us to operate domestically."

Harry nodded as he led the two women into the bedroom hallway, and wondered how expansive the verb "operate" was with regard to their mission. His guests visibly relaxed once he walked them through the fourth and final bedroom; Jill reached up and pulled the wig of massive brown hair off of her head, while Sabrina sat on the bed and kicked off her high heels.

"Cor, I really hate dolling up that way," Jill sighed, as she rubbed her fingers through her short, spiky black hair. "Mind if we set up here, Sir?"

Secret Agent Potter shrugged. "It's Harry, not Sir...and you five can split up the four bedrooms however you want." He then turned to Secret Agent Sabrina, who was staring an oak washstand that sat opposite the large poster bed with something akin to lust in her eyes. When she jumped off of the bed and ducked her head underneath its front ledge, Harry asked, "Looking for a listening device?"

The attractive thirty-something Muggle pulled her head back out and shook it. "No...I was looking for a maker's mark."

"A what?"

"A manufacturer's label," Jill explained. "Sabrina, here, has a kink for antique furniture."

"I certainly do not!"

"Okay, fine...you have a kink for shagging on top of antique furniture."

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Pay no attention to my uncouth colleague."

Harry snorted.

"You've got an amazing collection here, Sir," Sabrina stated. "Assuming that everything else is as authentic as this piece seems to be."

"I wouldn't know," Harry replied. "It was all here when I discovered that I owned this flat."

"Really?" the brown-haired Muggle asked, as she dragged a finger along a rounded corner. "Do you know how old the building is?"

Erm...built in the 1890's."

Sabrina nodded. "Right time frame for this Arts-and-Crafts style."

"If you say so," Harry replied. An idea then came to mind, and he pulled a shrunken portfolio from his ever-present, never-full knapsack. The two women startled when Harry's spell work returned the thick book to full size.

"Going to have to get used to all this magic," Sabrina muttered.

"Isn't that's what the bints out there are for?" asked Jill.

The Queen's Wizard was too busy scanning a "scroll-down" list of properties with his wand tip to pick up on the exchange. Once he found the Rookery, he "expanded" its description to provide an itemized list of rooms, and then, for each room, an inventory of his possessions.

"Let's see...*bedrooms ...last bedroom down the hall ...furniture*" Harry looked up. "So that's a washstand, then?"

When Sabrina nodded, Harry "clicked" on the word "washstand" with his wand tip and a full description of the piece crowded onto the page of text. He showed the book to the secret agent and asked, "Does Charles Rennie Mackintosh mean anything to you?"

Sabrina squealed in delight.

Jill frowned. "Alright, luv...let's get back to the others before you start rubbing off on the woodwork."

"Yes, Mum," the brown-haired Muggle mumbled. "So anyone mind if I set up here in this bedroom?"

Harry shrugged. "You can have the Master, for all I care."

Jill snorted. "Is that an invitation to share a bed, Sir?"

Harry's eyebrows disappeared under his hairline. "Not at all...there's no need for me to stay here, now that I've got you into the building...right?"

"Depends if you're talking about mission needs, or what those two girls think they need."

"Well, since what I need are my bits not being hexed off by Agent Granger..."

"Which Agent Granger?" Sabrina snarked.

Harry chuckled and replied, "Take your pick."

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Sabrina's willingness to stay with the plan was severely tested when they returned to the main room and she took a second look at what she had originally assumed was a reproduction of one of Pissarro's Kew Gardens masterpieces. Harry's willingness to stay with the plan was severely tested when they returned to the main room and Kelly casually asked him to help unzip her skimpy dress. Secret Agent Potter tried to stay cool and not flinch at this request, thinking that a "real" James Bond-like secret agent shouldn't blush like a hormonally-charged teen-ager. Unfortunately, the lack of an observable bra strap as he pulled down the zipper didn't help.

Nor did the way that the dress slipped onto the floor, leaving the secret agent in only her knickers.

"Still acting like you're part of my harem, then?" he asked in an almost-breaking voice.

Kelly smiled as she covered her bare breasts with one arm and turned towards the young wizard.

"Sorry...but I hate wearing dresses, and I always try to stay in character."

"Watch it, Kelly," Jill warned. "His girlfriend outranks you."

"Pity, that," the woman replied, waggling her eyebrows. She then leaned down to her opened bag, pulled a skimpy t-shirt from the pile of packed clothes, and slipped it over her head.

As Harry's eyes drifted down the woman's frame, he asked, "Dare I ask where you three hide your holsters?"

Kelly laughed, and turned around to face the Queen's Wizard. She then lifted one leg, turned her knee outward, and said, "Probably the same place where your girlfriend hides hers."

Patriarch Potter risked a quick glance and was rewarded with a view of the secret agent's magical holster... stuck high up her inner thigh, almost touching the crotch of her blue bikini-cut knickers.

"Wally handed them out just before we met," Jill added from across the room. "Said that the twin wizards who made them had wanted to see to the installation themselves."

"Yeah, that sounds like them," Harry replied with a smile, noting that the other two Muggle secret agents had now opened their own bags. But the clothes that were subsequently pulled from these cases were thrown aside in a quest to get to what was hidden underneath.

While the three Muggle agents began to assemble broken-down sniper rifles and spotting scopes, Harry turned towards the two witches, whose dresses now also lay in a heap on the floor.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Just getting comfortable, like she was,” Lavender replied, as she waved her arm towards Kelly in a motion that caused a fair bit of jiggling. “Not that it matters.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter?” Harry asked.

The blonde-haired witch smiled as she reached over and helped unhook Lisa’s bra. “It doesn’t matter how much of me...or us...you see...or how much of *you* we see, because none of us are going to remember any of it once we leave this flat, right?”

Harry closed his eyes, let out a deep breath, and shook his head.

“The memory charms only work on guests...since I own this flat I’ll remember everything.”

“Oh,” Lavender replied. “I must have misheard during the briefing...give us a few seconds, then.”

Harry nodded, and waited patiently for permission to open his eyes again. But when that permission was granted the two witches were still topless, and just barely covering their breasts with their arms.

“Lavender!” Harry growled, as he averted his eyes.

“Alright you two...you’ve had your fun,” barked Secret Agent Jill. “Go pick out your bedrooms, cover your bits, and get back out here immediately.”

The commanding tone in the Muggle agent’s voice acted just as well as any compulsion charm, and the two teen-agers dashed down the hallway with their bags in tow. Harry resisted the temptation to check out his classmates’ bums, and turned back towards the other three. As the women set their gear up on the balcony that overlooked Diagon Alley, he briefly reviewed Lucius Malfoy’s tenancy within the building, and the remote monitoring and internal security systems that were in place to keep him at bay.

Once that topic was covered, Harry asked, “So that’s a sniper rifle?”

Jill nodded. “It’s a L115A...the latest and greatest.”

The Queen’s Wizard stepped forward for a closer look, totally ignoring the view that a hunched-over Kelly was offering down her shirt.

“The latest and greatest sniper rifle uses a bolt action?” he asked.

Jill snorted.

“Thought you knew more about wands than rifles?”

Harry opened his suit jacket and revealed his own hand gun, resting in a magical holster that sat flush against his chest. “Crash course in multi-tasking.”

“So it seems,” Jill replied. “As for the bolt-action...it allows us to manually control the release of empty cases. There are times and places where the noise of an automatic case ejection would give away our location.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” said Harry. “How big a bullet?”

“A .338,” Jill replied, as she pulled large bullets from a box and handed them over for the wizard’s inspection. “Comes in three flavors...armor piercing, incendiary, and silver-tipped.”

“Nice...so you can set targets on fire?”

“Sets what’s left of the target on fire,” Sabrina stated, while she dropped her head to look through tripod-mounted digital binoculars.

“Damn I hate this,” she added.

“What?”

“Not seeing with my eyes what we see through these electronic binoculars.”

“They aren’t half as bad as this new digital scope,” chimed in Kelly, as she settled in behind the rifle’s sight. “Still having trouble adjusting for the extra weight.”

“Well that’s why they pay us all those pounds, girls,” Jill replied.

This earned the woman a derisive laugh from the other two.

“Cor, you know that we could all make more in one freelance contract than we get paid in annual salary.”

“And miss out on the chance to serve in Her Majesty’s Secret Service?” Jill asked. She winked at Harry and then added, “Not to mention the fact

that the job lets us work with handsome young men in fabulously furnished flats.”

“Oh, no...not you as well,” Harry replied.

“Why not?” Jill asked with a grin.

“Erm...because I outrank you, and so does my girlfriend?”

“Yes, there is that,” Jill admitted with an overly-dramatic sigh. “Of course, I could have just been lusting over the furniture.”

“Who are you trying to kid, Jill?” asked Sabrina. “I’ve sat on your flat’s ratty sofas, and know for a fact that you’d rather have one of those two girls sharing your bed than Harry.”

“Although both Harry and his girlfriend might be a different matter,” chimed in Kelly with a laugh.

“Oh hush, you two,” admonished Jill. “And stay on task.”

“We’re done,” Kelly replied, as she stepped back from the rifle and grabbed her own pair of digital binoculars. “So what do you think Sabrina...two hundred yards to the near side of the alley, and three to that big white building at the end?”

“Sounds right to me,” the antiques-lover replied. The two passed their binoculars back to Jill and Harry so that they could take a look.

“Almost close enough to not need a spotter,” offered Jill, as she got her first “live” view of Diagon Alley.

“So you’re set up to target Death Eaters if they attack the Alley again?” Harry asked.

“That’s the mission at present time,” Jill replied.

“But how can you be sure?” the Queen’s Wizard asked. “There is a magic spell that could force innocent people to dress up that way and pretend to be a bad guy.”

“Does it really matter if they’re shooting lethal spells at other innocents?” Sabrina asked.

“Well...are you three good enough shots to target a wand hand, rather than a head?”

The dismissive “Harrumph!” from all three women was taken as a “Yes.”

“But we’d still need to be able to tell one way or the other,” Kelly offered.

Harry dropped the digital binoculars from his eyes and stared through the Alley’s notice-me-not wards. He still had his modified omnioculars with him, but he really didn’t want to tie up Dobby full-time on a Dark Mark watch, like he did during the Garden Party. Lisa and Lavender could take turns scouting for Death Eaters in the Alley, but giving Lavender a way to peek underneath a wizard’s robes seemed like a bad idea...until Harry realized that this was a case where the Rookery’s wards would work in his favor.

The Queen’s Wizard turned and called for the two witches. They bounced back into the main area wearing tight-fitting Muggle shorts and t-shirts.

“Yes, Harry?” Lavender asked.

“So, we were just talking about this mission,” Harry explained, “and I was wondering what you’ve been tasked with.”

“We’re here to help these Muggles deal with a magical flat,” Lisa replied.

“Which is about all we can do right now, given that we left our wands behind at Azkaban, and neither of us got a really good match from those spares that Hermione had for us to pick through.”

Harry nodded. “So what if I had an extra task for you two while you’re here?”

Lavender shrugged. “Your wish is our command, milord.”

“Oh, stop that,” Harry snapped, “and come on over here to the window.” He then passed his omnioculars to Lisa, and explained his idea.

After he was done, Lavender excitedly asked, “So, our new job is to stare at naked bits all day long?”

“Your job is to look for Dark Marks under robes, and to pass that information on to the other three,” Harry corrected. “Keep to the window, so as to avoid frying their electronics on the balcony.”

“And if we happen to see some bits...unintentionally, of course?” asked Lisa.

Harry nodded, and then smirked as Lavender fought to contain her perky excitement.

“Don’t get too worked up, girls,” Jill offered. “You’re going to forget anything that you see once you leave the building.”

“Oh...yeah...good thing, that,” Lavender replied flatly.

"So when do we start?" Lisa asked. "No time like the present," Jill replied.

"The three of us will be working in pairs using staggered shifts...sixteen hours on, eight off. Only need one of you on duty, though, so you'll have rotating twelve hour shifts."

"Unless Harry can round up one or two more volunteers for this bit watch," Kelly snarked.

"It's up to you two," Harry said, with a nod towards the teenaged witches. "Want to share the watch and work shorter shifts?"

Lisa and Lavender looked at each other, then turned back towards Harry and shook their heads. "It might be rough, but I think we're up for the challenge," Lavender replied.

"Right, let me know then," said an amused wizard. He left it to them to decide who had first watch, and made his way to the flat's kitchen to see how well it was stocked. While estimating how much food was available, he heard Lavender curse out loud. He rushed back to the sitting room, and found her looking out the window with his magical spyglasses. "What's that, Lavender...a Death Eater?"

"No, something worse...a hundred-year old wizard with a potbelly hiding his bits...was it too much to hope for something more pleasant to track?"

"You'll have to take the good with the bad, I guess," said Harry.

"Yes, I will," Lavender replied coyly, as she swung her magically enhanced gaze away from the window. Harry had barely enough time to cover the front of his robe-covered crotch with a book pulled from a nearby shelf.

"Hey!" he protested.

"Fine," Lavender spat, as she lowered the omnioculars.

"So Harry...making any shopping trips to the Alley any time soon?"

"Not as far as you'll remember," he replied nervously.

A badge call saved Harry from further embarrassment, and he jumped out of the apartment with the book still in place as a visual shield.

Thirty seconds later, an electronic chirping noise caused Lavender to startle.

"What's that?"

Jill rolled her eyes as she pulled out her mobile, and snorted when she read the text message that had just been delivered to it.

"We've been issued plain spoken instructions by Agent Granger to keep our baps covered and our hands off of her boyfriend.

"How plain spoken?" asked Kelly.

Jill looked back down at her mobile display and replied, "Quite plain...says that we'll be the test subjects of her modified 'bit-bogey hex' otherwise."

Lavender shook her head dismissively. "Never heard of that one...now if she'd said bat-bogey hex...that's a real spell..."

"Could have been a typo?" offered Sabrina. "What's a bat-bogey hex do?"

"It enlarges nasal discharges, and transfigures those discharges into bats that fly out of your nostrils and attack your head," Lisa stated.

Jill frowned. "So if her threat wasn't mistyped, and Agent Granger has modified that spell, then instead of having bats flying out of your nose, they would be coming out of your..."

The draining of all color from Lisa's and Lavender's faces, and their reflexive knee clenching were more than sufficient responses to the question.

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Having ventured back out into public a second time and finally completed the task that had been assigned to him, Draco Malfoy slipped back into the Knockturn Alley safe house just a few seconds before the polyjuice potion wore off. As he delivered the potions ingredient to his Godfather, the blonde-again wizard tried to decide which was worse...the leers and lewd comments he'd once again endured from the entrance guard, or the fact that the Death Eater hadn't looked that much less interested once Draco had reverted to male form right before his eyes. That kind of unwanted attention from other Death Eaters had never been a problem for Draco, given his father's position within Voldemort's Inner Circle. But by now it was an open secret that Lucius Malfoy had somehow lost favor with the Dark Lord, and no longer had influence. That meant that it was only his Godfather who stood between Draco and those Death Eaters who thought he had a pretty mouth...and that wasn't quite the same thing.

Draco tried to block all of this out of his mind as he escaped to his little corner of their cramped sleeping area and plopped down onto his assigned bed. He wanted it all blocked because he wanted to focus on the fact that he actually did have a pretty mouth...and pretty bits...at least when he had been disguised as a female prostitute.

It gave a teen-aged boy ideas...ideas that might have been put to use behind the drawn curtains of a poster bed, or a discrete notice-me-not charm. But Draco didn't enjoy that kind of privacy within the safe house...and he certainly wasn't about to relieve his...urges...with other male

Death Eaters around.

"No," the Malfoy scion thought, *"I'll slip out tonight and let a real girl satisfy those urges...now that there's nobody patrolling Diagon Alley."*

It would have to be Diagon Alley...the witches out and about in Knockturn Alley were all quite adept at protecting themselves against any kind of magical compulsion to spread their legs. And if he couldn't find a pretty witch in Diagon...well, there'd be at least one or two wizards there that he could assault. Not to assault sexually, of course...he was no poofter. It would be just a simple theft...to get enough galleons to return to Knockturn and properly hire a good-looking whore...a real witch with baps at least as large as his had just been.

5:30pm, Balta Sound, Unst, Shetland Islands

Had the Muggle crews of the three 33rd Squadron helicopters that had been scrambled from RAF Benson not previously transported Harry Potter and his TPOMS squadron, they might have been more curious as to why they had been ordered to fly to an abandoned air station in the Shetlands and to wait there for passengers.

They also might have been more surprised when they spotted a motorbike flying towards them at a high rate of speed.

Harry pulled his charmed Bonny up to a ground-level hover next to an opened hatchway.

"Evening, Conan," one of the pilots called out.

The Queen's Wizard smiled at the airman's greeting, which he took to represent both the informality and acceptance that he'd sought during his short tenure within the British Military.

"Haven't been waiting long, I hope?"

"Not at all, Major."

"That's good...ready to get going, then?"

"We're under your wing, Conan...or handlebars, as it were."

Harry snorted. "Right...we've got about five miles to cover, heading up the inlet. Think you'll be able to find a place to land?"

The helicopter pilot laughed. "On these treeless rocks? Yeah, we'll manage somehow."

"Fair enough," Harry admitted. "Don't follow too close behind, or you'll hit a ward line and develop a sudden desire to empty the trash bins back home...Oh, and don't be thrown by the sudden appearance of your passengers, or how they'll be dressed."

"How many, then?"

"Forty-one, including myself."

"You won't be leading us home on the Bonny, then?"

Harry shook his head. "Better I be back in one of the cabins...some of our guests have never flown in a helicopter." Picking up on the glint within the pilot's eyes, the Queen's Wizard quickly added, "And some of our guests are diplomatic V.I.P.'s, so ease off on the puke-producing joyrides, right?"

The pilot snorted, and replied with a reluctant nod of the head.

Five minutes later, the three helicopters touched down on a small uninhabited island that sat a hundred meters out into an inlet. Brisk winds held the attention of the pilots as their rotors spun, so it was up to the co-pilots and crew chiefs to gawk as Harry shrunk his motorbike, pocketed it, then walked into an open field and opened an invisible door. Their interest in Harry's magic quickly shifted over to the multiethnic stream of strangely dressed people that emerged from trap door, seemingly out of nowhere. Aussies in slouch hats and khaki robes helped dark-skinned Swazi warriors stow their leather shields and spears into the cabin of the first helicopter. A half-dozen bare-footed and bare-chested Maori followed a team of blonde Norwegian wizards dressed in Muggle combat fatigues into the second. And the Queen's Wizard led the Supreme Mugwump, the Emperor's Wizard, the King's Wizard, and a mixed bag of magical North Americans into the third. Coarsely-worded orders barked over comm systems brought the Muggle crews back on task as the portal for the Norsca Network's Shetland Station disappeared behind the group of magicals. The three helicopters gently lifted off, and headed on a southwesterly bearing towards the Orkneys...where their passengers could use portkeys without tripping the British Ministry of Magic's frontier wards.

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7:00pm, Ministry of Magic, Fidelius-protected Location

The select group of residual Ministry personnel who had been invited to dine in the Minister of Magic's office were disappointed with the menu...most of them had assumed that a "working dinner" would involve better food than what was presently available within the house-elf-less cafeteria. But it was not the case, since Scrimgeour was suffering just as much as they were from the absence of Ministry house-elves. Of course, as secret keeper he was the one who might have been able to fix that problem, but Rufus was in no mood to stray outside of the Ministry's confines to track down the house-elves until he had to...even with the amped-up glamour charm that actively hid his contract-cursed gnomish figure. So it was stale

Biscuits and spell-warmed tins of canned meat that were shared as the group reviewed the present state of the Ministry.

The skeleton staff and those family members who had been told the secrets and brought within the wards were focusing only on the most critical of services. Staffing within the Ministry wards was tilted heavily towards the Magical Surveillance Office, the WWN, and guard duty. Some thought this defensive stance was redundant, given the apparent robustness of the *Fidelius* charms that had been cast, but neither Scrimgeour nor his Senior Lackeys fully trusted the efficacy of the Dutch charms master's work (especially once his contract had become void and they'd shrunk down and ballooned out into Kabouter-scale figures). The Head Unspeakable was no more forthcoming about the status of the Department of Mysteries than normal...he insisted that he had sufficient staff to guard their secrets and left it at that.

Given this reticence, Croaker wasn't surprised when Scrimgeour asked him to remain once the meeting broke up.

"So...enough people to guard your Department, but none to spare for the common defense?" asked Rufus.

The Unspeakable shook his head. "Not after this morning's culling," he replied. "Lost many of my best witches and wizards...just because of their suddenly suspect heritage."

"Yes, well...given Potter's influence and power within the Muggle world..."

"Balanced against the years and years these Muggleborns and so-called half-bloods have spent within our world?" Croaker snapped. "It's crazy! Crazy, I tell you! It's as if we're doing the Death Eater's dirty work for them!"

"Now, now, it's not that bad," Scrimgeour insisted. "We haven't hurt them...or arrested them...and once this meeting in Carlisle is over and done with, and the ICW comes back on board, we can start to bring them back into the fold..."

Croaker snorted. "Right...there are a lot of assumptions within that timeline."

Scrimgeour shrugged his little shoulders, using a motion that was mirrored by his "normal" glamour charm-aided avatar. "Speaking of timelines...how goes it with the Irish Annex?"

The Unspeakable frowned. "Slowly, given available staff...but we should have everything ready by tomorrow afternoon."

"Good," replied Rufus. He then pushed a scroll across the desk and added, "Here is the prioritized evacuation list."

The Head of the Department of Mysteries unrolled the scroll, scanned the order of names, and immediately protested. "Where are my people on this list?"

"Mostly not there, obviously...somebody has to stay back to guard all those mysterious secrets, right?"

"And you can justify filling this list with family members...like Percy's little sister...because..."

"Because I'm the Minister of Magic?" Rufus calmly replied. "There is a certain logic to it, you know...unless your people can come up with a way of moving all of your secrets with you."

"But..."

"And there's a certain advantage to your Unspeakable status, don't you think?" Rufus asked. "If the worse happens, who could know what side your people were on?"

"How about the Unspeakables that we've already kicked out?" Croaker scathingly replied.

Rufus frowned. "Yes, well...it would seem that the fixing of this problem is entirely in your hands."

"And how am I supposed to fix this?" Croaker asked, as he waved the scroll in front of the Minister.

"Two ways come to mind," replied Rufus. "Either work to expand Annex capacity...or make sure that we don't have need of it by fixing that damn Orb."

Croaker closed his eyes, counted to ten, and then accepted Scrimgeour's dismissal. While neither option sounded tenable, there were more than a few hours remaining before Carlisle. And many more than that, should his staff's efforts to repair at least one of their broken time turners bear fruit.

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9:30pm, Buckingham Palace, London

The black-haired teenager who wore Queen Wizard's Robes over Parachute Regiment mess dress startled when a gentle hand roused him from an unscheduled nap.

"Erm...what...Your Majesty?"

The Queen shushed her Wizard. "Relax, Gryffindor...no cause for alarm."

Harry shook the cobwebs and took a look at himself. He had been waiting for Hermione and her parents to arrive at Buckingham Palace, just as he had all those weeks before...waiting in the very same gold-trimmed room, sitting in the very same chair by the fire...and had apparently fallen asleep.

The Queen's Wizard sat up, and stretched as much as he dared stretch within the Queen's presence. "Is it time for dinner, then, Your Majesty?"

"Well past, actually," the Queen replied with a smile. "But you were so tired; we thought it best to let you rest."

Harry frowned. "Thank you...I apparently needed it...although..."

The Queen saw through Harry's confusion over her presence and smiled.

"We decided to wake you in person, rather than risk your sudden appearance at the reception with a drawn sword and...slightly less clothing."

The well-dressed wizard blushed and shook his head.

"I'm never going to be able to live that down, am I, Your Majesty?"

The monarch's eyes sparkled. "Not a chance, *Conan*."

Harry choked off a snort, as he stood and walked with the Queen towards the same drawing room where Hermione and he had been created Knights Protectors of the Realm. Along the way she provided a quick update on the negotiations between Her Government and the International Confederation of Wizards.

Chairs were pushed back and the assembly of guests all rose to their feet when the Queen and Her Wizard were announced and entered the room. The monarch nodded her recognition as Harry quickly scanned the crowd. It looked to be a far friendlier audience, in his opinion, than the first time he'd been in that room. Harry's Aunt and Uncle were nowhere to be seen, although Hermione's parents were there, dressed in their Order of Arthur kits. Most of the other Order of Arthur members were there (Ron was not, as he was still out cold from the *Draught of the Living Death*). The TPOMS squadron was there as well, having been relieved of sentinel duty by the International "Advisors" that Harry had ushered in from the Shetlands. The current Prime Minister and his wife had risked a return to London, and had been chatting amicably with his predecessor's wife. The lines of succession had also been risked a bit by this gathering, with both the Prince and his younger son in the room. The latter was standing within a small, but powerful grouping that included the cricket-loving former Prime Minister, Gawain Robards, and the Japanese head of the ICW.

Members of the Household staff were on hand to guide those who would now serve the Queen as her *Magnum Concilium* in front of the Monarch. The Sword of Gryffindor was once again placed in the monarch's gloved hand as she restored to service an advisory panel that, for now, was limited to just three members...Harry, Robards, and the former Prime Minister.

Just how blurry the dividing line had become between the magical and mundane worlds was brought home to Harry as the Supreme Mugwump and other foreign witches and wizard stood in silent support while he swore the following oath:

You do swear by Almighty God to be a true and faithful Servant unto The Queen's Majesty as one of Her Majesty's Magnum Concilium. You will not know or understand of any manner of thing, whether magical or mundane, to be attempted, done or spoken against Her Majesty's Person, Honour, Crown or Dignity Royal, but you will left and withstand the same to the uttermost of your power, and either cause it to be revealed to Her Majesty Herself, or to such of Her Government as shall advertise Her Majesty of the same. You will to your uttermost bear Faith and Allegiance to the Queen's Majesty; and will assist and defend all civil and temporal Jurisdictions, Pre-eminences, and Authorities, granted to Her Majesty and annexed to the Crown either by Treaty or Acts of Parliament, or otherwise, against all Enemies, be they either Foreign or Domestic, Magical or Mundane. And generally in all things you will do as a faithful and true Servant ought to do to Her Majesty. SO HELP YOU GOD.

The room burst into applause when the Queen brought Harry to her side and presented her newly installed Lord High Steward for the first time. He accepted both the title and applause with far more grace and poise than he might have earlier in the summer...until the Prince of Wales caught his eye with a wide smile and nine fingers raised in the air.

"Oh, Bloody Hell!" the Queen's Wizard whispered to himself. Or at least tried to whisper to himself.

"Something wrong, Gryffindor?" the Queen asked.

"Erm, no...sorry, Your Majesty...The Prince was just reminding me that I now possess more titles than he does."

The monarch chuckled. "We believe the both of you to be too modest, if it matters..."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"And we remind you that your role as Lord High Steward is mainly ceremonial...at least until our meeting tomorrow at Carlisle?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The extent of the Queen's Wizard's newfound authority was tested not fifteen minutes later, when Harry's mobile chirped while he was glibly insisting (over drinks) that the Prince count up his ceremonial military commissions. The young wizard excused himself, walked to a slightly quieter corner of the room, and held a brief conversation.

The Prince watched the expression on Harry's face turn far too serious for his liking. The Norwegian King's Wizard, who had spotted Harry's

movement, approached the Prince and asked, "What's going on, Your Highness?"

"Not quite sure," the Prince replied. He watched the Queen's Wizard activate every ray on his Art Club badge, and then added, "But whatever it is warrants the involvement of the entire Order of Arthur."

More than just the King's Wizard and Prince realized something was amiss when Hermione Granger suddenly disappeared with a pop. That caught the attention of everyone in the room, and since "everyone" all had high level security clearances, the Queen's Wizard decided just to make a general announcement.

"If I can have everyone's attention, please," he called out. "A Death Eater has just been spotted in Diagon Alley. He hasn't attacked anything or anyone, and there is no indication of any other enemy activity at this time, but...to be cautious..."

The Queen's voice carried over the responding din of noise, as whispered conversations broke out and chairs were pushed back. "My Lord High Steward...how may we all be of assistance?"

The room turned silent, as all eyes turned towards Harry Potter. He tried to sort out needs and priorities on the fly. "Well, first off...might be prudent, Your Majesty...Hermione just apparated back to the Bunker, and could serve as an anchor for a return trip to Balmoral?"

"Makes sense, Your Majesty," the Prince interjected, as he glanced towards his son on the other side of the room. "Lines of succession, and all that?"

The Queen took in a deep breath, and then nodded. "We then leave the situation in your capable hands, Gryffindor...Mr. Wall...Miss Patil, your attendance?"

Secret Agent Steve and On-duty Witch-in-Waiting Parvati Patil followed the Queen out of the room as everyone one else bowed and curtsied. This allowed the young witch to apparate and the other two to badge jump to Balmoral Castle without generating undue interest.

The orderly evacuation of the Queen made it easy for those remaining to sort out where they were needed without too much prodding by her Wizard. Harry did pull aside the former Prime Minister, Gawain Robards, and the Norwegian King's Wizard (the designated ICW advisor to the *Magnum Concilium*), and led them towards MI-5 ¾'s auxiliary command post in the basement of Buckingham Palace.

"Keep your wands in your pockets, if you can," the Queen's Wizard asked, as they entered the room. "The electronics are rather touchy."

His three companions nodded in agreement (although only two actually had wands in their possession). Harry walked up behind a Muggle agent that was sitting in front of a bank of monitors and clasped a hand on his shoulder.

"Good evening, Scott."

"Good evening, Sir."

Harry pointed towards one specific screen and asked, "That's the Rookery2 feed, right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Can you get me an open channel to our colleagues inside, then?"

"Right away, Sir."

The Queen's Wizard turned and pointed out a few of the Diagon Alley landmarks on the television monitor while the electronics operator pushed a few buttons.

"Merlin!" Robards exclaimed. "How long have the Muggles been spying down upon us?"

"Now, now, Gawain, mind the pronouns," Harry replied with a grin. "We...and that includes you after that oath you just swore...we have had this equipment in place for a little while now. It's how we spotted the werewolves running during the attack on Fred and George's shop last week."

"Line's open, Sir," the operator announced.

"Thanks, Scott," the Queen's Wizard replied. He then raised his voice and called out, "Hello Rookery...you there, Angels?"

"Hello, Charlie," one of the Muggle secret agents quipped.

"Who's Charlie?" asked a second female. "Could've sworn that was Harry's voice."

"Muggle joke, Lavender," Harry replied.

"Oh...Hi Harry!"

"Hello, Lavender...and before we get too much farther, I should let you know that I've got a few others here in the room listening in, including Head Auror Robards, and the former Muggle Prime Minister."

"Does that mean we can't tease you...and talk dirty?" asked Lavender.

"Depends on which former Prime Minister it is," the men heard a third female voice mutter.

"Wow, these microphones...they are so sensitive!" Harry quipped.

"Oops."

"Right, then," the Queen's Wizard pushed on. "We're looking at the live feeds from Diagon right now...where's the Death Eater?"

"Draco just slipped behind where Fortesque's used to be," Lavender replied.

"He just...wait...did you just say Draco, as in Draco Malfoy?"

"The one...and only, thank Morgana," Lavender quipped. "I'd recognize that ferret's face and blonde hair anywhere...and if that wasn't enough, his bits were miniscule."

"Too much information, Lav," Harry whined. "Don't want to know how you could identify him based on bit size."

"Oi, what do you think I am?" Lavender protested. "I wouldn't touch that ponce's pouch with a two-foot telescope...which is what you'd need to see them, by the way."

"Lavender!"

"Just saying that it's clear that Draco has been compensating all of these years," the witch explained.

"More to the point...did he have a Dark Mark?" asked Harry.

"Oh yeah...that was *much* larger...easy enough to spot."

"So now that we've got that squared away...can anyone tell me what he's done so far?"

"Not much," Jill replied. "He slipped out of Knockturn Alley about fifteen minutes ago...kept to the shadows...looked like he was waiting for someone."

"Has there been a lot of foot traffic?" Robards asked.

"Negative," replied Jill. "Hasn't been much at all since we've been set up here, and no one has been out since sunset."

"Not surprised, given the absence of Auror patrols," Gawain noted.

"Hold on...here's someone just coming out of Gringott's," Jill announced.

Harry and the other men in the command post squinted at the monitor display.

"Your binoculars must be better than our cameras," Harry announced.

"Subject is a male, dressed in a hooded robe...maybe 190 centimeters tall..."

"And six inches long..."

"Lavender!"

"Sorry."

"Sure you are...eyes up, and tell us if he's marked...and I'm not talking about birthmarks, either!"

"Yes, Harry," the witch replied. "And no Harry...he doesn't appear to have a Dark Mark."

"Right then...let's see how this plays out."

By this point the image of the hooded wizard could be tracked on the remote monitor display. The Queen's Wizard and his colleagues watched as the pedestrian walked at a very quick pace away from Gringott's and towards the camera. Harry used this time to quickly brief in the former Prime Minister and King's Wizard on Draco Malfoy's rap sheet...a rap sheet that potentially grew longer when a red beam of light dropped the unmarked Wizard in a heap onto the street.

"What happened?" the former Prime Minister asked. "Did we just witness a magical murder?"

"Wrong color beam," Harry replied. "Killing curse is green...that was more likely a stunner."

"To what end?"

Draco Malfoy's motives became clear when he darted out from behind the building, ran to the unconscious wizard's position, and cut the victim's money pouch off of his belt.

"So it's a simple robbery?" asked the former Prime Minister.

Looks that way," the King's Wizard announced. "Not exactly a capital offense...pity, that."

"Might have to provide a bit of incentive, then," Harry announced, as he activated his Art Club badge.

"Fred?"

"Yeah, Boss?"

"You in your shop right now?"

"Yeah...trying to get all the whiz bangs ready for tomorrow."

"That's good....Draco Malfoy is in front of the ice cream parlour right now. You up for bringing him down?"

"Absolutely."

"Still got a few of those barbed balls lying about?"

"Think so."

"Here's what I want you to do, then..."

After giving Fred his marching orders, and imploring him to keep himself safe, Harry spoke up to his disembodied all-female audience. "Did you hear the plan, Rookery?"

"Affirmative," replied Jill.

"Got the Death Eater target in your sights?"

"For now...he's heading towards Knockturn," replied Secret Agent Sabrina.

"Excellent," replied Harry.

"Just take care to remember, then, that the wand in his hand is a lethal weapon."

"Understood," replied Jill. "And your friend Fred..."

"Is presently working for Her Majesty, and is attempting to keep Her Peace."

The former Prime Minister nodded, and then spoke up. "And that means *by any means necessary*, Agent."

You could almost hear the snap to attention in her voice as the female MI-5 sniper replied, "Yes, Sir!"

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Severus Snape's godson would have already been in the clear by now, had he been focused more on his safety and less on whether he now had enough galleons to hire a threesome. And thus formed his undoing.

Still thirty feet away from turning the corner, the blonde-haired wizard heard a voice shout out. "Draco Malfoy, you are violating The Queen's Peace! Stop where you are, drop your wand and place your hands on your head!"

The teen-aged wizard's eyes went wide. "A Weasley?" he muttered. "This will be fun..."

The blonde-haired Death Eater spun on his heels, crouched down into an attack stance, and raised his wand, all while quickly trying to decide whether to first taunt the red-haired Gryffindor, or cut to the chase and AK his sorry arse.

The decision wasn't quick enough.

The left side of Draco's skull caved in, struck by a high caliber, high-velocity bullet. He was dead before his body hit the ground.

"Sweet Merlin!" gasped Fred, as he watched the blood splatter. With a dragonhide-gloved hand still on his Art Club badge, and ready to jump at *Avada*'s first syllable, the red-haired wizard began to walk towards the corpse.

"Don't dawdle, Fred," ordered Harry, who had watched it all play out on CCTV. "Don't want you anywhere near that bullet wound if that other wizard wakes up, or somebody else crawls out of Knockturn Alley to investigate."

"Erm...Roger that, Boss," the wizard weakly replied.

When he got to the sprawled out body, the Weasley twin kicked Draco's wand away from his hand. Only then did he move his own gloved-hand away from his badge...and only long enough to pull a barbed metal ball out of a shoulder pouch, and toss it towards Draco's head. There was more than enough blood on the Slytherin Prince's face to activate the goblin-fashioned portkey, and the entire body disappeared. And what had just happened...what he had just seen...was more than disturbing enough for Fred Weasley *not* to make a joke about having just delivered a take-away dinner to Fenrir Greyback. He quickly grabbed Draco's wand and badge-jumped away...to anyplace other than Diagon Alley.

Back in Buckingham Palace, the Queen's Wizard announced "Good work, everyone," with far too much steel in his voice for the liking of the Norwegian King's Wizard.

"Alright, there, Harry?"

The Queen's Wizard stared at the bank of monitors for a few more seconds, and then nodded his head and quietly replied... "I ain't got time to bleed."

The former Prime Minister frowned at this bit of Muggle movie dialogue.

"Enough time for a drink, then...now that the threat has been neutralized?"

Harry sighed. "Yeah...I've got a bottle of the Prince's favorite stashed upstairs in my Quarters...and there's a scale model of Carlisle Castle...we could go over tomorrow's plans over drinks. Guess we can...kill...two birds with one stone?"

The former Prime Minister sucked in a deep breath, and then slowly let it out. Patting the young man on the shoulder, he then declared, "We do what needs to be done, Gryffindor...only what needs to be done."

11:59pm, Carlisle Castle, Carlisle

The Treaty of Carlisle designated the grassy fields nestled within the junction of the Rivers Eden and Caldwell as the place where signatory parties or their successors would meet, should any of those parties see need. The choice was quite intentional, geographically speaking. Carlisle was a Border Town, and its castle was originally a Roman fort and garrison that stood along Hadrian's Wall. The first "modern" stone fortifications, which dated back to the Eleventh Century, were raised less than ten miles from the Scottish border. It was therefore considered to be as close to "neutral ground" as one could get, especially considering the history of feuding and attack in the first seven centuries after its construction.

If there was anything curious about the choice, it was that the Treaty's meeting fields were located just under the shadow of Carlisle Castle's walls... a position of relative strength for the English monarch. That advantage had been seized upon in the days leading up to the meeting. The British Army had reclaimed the tourist attraction (which had served as the headquarters for an Army regiment up to 1959), and returned the castle to its original purpose. Goblin-constructed wards now protected a garrison of three-hundred active duty troops, armed with both high-tech weapons, and lower-tech alternatives that were less likely to fail around magic.

The fields identified by treaty were being closely monitored by these troops, using the same kind of digital cameras and electronic monitoring equipment that proved useful at Edinburgh and Salisbury. They didn't know what they were looking for in this area, which now hosted two football fields and the local cricket pitch, but had been told that they would know once they saw it.

That prediction came true at the stroke of midnight, when a dense fog spilled up and over the banks of the two rivers, and a powerful wave of magic washed up and over the castle walls. The wailing of a World War II-era hand-cranked siren (pulled from the Regimental museum for just this eventually) brought the castle to life...and interrupted a therapeutic hot-tub consoling session inside of a magical tent that had been pitched in the Castle's Inner Bailey.

"Damn it, what now?" Harry complained, as he reached over the wooden tub's edge for his Art Club badge. "Wally?"

"Hey, Harry...looks like a pulse of magical energy just hit your location...knocked out every camera and electronic sensor on the ground."

"We're under attack?" asked the Queen's Wizard, while his girlfriend and he stepped out of the water and dried themselves off with charmed bathrobes robes.

"No signs of one at the moment," replied Wally. "Still have raw video footage from the drone-mounted camera that is patrolling over your heads. "But hard to say, actually...there is a dense fog that has formed on the meeting fields...our infrared cameras should be able to penetrate...but can't, for some reason."

"Roger that, Wally...we'll check it out."

Harry and Hermione quickly donned black fatigues trimmed with Potter plaid, which identified them as loyal wand-wielders. Dobby popped into the tent and provided them with night-vision goggles and digital binoculars that he had retrieved from an EMP-hardened cache inside the Round Tower. The two teenagers ran up to the castle's walls with that equipment, and arrived just in time to see the fog retreat back towards the river banks...and to stare in wonder at what the fog had left behind.

A megalithic stone circle had been raised in the middle of the Treaty's meeting fields, and, on the far side of those fields...a magical full-scale counterpart to Carlisle Castle now stood.

Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall Ch 45: Ringa Pakia

Disclaimer: Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

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Saturday, 14 July

When Voldemort woke up on the morning after Carlisle Castle got a twin, he looked at a calendar, cursed...and wondered whether Severus Snape's brews were on track to heal his injured Death Eaters in five days' time.

When Snape woke up on the morning after Carlisle Castle got a twin, he looked at an empty bed, cursed...and wondered whether Draco Malfoy had done something truly stupid.

And Draco Malfoy was dead on the morning after Carlisle Castle got a twin, so he wouldn't be waking, or cursing, or wondering about anything, anytime soon.

8:00am, Carlisle Castle, Carlisle

Under terms negotiated three days previous via an exchange of owl posts, Special Ambassador Hermione Granger left the magical and military protections of Carlisle Castle for a pre-meeting discussion with a designated Ministry official. Though by prior agreement she was flying solo, her boyfriend was of no mind to leave her unescorted, and insisted that he give her a ride on his motorbike...at least to the edge of the meeting fields.

The bushy-haired witch climbed off Harry's Bonny, and gave him a reassuring kiss that drew some pointed comments and catcalls from those who were following along via open microphones, activated Art Club badges, and both ground-based and airborne cameras.

No mind was paid to said comments and catcalls.

It was only after Hermione's counterpart was spotted leaving the gates of the other castle that she left the shadow of "her" castle, and walked towards the ten-meter diameter stone circle that now stood in between the two larger structures. When the teen-aged witch and middle-aged wizard met within that stone circle, he extended a hand and introduced himself.

"Algie Croaker."

"Hermione Granger."

"I'm surprised that they sent someone so young for this meeting," the Unspeakable stated. "And a witch, no less?"

Hermione snorted. "And I'm surprised that you're neither Percy Weasley nor Dolores Umbridge."

"Surprised?" the wizard asked. "I'm rather pleased that's the case, actually."

"Who wouldn't be?" Hermione asked with a thin smile. She then nodded towards the structure that stood behind Croaker. "That's a rather impressive bit of magic."

"It is, isn't it?" the wizard replied. "Wish that I could claim credit for it."

"And yet you stepped out from its walls?"

Croaker shrugged. "Not intentionally...my portkey was redirected."

"Really?" Hermione asked. "Where were you coming from?"

"I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to."

"So you're not the Secret Keeper, then?"

The wizard chuckled.

"Perhaps they did send out the right person," he observed. "And on that note, before the Queen's Wizard or those Muggle snipers get itchy fingers..."

"Snipers?" Hermione asked. "Surely you don't think that lowly Muggles could do anything to harm a powerful wizard such as yourself?"

Croaker rolled his eyes. "Don't patronize me, Miss Granger...there are a few of us in the Ministry that aren't blinded by prejudicial hubris."

"Far fewer now that you've locked the Ministry down behind a *Fidelius* Charm."

"Perhaps," the Unspeakable admitted. "So in regards to the meeting this afternoon...it will be just the principles, right?"

Hermione nodded. "Two on each side?"

Croaker shook his head. "Three, I think."

"Scrimgeour can't choose between his two underlings?"

"Something like that."

"Three it is, then...approaching the circle on foot?"

The Unspeakable shook his head.

"Treaty also allows for either broomstick or horse."

"What...afraid that Umbridge can't waddle that far?"

The wizard snorted, and wondered if the young witch knew just how close she was to the truth.

Hermione then asked, "Any idea what we should make of the Treaty phrase 'enforced parlay'?"

"Not exactly," Croaker replied. "There are magical contracts strong enough to inflict penalties upon any who might violate a negotiated truce...and if the Treaty is strong enough to build castles...well, if it were me meeting up with the Queen, I wouldn't be fingering my wand."

"That makes sense," Hermione replied. "Can I assume that the Ministry is aware of the other requirements for meetings governed by the Treaty?"

"Such as..."

"The Minister's Orb, signifying his stewardship of those designated powers provided to Her Royal Majesty's Justice of the Peace for Magical Britain."

"I'm not quite sure what you're talking about."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Now who is the one trying to patronize?"

The Head Unspeakable scowled. "Do you have any idea just how dangerous your actions could be?"

Having gotten used to standing up to the Home Secretary and other powerful middle-aged males within COBRA meetings, Hermione was able to calmly stand her ground. "From my perspective, it is the Minister who needs to account for his actions. But as this is not the actual meeting, and as we are not the principal parties, neither my perspective nor your opinion really matters, now, does it?"

Croaker clamped down on his emotions, and bit his tongue. "Two this afternoon, then," he finally replied. "Three principles on each side on the field...you have your castle, and we...apparently...have ours. Terms and conditions as set out by Treaty."

Hermione nodded. "Sounds good to me."

The wizard stared hard at the witch in front of him, then shook his head and muttered, "Merlin help us all."

Hermione snorted, and said, "On that point, we agree."

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9:45am, Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, 10 Downing Street, London

An equipment belt, thigh packs and comm gear were stacked in a pile next to one of the wash basins when Kate Miller ran to the women's lav just before the start of the morning COBRA meeting. Turning towards the stall whose door was closed, she asked, "Hermione?"

The sound of an amused snort carried over the white marble privacy walls, just before it was drowned out by the sound of a flushing loo. A witch-in-black emerged from the stall and made her way towards the sink.

"And how, oh how, could you tell it was me, Chief Inspector?" Hermione asked.

"Well, I am a detective, right?" the older woman replied, as she faced the mirror behind an adjacent sink and straightened her tie.

The teen-aged Secret Agent closed her eyes for a moment while she washed her hands. "Guess there aren't that many other women kitted out like I am, eh?"

"Certainly none that have access to 10 Downing Street," Kate replied with a grin.

As the first of her two black leather thigh packs was strapped against Hermione's leg, the Chief Inspector asked, "Isn't there some way to magically relieve yourself without needing to strip all of that off?"

Hermione snorted.

"There is actually...magical nappies that banish the waste...used like bedpans in magical hospitals. Unfortunately...they aren't very sexy, and not practical replacements for knickers."

"Why is that?"

"They chafe something horrible," Hermione replied. "The charm that collects and gets rid of the urine works on any fluid, so your skin dries out if you wear them for more than a few hours at a time."

"Sounds like you've had some personal experience."

The young witch shook her head and sighed. "Yes, well...when I first learned about them back in Third Year I thought they'd be great for studying...I mean...you could drink all the tea you wanted, and never have to get up from your desk! But then one night I fell asleep wearing a pair, and, well...if it weren't for a trip to the infirmary the next morning for an embarrassing application of a magical salve, I wouldn't have been able to sit for days!"

Kate laughed. "So I guess that witches have to suffer through long queues at public loos like the rest of us?"

Hermione smiled as she tightened her equipment belt. "Well, there are still *some* advantages to being magical," she admitted. "We have charmed chamber pots small enough to fit in your bag, and if you go regimental underneath your robes..."

"Nice," the Chief Inspector replied. "Although I'd still prefer to wait in line rather than squat over a pot in public."

"Notice-me-not charms help out there."

"Imagine so," Kate admitted. "But if there isn't a need to share public facilities, then where do witches go to just talk amongst us girls and gossip?"

"My dorm mates never seemed to have a problem finding places," Hermione muttered.

"Well...that probably is a pain...especially when you snog your boyfriend beneath castle walls?"

Hermione scowled. "Kate!"

"And I suppose that the Queen's Wizard provides more than enough motivation for you wanting your knickers to look sexy?"

"Hmmp!"

The older woman laughed as she patted the well-armed witch on the shoulder. "Just a bit of teasing, love...and if you think that's bad, you should have heard Remy's snide whispering while he listened in this morning on his sunburst badge!"

"Thought that you and...Remy...were still working on your secret project this morning?"

"We were...just a bit of multi-tasking," Kate replied.

Hoping to change the topic, Hermione asked, "So how is your werewolf investigation coming along? Did you lose any momentum with the reassignment?"

The Chief Inspector shrugged. "Not really...it's only been a day that we've been working on the Ministry problem, and we'd already made good progress with the packs. Remy can be quite...persuasive...at times. Not quite in line with Department regulations, but...well...all sorts of dividing lines are blurry these days, right?"

A sigh escaped from the teen-aged witch's lips as she nodded in agreement.

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Hermione and Kate took their "normal" places at the rectangular conference table, which meant that the younger woman had to endure some predictable "wink wink, nudge nudge," teasing from Wally, who always sat to her left. There weren't assigned seats, as such, but every member of the COBRA team had by now staked out a permanent place at the table. The Prime Minister sat at the head, with Wally, Hermione and Kate to his left, and the Home Secretary, Defense Minister, and Met Commissioner to his immediate right. This arrangement was quasi-partisan, with younger, "hipper" non-politicians on one side, and older "stuffer" Cabinet Officers on the other. The MI-5 and MI-6 Directors sat opposite the Prime Minister, and each played true to that relative position and occasionally helped mediate between the two sides.

Hermione took note of a new chair at the head of the table. The reason for that addition entered the room alongside the man who took his job. The Prime Minister flashed Hermione a smile as he took his seat.

"Right, now that we are all here...there is, as always, a lot to cover this morning. Gentlemen...Ladies... if you please?"

Those primaries and aides who hadn't already taken their seats did so at this time. The Prime Minister opened the meeting by welcoming the former Prime Minister to the group, and jokingly apologized to Sir John for keeping him away from Surrey's match against Northamptonshire. The cricket-loving retiree smiled and made some type of gentle jab at the opposing side's batting that went completely over Hermione's head...but hit

home with the former Prime Minister, who (as the former Prime Minister was fully aware) supported the Steelbacks (thereby giving the young witch one more reason to like the man who had been defeated by her schoolgirl crush).

The reason for the former Prime Minister's addition to the crisis committee was briefly discussed during a review of overnight events. As the lone Muggle member of the newly installed Queen's *Magnum Concilium*, he needed to be briefed in on her non-magical government's actions with respect to both Voldemort and the current Ministry of Magic. The mention of the installation ceremony then served as segue to a review of how the following reception had been cut short. The MI-5 Director took the lead on describing Draco Malfoy's demise, since the sniper team was presently under his purview.

The surly Home Secretary had a lot of questions about the operation, but rather than direct them towards the intelligence chief, he tossed them across the table towards Hermione. The rather rotund Cabinet Officer focused on jurisdictional issues, but having seen those inquiries deftly parried by Hermione moved on to more general questions regarding intelligence gathering.

"Do we have any touts within the enemy's ranks?" he asked.

"Touts?" asked Hermione. "You mean magical black taxis?"

The question earned the young witch some chuckles from around the table.

"He is asking if we are working with any informants, Agent Granger," the Met Chief explained.

"Oh, well...the only Death Eater informant that I knew about was Snape, and since he was the one who murdered his control..."

"Dumbledore?" the Prime Minister asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Sir. Our working assumption is that he was a double agent whose loyalties lie with Voldemort."

"And that assumption is strong enough to warrant a lethal response if he is spotted out in the open within your magical district?" the Home Secretary asked.

The young witch chewed on her lower lip. She glanced towards the respective heads of MI-5 and MI-6 and then replied, "I believe that decision is above my pay grade."

"But not your boyfriend's?"

"You're out of line," the Prime Minister called out to his Home Secretary. "And if you have to ask Agent Granger about the shoot-to-kill policy that you yourself signed off on, then..."

"Alright, alright," the red-faced man hastily replied. "All I am trying to do is head off the kind of embarrassing inquiries that Her Majesty's Government has faced in similar circumstances."

"Similar circumstances?" Hermione asked. "Have there been other covert operations against Death Eater targets that I've not been made aware of?"

"Agent Granger, with all due respect, what makes you think that you'd have a need-to-know if there were?" the Defense Minister challenged.

Hermione's face flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and indignation. Kate reached under the table and gave Hermione's hand a reassuring squeeze, which caused the young witch to take a deep breath, and revise the retort that had been forming in her head. The slightly less caustic version was delivered in a dangerously low voice.

"This is just like the SAS safe-house operations," she noted. "My apologies if I was once again mistaken in the belief that such a thing would be within my portfolio as Special Ambassador to the Wizarding World...I suppose that means that the Foreign Office was also kept in the dark about Sport and Social's black ops within the Irish Republic during the Troubles?"

The Defense Minister growled, "As a matter of fact, young lady..."

"Enough!" barked the Prime Minister. He waited until a sufficient period of silence confirmed that he had regained control of the meeting, and then turned towards Hermione.

"To my knowledge, you are as briefed in on the government's current response to Voldemort as I am." He then made a point of glancing towards both the Defense Minister and Home Secretary and added, "Unless there has been some plausible deniability at play here?"

"No, Sir," the three men all insisted.

"Then I am assuming that the Home Secretary was, in fact, referencing the Official Inquiries that were made into specific counterterrorism efforts within Northern Ireland?"

"Yes, Sir," his cabinet officer replied.

"So what's your real concern, then?"

"The lack of an investigation after last night's shooting!" replied the Home Secretary. "Our magicals removed of the body and other physical evidence from the scene!"

"Removed evidence? Have you gone mad?" asked the former Prime Minister, who could no longer hold his tongue. "This was a covert operation, not a bloody crime scene for investigators to rope off with yellow tape!"

"Exactly," the current Prime Minister added.

"You know, we could head off a lot of these concerns by making this purely a military operation..." offered the Defense Minister.

"Oh, right!" replied the Home Secretary. "Because that worked so cleanly in Belfast!"

"Moot point, actually," opined the MI-5 Director.

"How so?" the Defense Minister asked.

"The Army doesn't have any female sniper teams."

"And?"

"And the shot was taken from Agent Potter's flat within the Rookery," replied the head of MI-6. "Given the historical tenancies within that building, the assets that we've placed there are presumed to be his...shall we say...romantic interests?"

"So you are telling me that there aren't magical poofers?" the Defense Chief asked. "That Potter can't himself assume a gay cover identity for operational purposes?"

Eyes were invariably drawn towards Hermione, who quietly blushed. Wally snickered, and chimed in, "Well I've gotten him to dress well enough for the role...most of the time, that is...but otherwise..."

"Right, we have seriously moved away from our agenda here," interjected the Prime Minister (who was smiling, despite himself). He turned towards his predecessor and asked, "Sir John, you were with both the magical head constable and a representative of their U.N.-equivalent when these events unfolded, were you not?"

"That's right...and the only eyebrows that were raised were over how efficiently the situation was resolved. They both supported our shoot-to-kill response."

"That's good enough for now, then...let's move on to Carlisle," the Prime Minister decided. As committee members and their aides shuffled papers he added, "You've all read, I hope, Agent Granger's brief on what happened there last night?"

"Rather unbelievable," the Met Commissioner stated. "That a stone-walled castle could suddenly appear like that, out of the ground?"

"Magic can do some amazing things," Hermione replied.

"Are you capable of conjuring something up on that scale?"

The teen-aged witch shook her head. "Not even close. But then again I'm no Merlin, and this could have been something other than a conjuration."

"What do you mean?" the former Prime Minister asked.

Hermione shrugged. "That castle could have been magically hidden, and already standing there. Something like how a *Fidelius* charm works."

"Already have been standing there?" Sir John asked incredulously. "That's impossible! I've actually played on the pitch where this new castle now stands."

The teen-aged witch nodded, and replied, "Fair enough, but I've seen a house protected by a *Fidelius* charm make room for itself by shouldering out buildings on either side, once I was told the secret. The Muggles who were in those adjacent buildings didn't even notice."

"That might be getting ahead of ourselves, as we've got a presentation on this secret charm farther down the agenda," the Prime Minister noted. He then asked his Senior Adviser, "Does how this castle came into existence have any negative impact on the meeting this afternoon?"

The bushy-haired witch shook her head. "None that we've thought of, Sir. The Ministry representative that I met with this morning was just as surprised as we were by the castle...and we've actually taken it to be a positive sign, assuming that the magic behind its construction is tied to the Treaty."

"How so?"

"Makes it more likely that they can't attack the Queen, since the Treaty specifically bans the drawing of any weapons during the meeting time. It also supports the idea that the Treaty itself can magically adjudicate how the signatory parties respond to its terms. And if our assumptions are correct about the Ministry somehow breaking the treaty, then there will be that much more power behind Her Majesty's reassertion of direct control over her magical subjects."

"I don't understand why we even need a five-hundred year piece of parchment to justify our desire to enforce the rule of law within our borders," the Defense Minister muttered.

"Well I can think of three very good reasons, Sir," Hermione replied. She then looked towards her boss for fear of again moving off-topic. When the Prime Minister smiled and encouraged her with a head nod, the teen-aged witch took a deep breath and launched into lecture mode.

"First off, the international magical community has already weighed in on the legitimacy of both the Treaty itself, and Her Majesty's dominion over her magical subjects should the abrogation penalties come into play. That's what the meetings in Oslo yesterday were all about, and also the reason why the Supreme Mugwump is now in Britain."

"So this Japanese wizard speaks for every witch or wizard in the world?" someone asked.

"Well, not literally," Hermione replied. "But Aoki-sensei is the head of the ICW...that's something like being Secretary General of the U.N., except that he has a lot more authority and power."

"And he is really going to favor a Muggle government controlling Magical Britain?" asked the Home Secretary.

"Erm...well, actually...he has pledged his support for the Lord High Steward acting on the Queen's behalf, should it come down to that."

"So rather than Parliament, we'll have a sixteen-year old boy ruling over...what...25,000 British witches and wizards?"

"He'll be seventeen in two weeks," Hermione snapped reflexively. "And it's probably closer to 30,000 if you include those living within the Irish Republic."

"And then what...you'll magically rip up the Magna Carta?"

"This is old business," the Prime Minister interjected. "We've already accepted, in principal, the establishment of a limited international magical protectorate should events play out as expected this afternoon. Between that, and Sir John's presence on the *Magnum Concilium*, and Agent Potter's loyalties to the Queen, I think that we've got our bums covered."

The head of Her Majesty's government snorted when he spied the blush that his choice of words had produced on his Senior Advisor's face. He shrugged an apology, and then asked her about the other two reasons for the Treaty's importance.

"Erm, right, so...second point is financial. The Treaty's response to our calling out of the Ministry of Magic will be recognized not just by foreign witches and wizards, but by other magical sentients as well."

"You mean the goblins?" Kate Miller asked.

"Exactly," Hermione replied. "If the Ministry is magically stripped of its authority to rule, that will also affect their ability to collect taxes, or draw on any government-owned vaults or other funds held at Gringotts."

"The power of the purse," stated the former Prime Minister.

"That's right," the teen-aged witch replied. "It would be the equivalent of freezing the foreign assets of a rogue Muggle government, only worse because they would also lose control of their domestic bank holdings."

"And these goblins will, in turn, also recognize the authority of our new Lord High Steward?" asked the Home Secretary.

"Yes, Sir," was Hermione's simple reply. "The goblins are going to be very helpful...not only with access, but with a full audit of all previous Ministry financial transactions."

"And what has their support cost us?" asked the Defense Minister.

"Not much at all," Hermione replied. "Should it come to bear, the Lord High Steward, at the Queen's behest, has promised the negotiated return of any goblin-owned artifacts currently held by the Ministry. He will also immediately lift the ban on goblin-backed financial investments within the magical community. Oh, and he also plans on moving the Goblin Liaison Office into the magical equivalent of the Foreign Office, rather than treat the Goblins like a subservient race that needs to be controlled."

Hermione treated the silence that followed her response as tacit acceptance by the other COBRA members, and moved on.

"The third reason ties directly into the *Fidelius* charm or charms that are limiting access to the Ministry of Magic," she stated.

"I'm sorry, Agent Granger," the Home Secretary stated (although he didn't really seem to be). "But I'm still having a hard time understanding what this fidelity magic is all about...and yes, Prime Minister, I say this after having read all of the relevant briefing documents."

Kate thought for a moment, then turned to Hermione and winked. She then announced, "I think I've got a workable analogy, Sir."

"And that is....?"

The Chief Inspector smiled, and replied, "With all due respect, Sir...boxers or briefs?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"That's my hypothetical secret to protect, Sir," Kate explained.

"Are you wearing boxer shorts or Y-fronts today?"

"This is a ridiculous line of..."

No, no....I like it," the Prime Minister interjected.

"Please continue, Chief Inspector."

"Yes, sir," Kate happily replied. She then glanced back at the Home Secretary and asked, "So rather than answer the question, can you tell us how many people actually know the answer to that question?"

"What?"

"I imagine that you can remember what you are wearing, Sir," Kate pushed on. "But are you the only one that knows? Perhaps your wife laid out your clothes this morning? Or maybe you changed in the locker room following a morning workout?"

Hermione considered the latter possibility improbable, given the man's girth, but thought it might help if she jumped in.

"For discussion purposes, Sir, let's assume that it is only your wife and yourself that know for a fact that you are presently wearing boxer shorts."

"Does color or pattern matter, Agent Granger?" Wally teasingly asked. "What if they had a Hello Kitty imprint on the front?"

All previous attempts by meeting participants to swallow their laughter failed with this question. Amidst the guffaws, and the Home Secretary's blustering, Hermione eventually replied, "What type of boxer shorts wouldn't matter, although Hello Kitty shorts might provide more than enough motivation for him to keep their existence a secret."

The target for all of this teasing seethed, "This is absolutely...."

"Oh, be quiet," the Defense Minister admonished. "So, Agent Granger, the secret to be protected is that the Home Secretary is wearing Hello Kitty shorts, and only his wife and he are aware of that fact...what's next?"

"Well, let's imagine that I am able to cast the *Fidelius* charm, even though I really can't. The Home Secretary would come to me, tell me the secret that he wanted to protect, and..."

"So then there'd be three of you that knew?"

"At that time, yes," Hermione replied.

"Then a Secret Keeper would be chosen...he or she would become the vessel within which the secret is magically stored." She then turned towards the Home Secretary and asked, "So, Sir...whom is to become your Hello Kitty secret keeper?"

"But I'm not wearing Hello Kitty shorts!"

"Please, Sir...it's just for illustrative purposes..."

"Oh, Bloody Hell....let's give the job to the Defense Minister, then."

The cabinet officer in question channeled his inner Homer and shouted, "Doh!"

"Fair enough," Hermione stated, as she drew her wand from her wrist holder. She waved it around in the circle, called out "*Fidelius*" and jabbed it towards the Defense Minister.

"So now he'd be the only one to know? Even I would forget what I'm wearing?" asked the Home Secretary.

The young witch nodded. "Unless the Defense Minister chose to share the secret with you."

"But all I would have to do is drop my trousers and look, wouldn't I?"

"Wouldn't matter," Hermione replied.

"You could hop up onto the table and drop your trousers for all of us to see, and none of us would be able to recognize or describe what you were wearing underneath."

"Even if they were clearly visible?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Sort of like you don't know where your house keys are located, even if you are looking right at them on the coffee table?" the Prime Minister asked.

"That's right...you could stare at his little white cat all day long and not recognize them as what they were."

Glowering, the Home Secretary asked, "Could I still feel these shorts against my skin? Or would I then go about the day on the mistaken assumption that I wasn't wearing any underwear?"

"That might cause an embarrassing mess in the loo," muttered the MI-5 Director to his counterpart.

Hermione let the resulting laughs die down before she replied, "Actually, that observation points towards the limitations of this type of magic, as well

our response to the situation at hand.”

“How so?”

“It all comes down to the exact wording of the secret,” she explained.

“I wasn’t asked to sequester the fact that the Home Secretary was wearing underwear...only the specific type of underwear he was wearing.”

“So I would know that I was wearing shorts...know well enough to pull them down when I...erm, well...when the situation called for it?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The Home Secretary then noted, “But I still couldn’t describe them to you...or to myself, for that matter?”

“Yes, Sir,” Kate interjected. “Just as we could state with certainty that you weren’t going commando if you dropped your trousers. We might even recognize that you were wearing boxer shorts, as the secret specified the type of boxers worn.”

“This is all so much fun and games, Chief Inspector,” the Home Secretary then noted. “But if the specific secret is so well guarded, how does one go about circumventing it?”

Hermione and Kate looked at each other, before the witch gave the policewoman a go-ahead nod.

“Well, Sir...we have been able to work with these limitations, as well as the difference between knowing and guessing, to narrow down exactly what the Ministry of Magic has done to hide itself.”

“Knowing and guessing?” asked the Home Secretary.

“Yes, sir...just because magic might keep us from knowing a secret doesn’t preclude us from making educated guesses using the available evidence.”

When the cabinet officer in question furrowed his eyebrows, Hermione jumped in.

“If we go back to your Hello Kitty shorts, Sir...”

“But I’m not wearing Hello Kitty shorts, I tell you!”

“Yes, Sir...Of course, Sir...but if you’ll indulge me for a moment?”

“Oh, alright.”

“Thank you, Sir. So let’s say that I was curious about what type of underwear you were wearing today...remember, this is only an illustration...”

“Yes, Yes, Go on...”

“So...because of the magic I couldn’t know with certainty what you were wearing at that moment, even if you showed me. But what if I was to go to your house, and picked through your pile of soiled laundry, and discovered several pairs of Hello Kitty shorts? And then I rummaged through your drawers and found one that held nothing but clean Hello Kitty shorts? And then I asked your wife what you wore yesterday, and she told me that you had worn Hello Kitty shorts?”

Kate added, “Then maybe we could ask every man in this room of similar age and station to tell me what they were wearing, and every one of them replied that they were, at that very moment, wearing Hello Kitty shorts? That would allow us to make a very good guess, now...wouldn’t it, Sir?”

“The relevancy, Agent Granger?” the Home Secretary whined.

“As it is part of her brief, that’s perhaps best answered by the Chief Inspector?” Hermione replied.

“Let’s start with location, then,” Kate stated.

“Over the past day we have interviewed more than fifty different witches and wizards. All of them informed us that they think that they used to know where the Ministry of Magic was located, but none of them can now recall that fact. So there has to be some geographic component to the secret.”

“Well that’s not rocket science,” muttered the Home Secretary.

The Muggle police officer ignored her boss’s boss and pushed on. “Working down the same lines of asking other blokes what type of shorts they were wearing, we gathered some information on the locations of the magical governments in other countries. Most of them turn out to be in whatever regional city was largest, or most powerful, anywhere from five hundred or a thousand years ago.”

“So the French magical ministry is located in Paris?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And the Italian Ministry is in Rome?”

Venice, actually," Hermione replied.

"That makes sense, I guess," the Prime Minister noted with a nod. "The Venetian City State ruled the Adriatic back then, and was far more powerful than Rome."

"So for England...should be London, right?"

"Were it just England, that's the obvious guess," Kate replied. "But as Agent Granger has noted before, the Ministry of Magic has jurisdiction over England, Wales, most of Scotland, and all of Ireland, including the Republic. So at first glance the Ministry might just as easily be located in Dublin, or Edinburgh...maybe even Cardiff."

"At first glance, but not when you look a second or third time?" asked the Prime Minister.

The Chief Inspector nodded. "It's been a challenge, as we've started eliminating other possibilities...once you are down to just one best guess it approaches more knowing than guessing, and the magic keeps us from knowing, so...more than once we've reached a certain point in our analysis, and suddenly felt the need to discuss sports, or the weather."

"So how far down the road have you gotten, then?"

"We are guessing London," Kate replied. "The largest magical commercial district is located here, after all. And Agent Potter's memories of the place are also useful. He has visited the Ministry of Magic before, you see...and he recalls that trip involving a walk. Of course, he could have been walking in any city..."

"But Harry can't ever recall visiting Ireland, and doesn't remember visiting Edinburgh or Cardiff before this past week," Hermione stated. "Now this could be the magic playing with our minds, here, but if we have to make a best guess..."

"That guess is that the Ministry of Magic is located someplace in London...where to from there, then?" Sir John asked.

Kate Miller rose from her chair and walked towards a three-dimensional rendering of the Ministry of Magic that Wally had thoughtfully called up on his computer and projected against a wall.

"This layout is based on interviews of Ministry employees who were booted out before the *Fidelius* charm took hold," she explained. "We also got some help by reviewing a few pensieved memories...you know...those wisps of smoke that can be used to walk through specific recollections?"

"Like those provided by Agents Potter and Granger that walked us through the Garden Party and Inverness?" asked the MI-6 chief.

"Yes, Sir," said Kate.

"Based on the layout and dimensions of the different levels, it's a good guess that the Ministry is located underground."

"The top level apparently being larger than the bottom level?" asked the MI-5 chief.

"Yes, Sir," replied Kate.

"Now there is some counterevidence...for example, several of the employees recall having window views in their work area. But that is also something that could be accomplished with magic."

The Home Secretary asked, "By punching out underground window views?"

"No...by creating the illusion of a window view," Kate replied. "This alternative explanation is supported by reports of seeing snow-capped mountains from one window, while the same vantage point one floor higher looks out over green rolling hills."

"So it's underground, someplace," the Defense Minister wondered, "How is it accessed?"

Kate nodded. "That's also a secret...either with the same magic that protects its location, or...more probably...a second charm."

"There'd have to be lift shafts to access an underground location, right?"

"Not necessarily, so long as magic is involved," Hermione replied.

"Again, for comparison purposes...the magical transportation hub in Oslo is located underground, but doesn't have a public aboveground access point."

"So how is that reached, then?"

"Dyrrheim Station can be accessed by floo, or apparition, or portkey," stated Hermione. "Our Art Club badges work as well, if one of us is already there as an anchor point."

"So these are all magical types of transportation, right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"So wouldn't it stand to reason that these same methods could be used to gain access to our British Ministry?"

"That would be a logical assumption," Hermione replied. She pointed towards the three-dimensional computer image of the Ministry and added, "In fact, that would explain a lot of things, like the banks of fireplaces on that one level, and what looks like a portkey arrival platform up on top..."

The young witch's mind suddenly began to drift.

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Ten minutes later, Agent Granger began to wonder why the COBRA team was discussing the failure of England's side to advance through to the semi-finals of the FIFA World Cup.

Eleven minutes later, she figured it out.

Hermione caught Kate's attention and asked, "We got too close again, didn't we?"

"Looks like it," the Chief Inspector replied.

"So what were we talking about, then?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Something about the link between the Queen's meeting at Carlisle and the Home Secretary's shorts?" asked Wally.

"That doesn't seem likely," the Cabinet Officer replied.

"Hold on, then," asked Kate.

"Was it the Home Secretary's Hello Kitty shorts and the Ministry's *Fidelius* Charm?"

"For the last time, I'm not wearing Hello Kitty shorts!"

"Well, then...that leaves us talking about how the Queen's meeting could help us crack the Ministry's concealing magic," Hermione noted.

"Can you provide a succinct response to that question that doesn't involve my choice of undergarments?" the Home Secretary asked. The young witch considered what the beefy politician might look like if he went commando, and decided that to be an excellent suggestion.

"Short of finding and killing the secret keeper, the easiest way to bypass a *Fidelius* -protected secret is to make it irrelevant."

"Irrelevant?" the Home Secretary asked. "While my preference for boxers is hardly relevant to this discussion..."

"Allow me to give a real life example, then," interrupted Hermione. "When the Queen's Wizard was just a year old, his family decided to go into hiding when they learned that they had been targeted by Voldemort and the Death Eaters."

"So they used a *Fidelius* charm?" the former Prime Minister asked.

"Yes, Sir," the young witch replied. "As best we can tell, the wording of the charm was something like, '*The Potter family is hiding in their cottage in Godric's Hollow*'. Might have included an actual street address, but it wouldn't have been necessary. Based on that kind of wording, our Charms professor at Hogwarts says that Voldemort himself could have looked into their cottage's windows and not seen any of the Potters walking about within it."

"So long as he didn't know the secret, of course," Kate added.

"But he did find out the secret...they were betrayed by their Secret Keeper, right?" the Prime Minister asked.

"Yes, that's right," Hermione stated. "But what is important to this story is the fact that Voldemort was the only person outside of the Potter family that was actually told the secret. Headmaster Dumbledore was specifically *not* told...and he didn't know where the family was hiding...right up until the moment that he did know."

"And that moment came when...what?" asked the Home Secretary.

"It came when both of Harry's parents were murdered," Hermione replied quietly. "He was an only child, you see..."

When the young witch couldn't find the right words to continue, Kate took up the task. "Once Harry lost his family, the secret was no longer relevant," she explained. "It wasn't '*Baby Harry Potter is hiding in a cottage*', but rather, '*The Potter family*'."

Most of the people within the room were smart enough to get the connection, but it was up to the Home Secretary to state the obvious. "So if the secret that we're up against is, '*The British Ministry of Magic is hiding...wherever*'," he reasoned, "We don't need to find this Secret Keeper. All we need to do is rid ourselves of the British Ministry of Magic...and if the Ministry's authority is derived from the negotiated terms within this Treaty of Carlisle, then..."

Hermione nodded, and softly snorted when she glanced down at her watch. If only the Home Secretary had needed an additional twenty minutes to catch on...then it would have been Kate who would have been picking up the tab for lunch...whenever it was that the both of them would actually have the time to eat out at a restaurant.

1:45pm, Carlisle Castle

Fifteen minutes before the schedule start of the meeting between the Queen and the Minister of Magic, three RAF attack helicopters escorted a fourth onto a landing zone that had been temporarily established in front of Carlisle Castle. Several well-armed SO14 agents escorted a very royal passenger and her small retinue out of this helicopter and into a waiting armoured vehicle. Everyone inside the castle walls sprung to attention when this vehicle drove through the main gates, and the Queen's Royal Standard was run up the castle's flag pole.

Many were lucky enough to get a glimpse of their white-haired monarch as she exited the vehicle and walked inside the Castle's stables. But only witches-in-waiting Padma and Hannah had the security clearances necessary to join her in a secured room, and to watch as her hair turned pink and her face shed decades of age. Once Tonks completed her transformation, she anchored badge jumps for the real Queen, the Royal Wizard, and the Royal Wizard's consort.

"So how was the trip, Tonks?" Harry asked.

"Too bloody long," the Auror complained, as she shook out her limbs and ran her fingers through her hair. While a slightly frumpy dress morphed into battle robes, she caught the Queen's bemused expression, and quickly added, "Not that I'm complaining about the assignment, Your Majesty... it was fun to be queen for a day."

"Thank you for your assistance, Miss Tonks," the Queen replied. "We are afraid that we might become used to the luxuries afforded by a perfect body double and near-instantaneous badge travel."

The Auror curtsied, and replied, "I am happy to have been in a position to help, Your Majesty."

"Will you be staying within the Castle during the meeting, then?"

Tonks glanced at Harry and Hermione, looking for some guidance to her response. The bushy-haired witch nodded, and took the initiative. "Your Majesty, my father is already here with the students, and can serve as the Castle's anchor point while we are outside of its walls. Tonks could do the same, but...we thought that she might be better deployed with our Ministry liberation team, which is presently on standby in London."

"Ah, very good," the Queen replied. "Godspeed, then, Auror Tonks...and stay safe. We would enjoy the opportunity to travel in this manner again some day."

"Yes, Ma'am," the witch replied, with a slight blush.

Once Tonks jumped back to London, Harry led the Queen and three witches out of the small room and into the stable area, where members of the Household Calvary were waiting with three saddled horses. The Queen smiled as she approached a large black gelding and patted its flank. "We are looking forward to the opportunity to ride again," she stated. "It's been far too many years."

"Are you certain about riding in on horseback, Your Majesty?" Hermione asked. "Since it has been...well..."

The monarch smiled. "No worries, Dame Hermione. We have taken council from Sir Evan, who spoke wondrously about the ability of magic to limber up limbs and strengthen the bones of those of us who are more...advanced in years."

The Queen's words drew support from her actions, as she lifted a foot into a stirrup, and almost jumped up into the saddle.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the bushy-haired witch said with a slight sigh.

When the monarch gleefully began to ride her horse down and back the stable's wide main aisle, Hermione glanced over at Hannah and Padma. The two teen-aged witches were beating back smiles and pointing towards each other.

Harry nudged his girlfriend's shoulder, and said, "C'mon, Hermione...it's just a horse! Not like you're being asked to ride on a dragon's back."

"Easy enough for you...you've ridden on broomsticks...and Buckbeak!"

"Seems to me that you've ridden on a hippogriff as well."

"As a passenger," Hermione protested. "And with my eyes closed the entire time, and my arms wrapped tightly around you!"

"Now that's a story that I haven't heard before," Hannah noted with a grin.

"Indeed, a story that we would no doubt enjoy as well...at some other time," the Queen announced from her saddle.

"Erm, Yes, Your Majesty," the young witch said reluctantly, as she walked up towards a chestnut brown mare.

"Don't forget to bow first, Hermione," teased Harry.

"Oh, hush, you!"

The two-witches-in-waiting snickered as a soldier helped Hermione up onto her horse.

"I'm so afraid that I'm going to fall off," she muttered.

"Need a sticking charm?" Padma teased.

"You are doing fine, Dame Hermione," the Queen encouraged.

"You sure are, Sweetheart," Harry added, as he deftly hopped into the saddle of the third horse and took up the slack in its reins. He glanced at his watch, opened up both magical and Muggle communication channels, and then ordered, "Game faces, everybody."

A last-minute flurry of activity took place around the three on horseback as witches-in-waiting and attendants checked and rechecked tacking, equipment, and protective gear. Almost all of the latter was being worn by the Queen, whose AK-resistant breast plate was secured outside of the red jacket of a cavalry uniform, which itself overlaid a dragonhide unitard that stretched from neck to toe. Hermione wore similar protective undergarments, and a riding outfit whose wool jacket was woven in Potter plaid. Harry, on the other hand, was brazenly unprotected, and (in the Queen's opinion), channeling his inner Rob Roy. All he was wearing at the moment were dragon hide boots, a Potter plaid kilt, and a white puffy-sleeved dress shirt. The reasons behind this choice of attire were sufficiently strong enough for him to endure the teasing of the witches-in-waiting about the need to avoid saddle sores and sudden drafts.

When the stable doors were opened, the Queen, her Wizard, and his Consort encouraged their steeds into a slow walk. The monarch turned towards Harry and asked, "Our forces are all in position, then?"

"As best they can be, Your Majesty," Harry confirmed. "Just have to hope our guesses are on the mark."

The Queen nodded as they rode out into the Inner Bailey. She scanned both the grounds and walls, and nodded at those who watched them pass by. Their facial expressions combined various amounts of surprise, shock and awe...their geriatric queen hadn't ridden publically on horseback for more than a decade, and had never been seen before dressed in armour...as if she were the Elizabeth of centuries past.

One of the Muggle soldiers saw fit to give voice to his emotions. He lifted his rifle into the air, and yelled out a mighty, "*HUZZAH!*"

Tears formed in the corners of the Queen's eyes as the cry was taken up by hundreds of voices.

"Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!"

That the horses didn't spook from all of the shouting demonstrated just how exceptionally well-trained was they were (and how carefully they had been selected from the Household Cavalry's stock).

A military escort that mixed both old and new elements formed around the Queen's party as they rode out of the castle. The procession was led by two "Jackal" reconnaissance vehicles (the biggest, meanest machines that could pass through the Castle's relatively narrow gates). These armoured vehicles were protected by both a forward-facing light machine gun (manned by a front-seat passenger who was doing much more than "riding shotgun"), and a turret-mounted heavy machine gun in the back. The field of fire for the lead Jackal was slightly limited by tall wooden flag poles that were mounted above each rear wheel-well; one flew the Queen's Royal Standard, while the other was adorned by the Union Jack.

A contingent of twenty horse-mounted Household Cavalry formed up behind these two lead vehicles, with each soldier dressed as if they were about to lead the Queen's landaus onto the racetrack at Ascot. Harry's preference to have had these troops dressed in battle fatigues and body armour had been overruled by those who insisted that this kind of historic Royal procession demanded full parade dress. He did take comfort, however, in knowing that each horseman carried submachine guns alongside their sabers. A symmetrical cadre of cavalry and armoured vehicles formed up behind the Queen and her companions, creating a highly armed sandwich that paraded out the castle while its garrison continue to cheer and a military bagpipe band struck up a tune.

The main gates of Carlisle Castle were located on the south wall and faced away from the meeting fields and magical constructs to the north. This relative geography required the Queen's party to follow the route that Harry had run his motorbike on earlier in the day...a route which included a fourteenth-century stone bridge and a small portion of the A595 four-lane motorway. It only took a few minutes for Queen and escort to make their way onto the narrow two-lane roadway that ran along the Castle's northern ramparts. They rode silently past a row of mature trees whose tops had been trimmed to keep sight lines and fields of fire cleared, and pulled up at predetermined positions that had been personally marked by Hermione as being located inside her ward lines.

Three members of the Household Cavalry escort quickly dismounted and took on the roles of squires for the Queen and her companions; each grabbed a bridle, and gently pulled their horses around to face the North. Those soldiers who manned the vehicle-mounted machine guns similarly swiveled their weapons, and set their sights upon the main gates of the magically constructed castle that sat on the far side of the field. The Queen's Wizard glanced at his watch and nodded with satisfaction; there were still two minutes remaining before the top of the hour. He then turned to the rider next to him and asked, "Alright there, Your Majesty?"

The monarch smiled and nodded her head. "We didn't realize just how much we missed a good ride," she replied. She then turned to her right and asked, "And how are you doing, Dame Hermione?"

"Erm...just fine, Your Majesty," the bushy-haired witch replied.

Harry leaned forward in his saddle just enough to catch his girlfriend's response. He could hear the nervousness in her voice, but didn't know if it was due to her unease on horseback or her unease with the situation in general. Some discretion, and the approach of two more soldiers on foot, kept him from asking. The men carried the standards that had been mounted on the lead vehicle. The soldier who held the Royal Standard walked up to Harry's mount, and slipped the base of the pole into the tacking just in front of his left knee. The other attached the official flag of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to Hermione's mount, and discrete sticking charms were applied so that they didn't have to worry about holding the reins and flagpole at the same time.

Harry and Hermione spent the balance of their wait communicating using both badge and radio. The Queen listened in on some of these exchanges, and shook her head slightly while Harry discussed the deployment of Summer Institute students to the Castle's walls.

"When we rode out and saw all the Potter Plaid...they look so young, Gryffindor!" the monarch lamented.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Harry replied. "Although a fair number are no younger than Hermione and myself."

The Queen sighed. "We forget, sometimes, that you both act far older than your years...but you are certain that it was worth the risk to bring them up from Windsor?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. They have all been training hard, and learning the kind of magic that might prove invaluable during the meeting."

"We pray that bears out," the Queen said solemnly.

The conversation was interrupted by a new burst of radio and badge chatter when the gates of the other castle opened. A dozen witches and wizards dressed in Auror robes flew out on broomsticks and split off, six to each side. The fact that Dawlish was spotted amongst this contingent made it easy for the two teen-aged wizards to accept a remote assessment provided by Gawain Robards...that all twelve were Scrimgeour or Umbridge toadies who had stayed behind when the Ministry went into *Fidelius*-aided hiding.

The Queen's Wizard could feel the tension level rise in the air as the carillon of Carlisle Cathedral began to ring out the hour. As soon as the last bell was struck, and the hour of two declared, the granitic stones that made up the circle in the middle of the field began to hum and glow blue. The intensity of both hue and hum grew, until arcs of magical energy shot out from one stone to the next, forming a blue ring of energy that flowed clockwise on a path two meters off of the ground. The buzzing noise rapidly grew in volume as the flow of magical energy picked up its pace, causing a few of the lesser-trained horses to become skittish and rear up. But before any of the riders were thrown, or any ears began to bleed, the humming suddenly stopped and a pinpoint of bright blue light formed in the center of the circle. This spot mushroomed out into a fast-growing sphere...a sphere that exploded in a blinding flash of light that rushed outwards from the stone circle and enveloped both castles in a hemispheric magical dome.

The magic that was at work within this shimmering dome was strong enough to kill any active Muggle electronics within the protected area. The Art Club badges still worked, though, which allowed the Queen herself to confirm that she hadn't been harmed by this magic. The same couldn't be said for any person who had been holding a weapon at the time of dome formation. The same kind of magic that had been at work on Azkaban took hold, and shot arcs of lightning down upon each weapon-holding hand...whether the hand belonged to a Muggle or wizard. The cries of pain heard as wands, and sabers, and machine guns were dropped like hot potatoes confirmed Hermione's suspicions on just what the treaty meant by "enforced parlay." They also served to justify the somewhat controversial decision to fly more than a hundred teen-aged witches and wizard up for the day from London.

oo000000oo

When the Queen, Harry and Hermione urged their horses towards the stone circle, Scrimgeour, Umbridge and Percy emerged from the far castle on broomstick and began their approach from the opposite side. Attempts to activate electronic gear retrieved from EMP tents proved futile, which forced Roger Granger to grab a standard pair of Muggle binoculars and run up to the ramparts.

Stoic stares were exchanged when the two parties reached the stone circle, before Harry took the initiative and nudged his horse forward. When the Queen's Wizard suffered no ill effects from crossing in between the standing stones, the Queen and Hermione brought their own mounts forward. But Harry didn't see the other two follow...his eyes were focused on the three Ministry officials as they flew their brooms into the circle. Those eyes bulged when the glamour charms that Scrimgeour and his flunkies had been hiding behind were negated by the magic within the stones.

"What the...?"

Roger Granger, who had watched the three Ministry officials lose their disguise from the castle's ramparts, couldn't help breaking Art Club badge silence. "*We represent...the Lollipop Guild...the Lollipop Guild...the Lollipop Guild...*"

"Dad!" Hermione hissed into her badge.

"Sorry, Ambassador," Roger replied, not really sounding as if he was. He then asked, "So maybe you think they're more like the Umpa-Lumpas?"

"Their skin tone would require more orange," the Queen dryly noted, using Ron's borrowed badge.

Hermione eyes went wide, and she turned towards the monarch in disbelief. The smirk displayed upon the Royal countenance caused the bushy-haired witch to shake her head and sigh...if the Queen was going to join the commentary, then how could she reprimand her father? The Special Ambassador to the Wizarding World gathered herself and pulled a copy of the Treaty of Carlisle out from a jacket pocket.

"In accordance with the terms negotiated between the magical and mundane, on these very grounds, in the Year of Our Lord...."

"Hold on, Hermione..." Harry interrupted. "We're supposed to be meeting with the Minister of Magic and his two underlings, not with some colorfully dressed dwarves."

"Oh, Sod off, Potter!" bellowed the red-bearded broom rider. "This is Minister Scrimgeour, and that's Madame Umbridge, and I'm Special Assistant Percy Weasley."

"Really?" Harry asked with a smile. "So has this circle made the three of us really large, or the three of you really, really small...and silly looking...and slope-nosed...."

"Show respect for your betters, boy!" Umbridge barked.

"Well that certainly sounds like Dolores Umbridge," Hermione said with a smile. "But just to be safe, perhaps a quiz?"

"Good idea!" Harry declared. He turned towards the red-bearded gnome and took on a theatrically raspy voice.

"*What...is your name?*"

Hermione's eyebrows arched, and she hissed, "Behave, Harry!"

The dwarf replied, "I already told you my name...it's Percy Weasley."

"*What...is your quest?*"

Percy frowned.

"I am here only because your Queen demanded a meeting."

Hermione giggled. "Harr-r-r-y!"

"*What...is Ron's favorite color?*"

"Red...no...Orange!"

Harry snickered, and then screamed, "A-a-a-a-a-h!"

The Queen smiled, and decided that she really needed to talk with her Prime Minister about getting a few Pythons onto her Birthday Honours List.

Roger Granger's laughter was carried over the Art Club badges, which made it harder for his daughter's admonishments to be heard.

"What's that Hermione?" Harry asked.

"I said...get on with it."

"Yes, Dear," he replied cheekily. The Queen's Wizard then looked down towards the pig-tailed broomstick rider and asked, "So you're supposedly Dolores Umbridge...how can I verify your identity, then?" Harry paused, then wagged his eyebrows. "I know!" And with that he pulled hard on his horse's reins and goaded the animal to rear up on its hind legs. Visions of attacking centaurs danced in front of the little witch's eyes as Harry's steed towered over her. When the horse's front hooves pounded back down onto the ground, the former High Inquisitor shrieked...fainted...and fell off of her broom.

"Yup, that's Umbridge," the Queen's Wizard snarked.

"Harry!" his girlfriend whined.

"What?"

"What did you do to her, Potter?" Percy demanded.

"Nothing!" protested the messy-haired wizard. "She just fainted. Cast an *Ennervate* spell on her if you don't believe me."

The red-bearded gnome scowled and reached for his wand. A small bolt of lightning sprung down from the sky and rewarded him with a nasty shock to his hand.

"Ouch! Bloody Hell!"

"Just leave her," Rufus scowled. "You didn't want her to come in the first place." The Minister turned back towards the Queen and demanded, "So what do you want?"

The Queen was not amused. "We shall not be bullied about, little one," she declared. She then turned towards Harry and said, "We suggest that your identity, as well as that of this other...man...who claims to be our Justice of the Peace...would be best confirmed under the terms of the Treaty."

The Queen's Wizard bowed his head and replied, "Yes, Your Majesty." He then pulled his single-pearl necklace from his sporran and slipped the chain over his head. When the orb fell to his chest it began to glow. That glow deepened with intensity when sparks of fairy lightning arced down from the tops of each standing stone. Sitting tall in the saddle, Harry stared down at the two broom-mounted munchkins and reluctantly decided it best not to declare himself (by the power of Greyskull) to be Oz, the Great and Powerful. Instead, he resolutely proclaimed, "I am Her Royal Majesty's Wizard, The Right Honorable Earl Gryffindor, Major Sir Harry Potter." He then smiled and added (almost as an aside), "I'm also Her Royal Majesty's Lord High Steward...and last, but not least, Hermione's boyfriend."

"Harry!" his bushy-hair companion chided.

The Queen smiled and noted, "We would not disagree with his priorities, Dame Hermione." The monarch then turned that smile upside down and stated, "That my Wizard's emblem of office is alive, and charged by the power of this Circle demonstrates that Our House and Muggle government have abided by the terms of the Treaty signed here at Carlisle some four hundred years ago. We would be pleased to see our Magical Justice of the Peace do the same."

The diminutive wizard scowled. "I am the Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour! I hold all of the rights and powers assigned to that post by the Wizengamot!"

Harry snorted. "Quit stalling. Where's *your* necklace, Rufus?"

The little wizard tried to give the Queen's Wizard an intimidating stare, but it was hard to pull off that kind of look when you're cursed to look like a cartoon character. "Right!" Rufus spat, as he pulled his own orb from a pouch tied to his belt. He began to place its chain around his neck, but then thought better of it. He already knew that the orb wouldn't glow, and feared that the necklace might garrote him if he tried to fake it. So he threw the necklace to the ground, right in front of the Queen's horse.

"There's your bloody orb!" he growled.

The Queen sucked in a deep breath and turned towards Hermione. The young witch pointed towards a highlighted paragraph of text in her version of the Treaty. The Queen reviewed the words, and shook her head. "There is a lengthy declaration here that we might use to announce your position forfeit, and proclaim the reassertion of direct rule over our magical realm," she informed the senior dwarf. "But as we have learned that much of magic is based on intent, we believe it sufficient for us to declare that you, Rufus Scrimgeour...are sacked!"

Harry nodded, and added, "So mote it be."

The Queen's guess (and Harry's benediction) bore fruit when the stone circle responded with a flash of blue light. The dragon-guarded pearl that Scrimgeour had thrown down to the ground rose up into the air with the chain trailing behind, then moved laterally until it came to a full stop and hovered in front of the Queen's face. The monarch looked first at Hermione, then at Harry. They both shrugged their shoulders, prompting the Queen to make a command decision. Dropping her horse's reins, she grasped the necklace with both hands and placed it over her head.

Hermione gasped in shock, and didn't release that breath until the chain rested loosely around the monarch's neck and the orb sat against her AK-resistant breast plate.

"Would have been sorted Gryffindor, for sure," Harry whispered, as he watched the Queen's orb begin to glow brightly.

"Well, that settles the matter, does it not?" she announced. The Queen looked down at the two broom-mounted wizards and stated, "We shall assume physical control of the former Ministry of Magic presently."

Percy snorted. "You can't control what you can't find!"

"Ha!" Harry spat, as he wondered whether the portkey that Percy had provided him would still give him access to Scrimgeour's office. He then leaned forward in his saddle, and caught Hermione's attention. She nodded, and they both gave the Queen a firm head nod.

"Excellent," she declared smugly. The Queen then scowled back at Percy and said, "We do not wish to force the issue, but are prepared to do so, if need be."

"Your Muggles and their weapons are no match for magic," the red-bearded wizard declared.

"So what are we, Wetherby?" Hermione shot back. "Soggy toast?"

"And who says that we stand alone in defense of the Realm?" Harry added.

Scrimgeour snorted. "Nice bluff, boy."

"So you think that Hermione and I are only wands sworn to the Queen's defense?"

"I don't see any others on your side," Percy shot back.

The Queen gave the Ministry officials a dismissive glare as she reached for the bridle of Harry's horse. "My Lord High Steward, if you would kindly disabuse these people of this opinion?"

A wide grin broke out on his face as he jumped down to the ground. "Yes, Your Majesty," Harry intoned, while pulling his white shirt over his head. Now dressed only in a Potter Plaid kilt and dragonhide boots, the bare-chested wizard turned his back on the Ministry party, cupped his hands around his mouth, and loudly barked out a Maori summoning cry towards Carlisle Castle's walls.

"Ahh...ooooh!"

The castle responded with a roar, as Dean Thomas led more than a hundred witches and wizards up out of hiding and into view on the ramparts. **"Au!"** they called back, with thundering voices.

Harry wanted to take a moment to relish the sight...Muggleborn Summer Institute students and Peanut Butter Brigadiers standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Rongo and his Maori mates. But those on the ramparts used that time to react to their first spotting of the diminutive Ministry officials.

"Hey Harry," Dean yelled out. "Who are you meeting with...the Minister of Magic...or Tinky-Winky?"

Laughter and cat calls echoed down from the walls as Roger's confirmation of Rufus' and Percy's identities spread, and Harry's comrades realized just how thoroughly the Ministry officials had been pranked. All of the fear and uncertainties that had built up within them dissipated, as what had

being a confrontation quickly morphed into more of a spectacle. Or a football game...as someone began to chant on the walls began a stadium chant that was picked up in full chorus.

"Tele-tubbies!" *Clap...Clap...Clap-Clap-Clap* . **"Tele-tubbies!"** *Clap...Clap...Clap-Clap-Clap* ...**"Tele-tubbies!"** *Clap...Clap...Clap-Clap-Clap*"

The Queen's Wizard let the taunting go for a bit, then instantly calmed the crowd by raising his hands. He then took in a deep breath and yelled out a well-practiced command using the Maori language. **"Kia whakangawari au i a hau!"** (*Let us prepare ourselves for the fray!*)

In one voice the ramparts loudly responded, **"Au!"**

The Muggleborns followed the lead of Rongo and his Maori mates and began to slap their arms and thighs, left bare by sleeveless white t-shirts and short Potter Plaid kilts. Deep breaths were taken that were then forced out through puffed cheeks painted in the bold colors of the Muggle countries of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. More than a few students followed Harry's lead and bared their chests, which allowed the Queen's Wizard to pinpoint (with only a trace of incredulity) Luna Lovegood's placement along the walls.

"What in Merlin's name is that supposed to be?" Rufus demanded.

As Harry turned back towards the miniaturized Ministry delegation, he heard the Queen say with pride, "It is the answer to your question, Scrimgeour...they are our *loyal* magical subjects."

"But most of them are only children...without wands," sneered Percy. "What could they hope to do to us?"

The Queen let out a Royal snort, and turned back towards her Wizard. **"Ringa pakia** , My Lord High Steward."

"With pleasure, Your Majesty," Harry replied. The Queen's Wizard once again turned his back on the magical delegation and looked up towards the castle ramparts. The tartan-clad wizards and witches fell silent as Harry walked out towards the castle. Suddenly, he turned on his heels, took a giant leap back towards the defrocked mini-Minister, and landed in a crouch with arms spread, as if in flight. The Queen's Wizard then yelled out at the top of his lungs.

"Ringa pakia!" (*Slap the hands against the thighs!*)

The wall of Muggleborns and their allies jumped up into the air as one, then landed in a crouch, slapped thighs with open hands, and shouted.

"He!"

Harry glared down at mini-Percy with bulging eyes, and then stuck out his tongue at him. As the Queen's Wizard slapped his hands against his arms and legs, Dean Thomas, the Summer Institute's Head Boy, took up the lead from the castle walls.

"Uma tiraha!" (*Puff out the chest!*)

"He!"

Harry's efforts to appear menacing would have been severely tested at this point, had he been facing the castle and spotted Luna puffing out *her* chest.

Dean then shouted, **"Waewae takahia kia kino!"** (*Stamp the feet as hard as you can!*)

The sound of more than a hundred pairs of boots (and a dozen Maori feet) stomping on the stone ramparts rolled down onto the field below, carried forward on a harsh breeze that hit Percy's and Scrimgeour's face like a hard slap. Not realizing that this was the start of a wandless Maori magical dance which was designed to induce insufferable fear and hopelessness in one's foes, Rufus and Percy sat there on their broomsticks, dazed and confused, while the haka's magic was invoked by students who danced and shouted from the castle walls.

Ko Muggleborn e haruru nei! (*The Muggleborn storm is about to break!*)

Ko Muggleborn e haruru nei! (*The Muggleborn storm waxes fiercer!*)

Ka tū te ihiihi (*We shall stand fearless*)

Ka tū te wanawana (*We shall stand exalted in spirit*)

Ki runga ki te rangi, (*We shall climb to the heavens*)

E tū iho nei, tū iho nei, hī! (*We shall attain the highest of heights!*)

A roar of approval came from the Muggle soldiers who were stationed at ground level behind the Castle's walls...the haka had boosted their spirits like a Dementor attack in reverse. A polar opposite reaction was generated within the targeted wizards (both inside the circle and along the magical castle's walls), who cowered in fear as they tried (and in some cases failed) to retain control of their bowels.

"Wha...what was that?" whimpered Percy.

Harry smiled. "I call it the 'Oops, I *crapped my pants*,' dance...did it work?"

While Percy weakly shook his head, Dean Thomas and the Muggleborns appended the Maori chant with a rousing chorus of "God Save the Queen." The Summer Institute's Head Boy then yelled, "*Three cheers for Her Majesty, the Queen!*"

"Hip, Hip....Huzzah!"

"Hip, Hip....Huzzah!"

"Hip, Hip....Huzzah!"

Giddy over what they had just accomplished, some launched into some freelance taunting. Dean jumped up onto a parapet, turned his back to the field below, and flipped up the hem of his kilt. "Hey Percy, kiss my arse...your lips are at the right height for it!"

Within moments a scene from *Braveheart* was re-enacted as nearly all of the other Summer Institute students gleefully mooned the Ministry delegation.

"Oh, my," said the Queen, as she looked back towards the castle with eyes that were bright and mirthful. Once the Muggleborn witches and wizards dropped their kilt hems and righted themselves, Roger Granger provided some additional inspiration. The students had no qualms when it came to loudly labeling Ron's older brother an "empty headed animal food trough whopper." Hermione shook her head at the cinematic reference, but had been forced to watch enough Python on videotape to realize how she could contribute. From her position inside the circle she yelled back, "*Fetchez la vache (Fetch the cow)*"

Luna Lovegood considered this to be one of the funniest things that she'd ever heard. She therefore took up the chant, which was quickly adopted up and down the line.

"*Fetchez la vache!...Fetchez la vache!... Fetchez la vache!*"

Down on the treaty fields, the Queen was having a very hard time maintaining her decorum.

"What is that they're saying?" Percy asked weakly.

"We suggest that you duck if you hear something moo," replied the Queen. She then turned towards Harry and Hermione and added, "Let us depart. We have our answers, we have made our declarations, and we tire of these people's presence."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Harry said with a short bow. He squared off with Scrimgeour and said, "As Her Majesty's Lord High Steward for Magical Britain, I order you to tell me the secrets that have hidden the former Ministry of Magic, or provide the name of the secret keeper capable of doing the same."

Having gained back just a bit of bravado, Rufus hissed, "You think you can order us around without a wand, boy?"

Harry shook his head. "I can order you by the Grace of Her Majesty the Queen, and all of the magic backing the Treaty of Carlisle," he declared. "You have forfeited your right to rule," he added. "Either bow to the rightful ruler of Magical Britain, or slink away in shame."

"How dare you..."

"As Lord High Steward, that's how he dares," Hermione shot back. She then turned towards the Queen and asked, "Your Majesty, shall we detain these three for you?"

"We think not," replied the Queen. "They arrived here under parlay, and shall be offered opportunity to withdraw under those same terms." Percy got a little bit of his own wits about him and demanded, "Who are you to...."

"Enough!" snapped Scrimgeour, pulling hard on Percy's sleeve. "We will not yield, but shall withdraw in good order."

The Queen glared. "So mote it be." She then dismounted, while Harry helped Hermione do the same. After sending the riderless horses back towards the Castle, the Queen tapped her Art Club badge and called out, "Commander Wall?"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Three to beam up."

The sudden disappearance of not just Harry and Hermione but the Muggle Queen herself left the former Ministry officials too shocked for words. While they tried to make sense of what had just happened, the dome of magical energy began to dissipate, and a dense fog bank began to spill over the river banks and onto the field. Mini-Percy reached gingerly for the wand that was holstered inside his sleeve and used it to revive Umbridge. Not having gotten a punishing response, he conveyed this news to mini-Rufus, nodded towards the castle walls, and then asked, "Shall I send a few *Reducto* blasts towards those walls to put these traitors in their place?"

As Scrimgeour pondered the wisdom of this request, he noticed the fog growing thicker, and a strange "*whap-whap-whaping*" sound coming from the castle's direction. As his eyes followed his ears, three WAH-64D Apache attack helicopters rose from behind the castle's walls, each armed with Hellfire missiles pointed in their direction.

"What in Merlin's name...?" hissed Percy.

A flash of light caught Scrimgeour's attention, and he looked down at five different red spots that had suddenly appeared on the front of his robes. He didn't know what these spots were or what they meant...but given the position of the Muggle flying machines, he was quite certain that he didn't want to find out.

"Keep your wand hidden, Percy," Rufus said evenly. He slowly pulled the Head Auror badge from his robe front and held it out. "No sudden movements," he ordered. "Grab hold of Dolores and her broom...nice and slow...and grab onto our ride home."

Once Percy managed to get the groggy witch's fat fingers joined with his onto Rufus's badge, the three disappeared in a flash. This was the signal for the Aurors who had been guarding their backs to use their own portkeys. The fog was now thick enough to mask the Aurors' escape, which forced the Muggle attack helicopters to maintain their positions and provide cover for the Queen's cavalry escort to return back inside the walls. When the dense fog lifted, the three helicopters were ordered to make low altitude passes over the meeting fields...just to make sure that the stone circle and magical castle that had seemingly disappeared along with the fog were really no longer there.